

Increasing Value for Money in Higher Education Development Cooperation A German Perspective Based on Project Coordinators' Experiences

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Abstract

The concept *value for money*, usually defined as the three E's (economy, efficiency and effectiveness), does not fully apply to projects in development cooperation. The paper on hand argues that the concept should not be perceived as economic benefit in monetary terms only. It encourages a qualitative approach defining value for money as a long-term effect of a project that can be reached by only a little more input of resources than usually available for development cooperation projects. Thus, the concept of value for money is closely connected to that of sustainability of a project. Recent studies show that German-African development cooperation in the field of higher education not always can live up to the expectations concerning sustainability (DAAD 2013 / Hansert et al. 2012). Based on the authors' experiences with development projects aiming at higher education quality, this article critically reflects on development cooperation in higher education and identifies prerequisites which could foster a beneficial use of (monetary and non-monetary) input in development cooperation projects. As will be shown, critical evaluative thinking, joint project planning, realistic expectations and the acknowledgement of intercultural differences can be key to successful project work in development cooperation and thus can help to increase the value for money and sustainability alike.

Keywords: higher education management, quality assurance, project management, international cooperation, development cooperation

1. Introduction

The concept of value for money, usually defined as the economic orientation, the efficiency and the effectiveness of an intervention, has become more important in development cooperation in the recent years, as Penny Jackson (2012) formulates in her paper *Value for Money and International Development*. While performance criteria for development aid interventions were different from other sectors in the past, nowadays a stronger need for demonstrating accountability towards society has risen also in this area and it became more and more necessary to counter aid sceptics. In Germany - a country that spent 24.7 billion US Dollars on developmental aid in 2016 (OECD, 2017) - more evaluation and monitoring activities are being installed currently to increase the accountability for funds spent on development cooperation. In 2012, the German Institute for Development Evaluation (DEval) was founded, which mirrors a growing political interest in the evaluation of German development cooperation (Lücking et al., 2015).

In the paper on hand a qualitative approach to the concept of value for money is applied. The question about economy, efficiency and effectiveness in development work is legitimate and important to guarantee transparency towards society and to improve intervention programmes, but it does not define economic benefit in monetary terms only. It relates costs - not necessarily defined as monetary input - and effects in terms of asking 'How much and what kind of input is needed to achieve a sustaining improvement?'. Thus, value for money is defined as the relation between investment (money, voluntary work, etc.) needed in addition to the basic project funding and achieving sustainability of a measure.

The present paper will focus on development cooperation in management and evaluation in the field of

higher education. There are recent international reports which point at the importance of improving higher education quality in contrast to just focussing on quantity (see also Mohohlwane & Taylor, 2015; Association for Public and Land-grant Universities, 2014). This is supported by the assumption that enhancing the quality of educational provision is not only a goal in itself, but also vital to further economic development as well as sustainability in various policy areas (see also Machuka, 2015; Mukkavilli, 2015; Association for Public and Land-grant Universities, 2014; Jowi, 2013). Thus, the description of improvements achieved in higher education management and quality assurance serve well to contrast long-term value for money against short term benefits of a given project.

Based on the authors' experiences in three development projects aiming at higher education quality in sub-Saharan Africa, this article critically reflects on development cooperation in higher education and identifies prerequisites which could foster a beneficial use of (monetary and non-monetary) input in development cooperation projects. First, it gives a short introduction to recent developments in development cooperation in higher education (quality) management in sub-Saharan Africa and to the three development cooperation projects, on which the argumentation of this article will be based. The projects were carried out in partnership with the University of Duisburg-Essen, Germany, funded as part of the DIES programme (see below). The paper on hand will then turn to factors increasing the value for money defined as a project's or long-term measure's success (i.e., realistic assessment of local demands and project planning, funding needs and funding possibilities, intercultural differences and support by policy makers and funding authorities). Finally, some hands-on recommendations to increase the effectiveness and sustainability of development cooperation projects in higher education will be deduced.

