



Hybrid Mobility: The Future of Internationalization and Student Mobility in East Africa

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Abstract. Internationalization and student mobility are topical issues in higher education. Universities continue to invest in increasing inbound student mobility and how to produce globally competent graduates. However, only a small percentage of higher education students benefit from mobility. Further, the COVID-19 pandemic introduced several changes that constituted the responses to the challenges posed by this pandemic. The most prominent response was the change from the traditional modes of teaching to web-based ones. Considering such changes, the nature of student mobility during the post-pandemic period is not clear. With the limited technological development, it is not clear whether universities in the Global South will continue to exploit the COVID-19 responses for student mobility. This paper explores the possibilities of hybrid student mobility as an alternative to the traditional students' physical mobility across national borders. Through a systematic literature review, the paper points out the benefits of adopting hybrid mobility and the limitations towards achieving the desired end. The paper is based on the Connectivism Learning Theory, which underscores the importance of technology in teaching and learning. With this theory, the authors argue that technology can be incorporated into the teaching and learning processes to make student mobility more inclusive.

Research Contribution: The paper explores alternative conceptualization of international student mobility (ISM) as opposed to the traditional physical cross border students' movements. It advocates for inclusivity and the democratization of ISM, and reframes it for circumstances in which physical movement is restricted, as the case was during COVID-19 pandemic.

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic · Internationalization · higher education · Connectivism · East Africa

1 Introduction

International student mobility remains the most famous manifestation of the internationalization of higher education (IHE) [1]. Under the influence of IHE, students travel across home country borders to accomplish higher education (HE) activities in other countries

[2]. The movements may be short-term (e.g., a study abroad programme for one year or semester) or long-term, such as the degree mobility programs [3, 4]. The benefits from these students' movements accrue to students, institutions, and national systems [5, 6]. However, the existing modes of student mobility serve a diminutive student population, hence minimizing the extent of the said benefits.

According to [2], only 6 million HE students (2.6% of the world's student population) were internationally mobile in 2019 which signifies the exclusive nature of international student mobility (ISM). The existing mode of ISM should be revised to make it of service to more students. Further, Africa currently has a population of 1.2 billion people, 60% of whom are eligible for HE [7]. These students compete for the few university study places [8, 9] hence some of them opt to study in foreign countries. However, studying in a foreign country comes at a hefty cost. Thus, a search for mechanisms that can make it cheaper is necessary.

By 2018, East Africa had over one million HE students [10], some of whom studied outside their home countries. [11] explains that the total number of outbound mobile students for Uganda, Kenya, Tanzania, Rwanda, Burundi, and South Sudan in 2018 was 6,044, 15,732, 6,876, 3,551, 4,851, and 1,093, respectively. Admittedly, these numbers are low when compared to those from other regions. They would have been higher if sustainable and cheaper modes of ISM were accessible. The popular destinations for outbound mobile students include USA, Europe, and China [12], though intra-African mobility is also being witnessed [13].

With the COVID-19 pandemic and the associated lockdowns, travel restrictions were imposed across borders, leaving many international students stranded in their host countries. At the same time, the employed students lost their part-time jobs, which meant the loss of incomes and sources of livelihood for themselves. These students were exposed to different life hazards which suggests that the traditional modes of provision of international education are not sustainable, especially in situations that involve political or health restrictions. Stake holders are concerned about the future of international education in the face of travel restrictions [5]. Sustainable modes of ISM should be explored. As opined by [2], it is time to reimagine ISM in ways that can benefit more students and are not subject to health or political restrictions.

This paper holds that ISM should constitute hybrid modalities. Hybrid mobility incorporates physical and digital classes taken on-site in the host country or remotely in the country of origin [14]. This shows that the success of hybrid mobility heavily relies on ICTs. As explained by [15], the COVID-19 pandemic inspired great innovation, resilience, and technological development within national and institutional systems. This links very well to institutional potential to adopt hybrid mobility. With these technologies, students can enrol directly in courses provided by foreign HE institutions [16]. This paper is founded on the Connectivism Learning Theory (CLT) to explore the adoption of hybrid mobility in East Africa.

