by Roberto Escarré

Navigating Challenges in Higher Education: The Impact of Capacity Building and International Collaboration in Developing Countries

Summary

Exploring the critical challenges faced by higher education systems in developing countries, this text emphasises the role of donor interventions in addressing these issues through capacity-building projects. Successful international collaborations, such as the IMPALA and FORINT projects, have significantly enhanced university operations and internationalisation in Latin America. Both projects were coordinated by EFMD, and funded by the **Erasmus+ Capacity Building for Higher Education action**. The importance of employing robust methodologies to assess the impact of these initiatives is highlighted, ensuring they contribute effectively to sustainable development and improved educational frameworks.

Introduction

Navigating the complex challenges in higher education within developing countries requires strategic donor interventions and international collaborations. This article delves into these challenges, highlighting successful initiatives like the IMPALA and FORINT projects that have significantly advanced the internationalisation and operational efficiency of universities in Latin America. The discussion emphasises the critical role of robust methodologies in measuring the impact of such capacity-building projects, ensuring they contribute effectively to sustainable development and the improvement of educational frameworks.

Main Challenges of Higher Education Systems

Higher education systems in developing countries encounter numerous challenges. The most significant of these challenges include:

- **Inadequate Funding.** Developing countries often suffer from limited financial resources dedicated to higher education. This shortfall affects the maintenance of infrastructure, competitive salaries for staff, and provision of adequate learning materials and technologies, leading to a decline in educational quality and limited expansion of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs).
- **Quality of Education.** The quality of education in HEIs is frequently compromised due to insufficient funding, outdated curricula, and a lack of qualified faculty. Additionally, the focus on rote learning over critical thinking and practical skills further undermines educational outcomes.

- **Access and Equity.** There are significant disparities in access to higher education among different socio-economic groups, genders, and regions within developing countries. Barriers such as high tuition fees, inadequate preparatory education, and socio-cultural factors particularly limit educational aspirations for women and students from rural or low-income backgrounds.
- **Impact of COVID-19.** The pandemic exacerbated existing challenges, causing widespread disruptions in education. Many HEIs were unprepared for the rapid shift to online learning, revealing issues such as the digital divide, lack of technological infrastructure, and insufficient training for both students and educators on online platforms.
- **Policy and Governance Issues.** Ineffective policies and poor governance are significant hurdles. Decision-makers often fail to implement evidence-based or pro-equity policies, and there is frequently a disconnect between policy formation and actual needs. Corruption and lack of transparency further undermine efforts to improve the higher education sector.
- **Technological Challenges.** Despite the transformative potential of technology, many developing countries lack the necessary infrastructure and technical support to implement and sustain digital learning solutions effectively. This results in a significant gap in the adoption of modern educational technologies and methodologies.

Donor Contributions to Solving Challenges

Addressing these challenges requires a multifaceted approach. Here are some common strategies employed by donors in this area.

- **Long-Term Capacity Building.** Donors invest in developing human capital, reforming curricula, and establishing international networks. These efforts include scholarships for students and staff, supporting joint research projects, and creating new educational programmes that align with local contexts and needs. This strategy aims to enhance the resilience and self-reliance of partner institutions, ensuring sustainable improvements in educational standards.
- **Promoting Educational Quality and International Cooperation.** Donors emphasise academic exchange and collaborative research to strengthen HEIs and improve research capacities. These programmes facilitate mobility of students, researchers, and faculty members, fostering knowledge exchange and enhancing educational quality. They also aim to address brain drain by encouraging talented individuals to study and work within their home countries.

- **Systemic Challenges and Governance.** Donor programmes support projects that enhance institutional governance, improve financial management, and develop comprehensive quality assurance systems. This includes legislative reforms and governance enhancements, ensuring HEIs are better equipped to manage their resources and deliver high-quality education.
- **Inclusivity and Equity.** Donor programmes emphasise long-term capacity building that benefits all stakeholders, including marginalised groups. By providing opportunities for underrepresented communities and prioritising equity of access, these programmes help reduce educational disparities and foster social cohesion.
- **Alignment with Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).** Higher education initiatives are aligned with the SDGs, supporting projects that promote sustainable technologies, environmental stewardship, and social equity. Integrating SDG principles into educational initiatives ensures that higher education contributes to broader global development goals, fostering innovation and promoting sustainable economic growth.
- **Encouraging Innovation and Research.** Donors enhance research capacities and foster a culture of innovation by supporting joint research projects and promoting collaborative research through academic exchange programmes. This focus on innovation and research is essential for advancing higher education and developing knowledge economies.