2. Development Cooperation in Higher Education Management and Quality Assurance in East and West Africa

Heavily increasing enrolments starting in the 1980s and 1990s parallel to declining budgets for tertiary education in sub-Saharan Africa as well as the rapid proliferation of private higher education institutions together with a fast transforming job market have prompted increased reflection about quality in tertiary education provision on the African continent (Materu, 2007). Consequently, over the past two decades, development cooperation in the field of higher education management and quality assurance between the European and the African continent was intensified¹.

Starting as early as 2006, a variety of projects were carried out in East Africa in the framework of the DIES-Programme. The *Dialogue on Innovative Higher Education Strategies* (DIES) is jointly coordinated by the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) and the German Rectors' Conference (HRK) and funded by the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ). It aims at supporting higher education institutions in developing countries to professionalise management processes and to enhance the quality of education provision. In the DIES-project *Quality Assurance in East Africa*, DAAD and HRK closely cooperated with the Inter-University Council for East Africa (IUCEA) (Hansert et al., 2012). Based on the experiences with the quality assurance initiative in East Africa, they launched a comparable initiative in West Africa called EWAQAS (*Enhanced West African Quality Assurance Structures in Higher Education*). The initiative brings together several partners from Europe (DAAD, UNESCO²) and Africa (AAU³, CAMES⁴, UEMOA⁵) and benefits immensely from preceding projects in East Africa and other regions in the world. Like the initiative in East Africa, it aims at strengthening capacity in the field of quality assurance and facilitating the policy dialogue among key drivers and stakeholders (UNESCO, 2013).

The three projects referred to in the present paper are either embedded in the East African or West African quality assurance initiatives of the DIES-programme. They were all coordinated by the Centre for Higher Education Development and Quality Enhancement (CHEDQE) of the University of Duisburg-Essen in Germany. Thus, the projects are not only highly beneficial to each other, but also share common ground in terms of funding background and regulations. They will be introduced shortly in the following:

UNITRACE 2.0 (10/2015 - 12/2016)

The Training on University Graduates' Tracer Studies (UNITRACE 2.0) was implemented in cooperation with the Commission for University Education (CUE) and the Inter-University Council for East Africa. The overall objective of UNITRACE 2.0 was to develop skills of university managers in order to be able to design, implement and analyse graduate tracer studies as being part of the internal quality assurance systems in East Africa. The participants of the programme were trained by East African and German researchers in the major

¹ For further information see EUA (2012) and the HAQAA project (<http://www.aau.org/haqaa/>)

² United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization.

³ Association of African Universities.

⁴ Conseil Africain et Malgache pour l'Enseignement Supérieur.

⁵ Union Economique et Monétaire Ouest Africaine.

fields related to graduate tracer studies, such as questionnaire development, data analysis and interpretation of findings. Participants were accompanied and supported throughout the whole process of their tracer study.

TrainQAfrica (11/2013 - 02/2017)

Training on Internal Quality Assurance in West Africa (TrainQAfrica) was a training course for quality managers from West Africa aiming at establishing internal quality assurance systems in their higher education institutions. The training focused on fields like effective quality and change management, handling instruments of quality assurance and assessment and development of study programmes. The course included five modules (four on-site, one online module) for which a compendium of course books was provided that supports the learning process in the workshops. All participants of the training planned and implemented an own project in their own institutions during the training course. This process of project implementation was monitored and coached by both peers and the trainers.

EIQMS (01/2014 - 12/2017)

Establishing Integrated Quality Management Systems is a DIES-partnership between the Centre for Higher Education Development and Quality Enhancement (CHEDQE) of the University of Duisburg-Essen, the Egerton University in Kenya and the St. Augustine University in Tanzania. Under the premise “Towards a Culture of Quality”, the project aims at establishing structures for integrated quality management systems at both partner universities. Special emphasis is placed on the introduction of evaluation processes at the faculties as well as the conceptualisation and implementation of graduate surveys. The CHEDQE trains and advises both cooperation partners on subjects such as the preparing of self-evaluation reports, review processes, and curriculum development. They also advise on the development of a reliable method and technical infrastructure for a qualitative assessment and analysis of information.

In the following chapters, influencing factors for the effective use of funding in development cooperation in higher education quality assurance will be identified based on the authors’ experience with the projects described above and beyond. To a certain extent, the findings can be generalised to be valid for other types of projects as well.