2 Theoretical Framing: Social Constructivism Learning Theory

Connectivism Learning Theory (CLT) was advanced by George Siemens in 2005. The theory explains how the Internet and the associated technologies can be used in information sharing and education [17]. The theory explores the use of the digital space to

facilitate learning and holds that technology connects information sources (nodes) during the learning process [18, 19]. Thus, information exchange across the digital space can be used to modify education and bring about new perspectives in ISM. With the digital age, international students should not entirely engage in physical mobility since internet-enabled technologies have eased information exchange. Students can engage in international education by exploiting digital spaces such as social media platforms, online videos, and blogs. They can share information, experiences, and knowledge without the teacher's intervention.

CLT highlights the position of students as active participants in their learning [20]. Further, unlike other learning theories which suggest that learning occurs inside a person while disregarding the learning that occurs outside the learner, for CLT, the learned material and the learning process are both essential [21]. Therefore, digital and physical interaction can be combined to bring about new experiences in ISM. The teacher's role in CLT is to facilitate learning rather than dissemination of knowledge. The teacher also creates learning ecologies, shapes communities, and allows learners to thrive [22].

Furthermore, CLT recognizes the role of context in addition to other factors, including chaos, complexity, and context for continual learning and knowledge creation based on self-discipline and organization. Other theories overemphasize the importance of the context while disregarding other influential issues [23]. According to CLT, peers can connect and share opinions and viewpoints, facilitating collaboration regardless of the context [24]. Consequently, a connected learning community eventually develops for learning and information sharing allowing for a rapid spread of knowledge among learners. Therefore, with connectivism, students can benefit more from hybrid mobility than from physical mobility. The purpose of ISM is to offer students benefit from diverse democratic values, cultures, and HE systems. Such is made possible through physical, digital, and hybrid mobility [25]. With hybrid mobility, students are destined to capitalize on the strength of both physical and digital mobilities.

3 Method

The data used for this paper was collected using a narrative review methodology and analyzed through a qualitative descriptive analysis. This methodology provides detailed and straightforward descriptions of the experiences and perceptions about a given research issue [26]. An internet-based literature search using search terms "international student mobility" and then "hybrid mobility in East Africa". The search results were evaluated for relevance and validity basing on the abstract content or executive summary. This gave rise to a total of 17 relevant pieces of literature that were used in this study. The literature revealed that ISM is an understudied subject in East Africa and hybrid mobility is a new phenomenon. The review focused on the state of ISM in East Africa though experiences beyond this region were used to contextualize the findings. The benefits of and obstacles to hybrid mobility, and the role of technological advancement in achieving hybrid mobility were summarized and presented as the case is with all qualitative descriptive studies [27].

4 Findings and Discussion

The study explored the possibilities of hybrid student mobility as an alternative to the traditional physical mobility. The findings arising from the analyses of the different data sources considered in the study are presented and discussed in this section.

4.1 The State of Student Mobility in East Africa

ISM on the African continent is an old phenomenon. Africans traveled and studied in the USA as early as 1896, and the practice continued into the colonial period [28]. The African elites who initiated African nationalist movements studied in foreign institutions as mobile students [29]. Such were cases of Africa's outbound ISM but intra-African mobility also existed. In East Africa, for example, Uganda Technical College which later became the present day Makerere University (MU), hosted students from East and Central Africa [30, 31]. Some prominent post-independence leaders in East Africa studied at MU. The said leaders include the former Tanzanian presidents Julius Nyerere and Benjamin Mukapa [32]. The former Kenyan President Mwai Kibaki and the former president of the Democratic Republic of Congo Joseph Kabila also studied at MU. Since independence and until now, MU hosts many international students [33].