30

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Measuring the Impact of Capacity Building Projects

By employing the following methodologies, it becomes possible to measure the tangible and intangible impacts of capacity-building projects in higher education, ensuring that donor investments effectively enhance the educational framework within developing countries and that progress is transparent to all stakeholders.

- **Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E).** Monitoring involves systematic tracking of a project's progress over time, including quantitative data (e.g., number of participants in trainings) and qualitative data (e.g., feedback from participants). Evaluation assesses the overall performance, relevance, effectiveness, and impact of the project through structured processes, including site visits, interviews, and review of project outputs.
- **Individual Level Assessments.** Tracer studies track outcomes for individuals who have participated in capacity-building programmes, such as changes in employment status and career progression. Qualitative methods, including interviews, surveys, and case studies, gather detailed insights into participants' experiences and the impact on their professional lives.
- **Organisational Level Assessments.** Evaluations focus on changes within HEIs, such as improvements in institutional governance, curriculum development, and research capabilities. External experts often use donor-provided frameworks to assess the sustainability and effectiveness of interventions.

- **Systemic Level Assessments.** These assessments examine the broader impact of capacity-building projects on the education system, including changes in policy, educational standards, and systemic governance. Comprehensive data collection and analysis are required to understand the long-term effects of interventions.
- **External Evaluations.** These evaluations cover various aspects of capacity-building interventions, including their effectiveness, efficiency, relevance, and sustainability, providing objective assessments and recommendations for improvement.
- **Impact Evaluations.** Focused on measuring the long-term effects and broader impact of interventions on the target population or sector, impact evaluations aim to determine the cause-and-effect relationship between the intervention and observed outcomes, often using rigorous statistical methods.

Examining EFMD's Impact: Case Studies on Capacity Building Projects in Higher Education

With over 30 years of experience, EFMD Global has played a key role in coordinating and participating in international projects, focusing on internationalising higher education, enhancing quality assurance, and exploring innovative approaches like open innovation and design thinking. More specifically, EFMD's capacity-building initiatives in higher education have created significant impact through projects like IMPALA and FORINT. These projects, funded by Erasmus+, have successfully enhanced the roles and internationalisation of universities in Latin America, particularly in Cuba, Panama, and Colombia, by developing frameworks, training experts, and embedding sustainable practices.

IMPALA Project | The IMPALA project, funded by the Erasmus+ programme from 2018 to 2022, aimed to strengthen the impact of Latin American universities. It involved 19 partners from Europe and Latin America, including universities and educational institutions from Colombia, Cuba, and Panama. The project focused on developing an Impact Assessment Framework (IAF) to measure the impact of universities' third mission activities, which include community services, continuous education, and research initiatives. Key achievements include training over 100 experts, creating significant reference materials, and integrating the IAF into regular operations of participating HEIs.

FORINT Project | The FORINT project, funded by Erasmus+ from 2016 to 2019, aimed to enhance the internationalisation of higher education in Cuba and Panama. Coordinated by EFMD, it involved seven Cuban universities, two Panamanian universities, and six European partners. Key achievements include a comprehensive situation and needs analysis, organising training seminars and study tours, and developing strategic plans and roadmaps for internationalisation. The project successfully raised awareness about internationalisation, involved over 500 participants, and embedded these practices within institutional frameworks, with support from the Cuban Ministry of Higher Education ensuring sustainability and wider adoption.

Conclusion

The article underscores the importance of addressing the multifaceted challenges faced by higher education systems in developing countries through strategic donor interventions and international collaborations. It also emphasises the need for comprehensive methodologies to measure the impact of capacity-building projects, ensuring that investments are effectively enhancing educational frameworks and contributing to sustainable development. A couple of contributions in the area by EFMD are provided such as the IMPALA and FORINT projects, which have successfully demonstrated how targeted capacity-building initiatives can significantly enhance the effectiveness and internationalisation of higher education institutions in developing countries, paving the way for sustainable improvements in educational quality and governance.

About the author

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