3. Factors Contributing to an Effective Use of Funding

a) Joint Project Planning and Valid Needs Assessment

Sporadically, there are studies carried out and project outcomes reflected to assess the status quo of the provision of tertiary education in Africa and the assurance of its quality (cf. for example Materu, 2007; Kuria et al., 2012). These reflections deliver some insight into pan-African, regional and national demands in higher education management and quality assurance. However, these studies often fail to provide information about the current status of, for instance, the financial situation of the participating higher education institutions or the quality of technical or ICT-infrastructure on a sub-national level - information which is critical to assess the actual demand of the cooperation partner from the developing country (South partners). Because of this lack of information, a significant number of development cooperation projects in the higher education quality assurance sector are rather supply-oriented than fitting to the actual demands of the South partners. Consequently, the content and structure of projects are determined by the expertise of partners from more developed countries (North partners). This expertise, again, is based on circumstances (availability of resources, quality of infrastructure, qualification of staff, etc.) which rarely correspond to the situation in the Southern partner country (cf. Sehoole et al., 2013). Moreover, funding in development cooperation is usually scarce. Thus, cooperation projects tend to get to the - assumingly - important core of the project directly and to spend the available funds on the core content only. Development projects rarely include extensive needs analyses before (planning phase) and appropriate project evaluations after working on the main work packages of the project to learn from for future cooperation (reflection phase). Thus, critical evaluative thinking on the part of the Northern partners is not as prominent as it could be both during the planning and the reflection phases of a project.

Critical evaluative thinking “involves identifying assumptions, posing thoughtful questions, pursuing deeper understanding through reflection and perspective taking, and informing decisions in preparation for action.” (Buckley et al., 2015, p. 378). Although this means additional reflective work and has to be honed through training and frequent application (Buckley et al., 2015; Rog, 2015), a detailed planning together with both partners from the North and the South as well as joint proposal writing can improve the project outline in so far that circumstances in the partner countries, the need for resources and competence development as well as realistic aims of the project are critically evaluated and much better assessed before initiating the project.

However, joint project planning also poses a challenge in itself. Different approaches to project and resource planning across countries and cultures might lead to divergent interpretations of the circumstances and feasibility of projects (see also below on cultural differences). This can hinder project success although there was joint project planning. For colleagues new in the field of development cooperation, it might be difficult to assess the situation and feasibility of work packages. This emphasises the importance of building on (own or “borrowed”) experience in development cooperation. A first step towards enhancing realistic planning could be

to increase coaching by experienced project coordinators to those who are new to international cooperation. This could improve planning and assessments by new Northern project partners and support them to put their ideas into a realistic context.

Realistic planning in development cooperation, thus, needs both experience in the project planning and detailed knowledge about the basis and circumstances of a project. Since Northern partners may have the experience in coordinating development cooperation projects and thus can bring in the former, Southern partners are experts in contributing the latter. This shows that it is crucial to combine both perspectives as early as possible, that is: in a joint planning process including a needs assessment for the project. This can best be done by brainstorming sessions, status-quo-surveys on necessary infrastructure, human resources, etc. on-site. Additionally, a critical reflection of the first draft of the project plan and a critical evaluation drawing from all partners' experiences could improve the applicability of a project plan in the estimated time frame. Realistic planning increases the probability of a project to be successful, i.e. to produce long-term effects. Thus, it increases the value produced in return of the resources spent.

b) Appropriate Funding Practice

One major question regarding value for money is the question of how little opposed to how much more resources are necessary to achieve sustainability in contrast to spending that little less and thus not achieving a sustainable outcome (Jackson, 2012). This question goes further than a focus on monetary input only and imminent outcomes, a common practice in development cooperation funding logic and evaluation (Gertler et al., 2011). Aiming at the acquisition of more funding may be seen as inappropriate in the light of limited resources. Nevertheless, the question must be asked, whether it would be better to spend a little more and achieve a sustainable outcome instead of spending money in vain.