ISM is a prominent aspect of East Africa's HE and constitutes both inbound and outbound mobility trends though country specific differences exist. For example, universities in Uganda host over 16,000 international students [34], mainly from neighboring East African countries [35]. On the other hand, Kenya hosts many international students from over 60 countries, constituting up to 15% of the student population in some universities. Student mobility is also regarded as a foreign exchange earner for some East African countries [36, 37]. Further, ISM patterns in East Africa differ between countries. For example, Uganda is an insignificant source of international students [38] while Kenya is among the top ten countries with the highest number of outbound students in Sub-Saharan Africa [39]. In Rwanda, outbound mobility was high especially after the genocide, but it has now reduced to about 6%. International students from Rwanda are destined mainly for the US such that Rwanda is the 9th Sub-Saharan African country with many international students in the US [40]. Other popular destinations for East Africa's international students are China, Malaysia, South Africa, Canada, and Europe.

Further, ISM in East Africa involves physical movement of students across borders and cases of virtual ISM are not indicated. At the same time, there was no information about East Africa's engagement in hybrid mobility. Even in countries with well-developed ISM programs, not more than 10% of the students benefit from physical mobility [41]. Thus, physical mobility is highly restrictive and is non-inclusive and brings about less benefits than it should bring.

4.2 The Benefits of Hybrid Mobility

According to [42], hybrid mobility is more accessible to non-traditional students which makes it more inclusive. Non-traditional students, including single parents, part-time and full-time employed students, and financially independent ones, often face challenges accessing HE. Accessing international education is even more challenging for

such students since they experience more significant mobility challenges. However, hybrid mobility can allow such students to navigate the aforementioned challenges and offer them opportunities to attend international education through digital avenues as they prepare for physical mobility. In addition, [43] explain that physical mobility challenges first-generation students and those with children since such students experience physical mobility challenges. At the same time, students from affluent families are more likely to attain foreign qualifications through physical mobility compared to those from low-income families [44]. This is usually due to the high costs associated with international education and travels. Considering East Africa's transitional economies, a high proportion of the HE students in the region are from low-income families.

They are not positioned to meet the high costs of foreign education. However, a hybrid mobility program is comparatively affordable and inclusive since it is not associated with high travel costs and disruptions of life at home [42].

Some studies [2, 3] have also indicated that the virtual component of hybrid mobility is essential for professional development of online skills, teamwork, and foreign languages. Students also adapt to working in multiple time zones, teaching and learning virtually in intercultural contexts [42]. As CLT indicates, hybrid mobility relies on establishing and maintaining knowledge networks. Therefore, as students interact physically and digitally, they develop skills essential for survival in the global multi-cultural environment. Some skills (e.g., foreign languages) are better developed through physical mobility. Others (e.g., online study skills) are only possible with virtual and hybrid mobility. Thus, hybrid mobility offers opportunities to capitalize on the benefits of both virtual and physical mobility.

Further, hybrid and virtual mobility can help students overcome the political, health, and safety issues that challenge physical mobility and reduce the costs that physical mobility imposes. In 2019, Rwanda closed her Gatuna Border with Uganda. This restricted the movement of people, including students, between the two countries. While the border has now been opened, the experience led to the loss of time and threatened the future of international students [45]. At the same time, the Akanyaru Border between Rwanda and Burundi remains closed [46], which limits the students' movement between the two countries. Thus, physical mobility remains at the mercy of political stability.

Furthermore, during the COVID-19 lock down, Uganda took a long time to re-open educational institutions [47]. This exposed international students to psychological trauma as the future of their education in Uganda was bleak. Besides, the closure of educational institutions was so abrupt that most international students in East Africa remained in their host countries amidst the border and institutional closure, further worsening their situation. Such international students suffered economic challenges besides being away from their families and friends. However, the situation would have been different had the mobility been digital or hybrid.

4.3 Obstacles to Hybrid Mobility

The most prominent challenge to the adoption of hybrid mobility is the dependence on technology. Students must have camera fitted computers, stable internet, and an electric connection to attend the digital classes [42]. However, such resources are not at their

best level in East Africa. For example, Uganda still faces unreliable connectivity to electricity, poor and expensive internet connectivity, and a lack of computers [48].

Since hybrid mobility involves students from different countries, a program and schedule that suits all students from different time zones is challenging. Students may have to encounter synchronous or asynchronous face-to-face interactions at times that do not suit their preferences and situations. The affected students must adapt to the new demands of study and work, which affects their learning and productivity.

