Chapter 1

Regional Integration in West Africa: Exploring the Option of Leveraging Workforce Diversity in the Academia and University System

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ABSTRACT

Since its establishment in 1975, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) has faced the task of regional integration and cooperation in West Africa mainly through economic policies and treaties, and has substantially failed to achieve the desired goals. The sub-region is probably one of the most outstanding regional enclaves of human diversity in the world. However, ethnicity and other differences remain critical phenomena of politics and life in the sub-region. More often than not, these differences are exploited for negative purposes rather than leveraging them for the objectives of cooperation, integration, and development. The university system and its academic membership offer an opportunity for harnessing some of the diversity in the region for more fruitful integration and development. This chapter examines this expected role of academia and the university system towards leveraging human resource diversity for improved cooperation, integration, and development in West Africa.

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INTRODUCTION

The challenge of regional integration remains the primary objective of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) since its formation in 1975. The academia is one group that has the propensity to participate in policy making in most countries especially in Africa where a distinctive political class cannot be distinguished from other power centers. A good number of members of the academia find their way to appointments in governments; they act as resource persons at various levels and they produce a large chunk of personnel for both the government and the private sector. In terms of diversity, they possess the various differences that can be found among the rest of the population in the sub-region (ethnicity, language, sex, age, educational qualifications, temperaments, etc.). Above all, the nature of their engagement as researchers makes them most available to work together in various exchange programs. The academia and by extension the university system, therefore, present a unique opportunity that can easily be used to leverage diversity, build peace, and champion programs of regional cooperation and integration in West Africa. Despite the existing diversity in the region, the academia, and the university system has the high potency of bringing diverse human resources to work together in the West African Universities.

The general objective of this research work is to examine how the academia and the university system can be maximized as an option for leveraging human resource diversity for improved cooperation, integration and development of the sub-region. The specific objectives pursued in the chapter include, but were not limited to the following:

- discussing strategies for enhancing organizational culture and climate that is more diverse ethnically, culturally, linguistically, intellectually, creatively, etc. within the university system in the West African universities;
- exploring avenues of harnessing the diversity evident among the academia in the sub-region and leveraging this through various university exchange programs towards better integration of the sub-region, and
- advocating for and suggesting policies and practices that support inter-university exchanges and research cooperation among the academia of West Africa, the rest of Africa, and the world.

This research was conducted using documentary analysis as well as discourse analysis approaches. Relevant portions of documents like ECOWAS treaty and protocols were analyzed in relation to promoting cooperation in the area of study. The invaluable gains of university exchanges and research cooperation in other parts of the world and the emerging trend of leveraging workforce diversity were highlighted.

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Diversity in West African Sub-Region

The West African sub-region is today made up of 15 countries in the central northwest bulge of the African Continent spanning from below the Sahara desert to the coast of the Atlantic Ocean. These countries include: Benin, Burkina Faso, Cote d’Ivoire, Cape Verde, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, and Togo. These countries are populated by highly diverse ethnic folks that were forced together during colonialism by European Countries in the 19th and 20th centuries. Nigeria, with over 300 hundred ethnic
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