A big challenge development cooperation projects face is the matter of co-funding. To emphasise equal partnerships as well as equal responsibilities for the success of a given project, Northern funding bodies often demand cross-funding by Southern funding bodies, institutions involved or political organs (e.g. IUCEA, 2006). Although this seems reasonable in the first place, this practice can result in underfunding of the projects or even in overall failure. We experienced that university associations or the leadership of higher education institutions from cooperating countries first committed to financially contribute to a project but then suddenly withdrew their financial support due to different reasons. One of the understandable and recurring reasons for a sudden termination of funding is the lack of financial means. It can only be assumed that this discontinuation of financial support is based on a lack of prospective planning, a sudden internal reallocation of funds or a shortage of contributions from other parties (e.g. membership fees).

Attracting third-party funding in German higher education can be a challenge with many explicit and implicit rules which have to be known by the applicants. According to the authors' experience, the attraction of funding is very different in the African partner countries. Thus, even if Northern partners are very experienced and proficient in attracting funding in their countries, they do not necessarily succeed in attracting funding in African countries. In addition, (potential) project partners from higher education institutions in developing countries struggle to mobilise funds by their home institutions (cf. Magutu et al., 2010; Schoole et al. 2013). Raising internal funds is particularly difficult when it comes to funding for a preliminary project phase, including the joint proposal-writing process, since the success of the application is not guaranteed.

It would be worthwhile to consider an international workshop on attracting co-funding for development projects from funding bodies in the partner countries. This way, both North- and South-partners could learn from each other when it comes to different rules when applying for funding. Having gained competences on how to involve funding bodies, underfunding could be prevented and sustainability in development work could be increased (cf. Mikkavilli, 2015).

c) Appropriate Involvement of Policy Level and Funding Authorities

Joint capacity building is a generally accepted concept underlying any development cooperation (Alonso & Glennie, 2015). This concept is clearly delineated from the mere transfer of knowledge from an allegedly qualified partner (usually assumed to come from a developed country) to a supposedly inexperienced partner (usually assumed to be from a less developed country).

If joint capacity building is the underlying principle of development cooperation, cooperative planning and the implementation of programmes and projects as well as continuous exchange must come with it. In the field of higher education management and quality assurance, this is mirrored in various cooperation agreements and memorandums of understanding. In such documents, the structure of the partnership and the contribution (also in terms of financial support) of each party are defined.

According to the authors' experience, agreements and contracts sometimes are not fulfilled by both parties. This is especially common, when it comes to co-funding from Southern partners (see also above). Since Northern partners are often committed to the principle of joint capacity building, they aim to maintain their good relations to the policy-level partners in the partner countries even if they do not fulfil their part of the agreement. Thus Northern funding authorities or mediator organisations find themselves faced by the questions whether they

either insist on the fulfilment of a contract by both parties and thus potentially threaten the relationship or whether they run the project with less support from the respective Southern partner and thus decrease the quality of the operation.

From the perspective of project coordinators in the field, courage on the funding authorities' part to more strongly insist on the mutual fulfilment of obligations is desirable. This could strengthen the feeling of responsibility on the South partners' side. In this context insisting means that Northern funding or mediator organisations should discuss longer with their Southern counterparts on policy level about the meaning of mutual obligations and trust in collaborative relations and clearly express their strong conviction that collaboration is far less successful without trust and mutuality. They should also reflect on and announce potential consequences.

More exchange between the operative level (project coordinators and partners from North and South) and the policy level in development cooperation in higher education management and quality assurance is desirable, too. Since Northern funding regulations sometimes are not compatible with the reality in the Southern partner country, especially when it comes to the financial administration of a project. Applying German bureaucracy to different financial systems, processes of procurement and accounting and documentation is a challenge. It would be desirable that funding authorities and mediator organisations would allow for more flexibility to overcome these differences and to relieve project coordinators from the bureaucratic burden to enable them to focus their energy on the content of their project work.

d) Recognition of Cultural Differences

Working with colleagues from different countries and different cultural and economic backgrounds provides the opportunity to reflect established convictions and modes of work, including the notion of teaching and learning (e.g. by re-planning workshop concepts to make them applicable in a different context). It challenges Northern partners to understand different ways of managing complex organisations like universities (in Germany, bureaucratic rules and participative management are the underlying principle for organisational management; in Africa, clear-cut hierarchical structures serve the same purpose). In general, there are a lot of learning opportunities (also beyond the professional context) and chances for qualification in the bounds of international cooperation projects for Northern partners. Such kinds of cooperation can show them that they are not the only ones struggling with resistance against change in higher education institutions and that dialogue with funding bodies needs negotiating skills. It can be satisfying to know that, despite all obvious differences, in the end all partners strive for the same.