Due to limited curricula, internationalization and practical international opportunities, the digital component of hybrid mobility can demotivate students and course facilitators [42]. Therefore, making the digital component of hybrid mobility more international and satisfying to the participants remains debatable. To fully incorporate international learning environments such as libraries or a campus experience in digital mobility remains challenging.

A language common to students and instructors is essential for hybrid mobility. Hybrid mobility allows students from diverse backgrounds to enroll in a digital program without relocating from their home countries. Such students remain surrounded by people proficient in similar languages and such contexts do not offer a supportive environment for one to quickly learn a foreign language. Therefore, it is essential that students choose only the programs that do not require the learning of a new language when engaging in hybrid mobility, and this limits its richness.

While hybrid mobility is cheaper than physical student mobility, it remains more expensive when compared to virtual mobility [2] yet the main obstacle to ISM is its high costs [49]. Thus, while hybrid mobility improves inclusivity through cost reduction, it does not precisely make ISM affordable. Disadvantaged students, especially those from low income families, may not afford hybrid international education. The costs associated with electricity, computers and internet which are essential for the digital component remain an issue to be solved.

Lack of support from the implementers, institutions, and students themselves hinder the adoption of hybrid mobility [50]. Argues that an educational experience obtained through hybrid mobility is inferior to the one obtained from physical mobility. Physical mobility should be retained as the only source of mobility, so they argue. This limits the adoption of hybrid mobility. Additionally; one of the incentives for ISM is the development of intercultural competencies among students. However, hybrid mobility divides the available time between online and physical encounters. Consequently, the time students spend together is insufficient for developing the lasting relationships required for the acquisition of such competencies [50].

4.4 Technology for a More Inclusive Student Mobility

It became evident with the COVID-19 pandemic that online innovations in education can upgrade international education and exchange [2]. Therefore, this paper acknowledges that the success of these innovations relies on technological advancement at national, institutional, lecturer, and student levels [51]. Explain that to fully incorporate a virtual component in mobility, there must be a shift from simple technologies to automated and systematic processes.

Institutions that lagged behind technologically re-organized themselves and continued teaching students during the COVID-19 pandemic. While the extent of advancement varies, strides have been taken towards technological improvement. For example, for some universities, technology is now at the core of the student enrolment and matriculation, password generation, and control of access to resources. Further, most universities have websites that provide information for internal and external use. Some offer digital education, while others have digital libraries and integrated databases for staff, students, and course records. All these resources deserve further development to enable the virtual component of hybrid mobility to flourish.

Nevertheless, it should be acknowledged that technological development is so challenging, especially in the resource-developing nations of East Africa. However, [2] advises that practical digital cooperation is instrumental for a better future and for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. As advanced by [52], it is only through global connectivity that we can have a continued supply of critical services and enable digital literacy and social inclusion. Therefore, technological advancement remains primary in the search for inclusive mechanisms in ISM. Nations and institutions must cooperate to avail affordable and stable internet connectivity together with compatible devices.

[2] Advises that four technological components (software or platforms) are essential for virtual mobility. Such components include: a learning management system, a video-conferencing platform, online free teaching tools, and student communication platforms. This is what the institutions that intend to transform student mobility should focus on.

5 Conclusion

ISM constitutes an important aspect of the IHE which has become a necessity in today's globalized world. Restricting ISM to the physical option makes it less inclusive, less beneficial and limits the students' potential. This notwithstanding, COVID-19 has forced governments and institutions to step up their digital capacities, which currently provide a foundation for the development of other areas. This study showed that the digital capacities so acquired are essential elements for developing a virtual component in ISM. Such resources need to be further developed so as to improve the way ISM is being conducted. However, it should be noted that an entire shift to virtual mobility makes students miss out on the benefits that are specific to physical mobility. Therefore, this paper advocates for a hybrid mobility to avail such benefits to students. Hybrid mobility enables students to benefit from its virtual component while democratizing ISM and reducing the high costs of physical mobility. However, technological development remains essential for achieving hybrid mobility. Nations and institutions must invest in technology for them to transform ISM. Certainly, the future of ISM will involve both the physical and virtual components.

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