However, it cannot be denied that cultural differences in cross-continental cooperation have an influence on the activities and provide challenges for project work.

The concept of evaluative thinking understood as critically reflecting and questioning one's own and others' (including trainers' and superiors') opinions and practices openly, did not seem to be shared by the German and African colleagues in the same way.

Additionally, when exploring the grounds and limits of a planned project in development cooperation, intercultural differences can make it necessary to act with caution when it comes to the analysis of demands. There seems to be a deeply rooted cultural difference leading to different practice in formulating achievements and improvement potential. While Northern partners seem to rather focus desiderata and improvement potential, Southern partners seem to rather emphasise best practice and achievements instead.

The manifestation of intercultural difference can also be experienced when it comes to work pace and reliability in planning during workshops as well as the application of competences in project work on campus, i.e. in the time between workshops. In the authors' opinion, there is a lack of common understanding among African and German project partners about planning, timing and recreational needs over the course of a working day. This is a difference, which cannot be changed in the short run, but it can be handled by joint planning and a mutual commitment to jointly developed workshop rules.

Another observation concerns different notions and different ways to deal with hierarchy. In the authors' experience, sub-Saharan African higher education institutions tend to appoint higher ranking staff with the duty of attending workshops in international projects because often there is travel involved and - assumingly - the privilege of travelling is reserved for the higher ranking staff members. These senior staff members, however, are often not those who actually need the skills acquired in the training for their job. If this assumption is correct, there is an underlying problem of the transfer of knowledge and competences.

A general openness and sensitivity towards intercultural differences, the will to address them and jointly agree on ways to handle them, will surely increase the effectiveness of cross-cultural projects.

e) Realistic Expectations

Each of the aforementioned projects included a few short-term stays on-site in Africa. These short time spans combined with a field as complex as higher education (quality) management and evaluation with partners from different countries and heterogeneous learner groups always led to a feeling of being rushed in the projects. This constant hurry made it hard to promote critically questioning the approaches that were discussed.

Looking at the time needed to implement measures of (quality) management as well as evaluation projects

in German HEIs, it often takes years before an instrument is accepted and the data is actually used for evidence-based decision-making. Thus, this is not an African challenge alone, but one to be kept in mind when drafting a timeframe and the follow-up work of a development project dealing with higher education (quality) management.

Also, expecting too much too quickly regarding Southern partners' dedication to a development project can lead to frustration and tensions on both sides. The authors often had to fight the feeling that the work in a project is not evenly shared by all partners. Sometimes the Southern partners were not able to contribute appropriately, because of many other obligations (see below). Online-mentorships that were part of a project plan, for example, were not taken advantage of by the Southern project partners as much as was expected. As was sketched out before, project plans are often drafted with the Southern partners in mind, but not necessarily based on profound knowledge of their home countries and the higher education systems therein. Not involving Southern partners in a well-grounded preliminary project phase might also result in different expectations about the level of involvement by both partners which is necessary to render the project a success. If only one partner is responsible for formulating project aims and milestones, calculating the funds, etc. it can be hard to foster the feeling of owning the process and the wish to equally contribute. Also, tasks involving quality management and evaluation sometimes are not yet seen as a priority task to be carried out. Thus, South partners and training participants are often assigned this duty as an add-on, which they have to find time and funds for. Once they are back on campus, competences gained during workshops are quickly pushed to the back of their minds because other duties are more important from their higher education institutions management's perspective.

When it comes to higher level support, i.e. political or funding bodies' support, expecting too much can become a real challenge. There is no golden rule to ensure the support needed from the higher-level institutions in Africa. And the way to go about things follows much different implicit rules than we are used to in Germany. The most striking Europe-Africa difference regarding funding issues is that in sub-Saharan contexts funds can be withdrawn from projects or are never administered towards its recipients. The authors of this paper are hoping for a more stable interaction between Northern and Southern funding bodies leading to a reliable commitment on the policy and funding authorities' part to ensure that projects, once approved and funds granted, will be able to carry on and concentrate on the matter at hand without being hindered by lacking funds.

4. Summary and Conclusion: What can be improved to Foster Value for Money in Higher Education Development Cooperation?

In the preceding chapters five major factors were presented which can increase the beneficial use of funding in development cooperation in the field of higher education (quality) management:

- a) joint project planning and valid needs assessment
- b) appropriate funding practice
- c) appropriate involvement of policy level and funding authorities
- d) recognition of cultural differences
- e) realistic expectations

The argumentation was based on some concrete experiences gained by the authors of this paper in the bounds of three projects which they implemented in West and East Africa. In the following, some practice-oriented recommendations will be presented, which could help to make development cooperation projects in the aforementioned field more successful.

1. *Fostering critical evaluative thinking and open discourse both in project planning as well as in the bounds of cooperation projects themselves:* Preparatory and recurring joint planning and open reflection of a project can help to ensure that a development cooperation project addresses the demands of the developing country, focusses realistic aims, allows for a basic flexibility in the project implementation and supports mutual understanding across cultures. This demands a commitment of all parties involved to a basic openness and directness.

2. *Cooperatively planning projects together with partners under involvement of experienced project coordinators:* A joint and thorough planning process should be carried out in the framework of a project team meeting on-site in the country, where the project should be implemented. This will lead to feasible project plans taking the prerequisites and determinants (infrastructure, staff qualification, etc.) into consideration. Whenever possible, novice and semi-experienced project coordinators should involve more experienced project coordinators in the planning process. This can help to put the prerequisites and determinants in the right context and to consider them properly. The establishment and maintenance of project coordinator networks and peer coaching therein could be supported more than is currently done by the funding bodies.

3. *Increasing exchange between project coordinators and funding bodies:* An increased exchange between the operative level of project coordinators and the policy level of funding authorities can increase the long-term success of development cooperation projects in many ways. While project coordinators work in the field and thus can identify problems more quickly, the policy level can help to address these problems fast and insistently. Oftentimes, obstacles on the very basic operative level (e.g. different procurement and accounting procedures in different institutions, staff fluctuation, IT-infrastructure) can have devastating consequences for a project.

Unfortunately, the policy level does not necessarily know of and discuss these operative issues. More exchange between the two levels, e.g. in the framework of regular steering committee meetings, the discussion of operative issues in the framework of conferences etc., can help to increase mutual trust between project coordinators and political actors. It can also help to reconsider regulations for the financial administration of projects and - more generally and most importantly - helps the political level to be up-to-date concerning what is needed in a country.

4. *Acknowledging and actively addressing intercultural differences*: The influence of intercultural differences on cooperation projects is undeniable. When it comes to cooperation between Sub-Saharan African and German partners, different concepts of teaching and learning (e.g. lecture style vs. cooperative learning), diverging notions of planning and timing (e.g. flexibility vs. punctuality) and differing connotations of hierarchy (e.g. more regulative function vs. more representative function) have to be taken into consideration. It cannot be an explicit aim of any development cooperation to change cultural habits. But development cooperation should have the aim to address intercultural differences, in order to facilitate cooperation. This can be achieved by - first of all and most importantly - mutual respect and appreciation of difference in general. A smooth collaboration can also be achieved by discussing intercultural differences and potentially resulting problems jointly aiming at the joint development of rules for the cooperation, to which all partners commit themselves.

5. *Learning to work with realistic expectations*: Funding in development cooperation is scarce and produces a constant rush in many projects. Alone, this rush is of no benefit at all. Some things just need the time they need. Thus, the probability of a project to be effective and successful can rather be increased by setting realistic and achievable aims than by hurrying through an unmanageable amount of work. It could help Northern project partners to remember the developments in their own countries. It is improbable that a measure which took five years in Germany, for example, would be accomplished in two years in Kenya. When planning projects, it would also be helpful to factor in that a project oftentimes is an add-on to the tasks of an individual working in a project and thus needs additional energy and time.

Future evaluations of development cooperation projects in higher education in the form of rigorous impact assessments should generally be increased. Evaluations should also consider the aforementioned impact factors for the success of interventions in higher education.

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