

Higher Education Systems and International Student Mobility in East Africa: A Colonial Relic Shaped by Neoliberal Imperatives of Internationalization

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Abstract

The internationalization of higher education (IHE) — especially through international student mobility (ISM) — has been widely studied, but most of this scholarship draws on evidence and perspectives from the global North. As a result, research on IHE often overlooks the specific historical, political, and socioeconomic contexts that shape student mobility within Africa. This paper employs a mixed-methods approach to investigate how students' perceptions of the quality, governance, and reputation of HE systems in both their home and host countries influence patterns of intra-Africa student mobility, drawing on evidence from East Africa. The findings suggest that the movement of students within the region is shaped not only by practical considerations, but also by colonial legacies, each country's history of hosting international students, and the impact of neoliberal reforms in HE. By situating student mobility within these broader structural and historical contexts, this study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how HE systems shape mobility within Africa and adds to the growing body of critical scholarship on internationalization. Ultimately, this work points to the need for more regionally grounded research on student mobility across the global South.

Key words: student mobility, higher education, neoliberalism, coloniality, East Africa.

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Résumé: L'internationalisation de l'enseignement supérieur (IES), en particulier à travers la mobilité internationale des étudiants (IES), a fait l'objet de nombreuses études, mais la plupart de ces travaux s'appuient sur des données et des perspectives provenant des pays du Nord. En conséquence, les recherches sur l'IES négligent souvent les contextes historiques, politiques et socio-économiques spécifiques qui façonnent la mobilité étudiante en Afrique. Cet article utilise une approche mixte pour explorer comment les perceptions des étudiants quant à la qualité, la gouvernance et la réputation des systèmes d'enseignement supérieur dans leur pays d'origine et dans leur pays d'accueil influencent les schémas de mobilité étudiante intra-africaine, en s'appuyant sur des données provenant d'Afrique de l'Est. Les résultats suggèrent que les mouvements d'étudiants au sein de la région sont influencés non seulement par des considérations pratiques, mais aussi par l'héritage colonial, l'histoire de chaque pays en matière d'accueil d'étudiants internationaux et l'impact des réformes néolibérales dans l'enseignement supérieur. En situant la mobilité étudiante dans ces contextes structurels et historiques plus larges, cette étude contribue à une compréhension plus nuancée de la manière dont les systèmes d'enseignement supérieur façonnent la mobilité en Afrique et s'ajoute au corpus croissant de recherches critiques sur l'internationalisation. En fin de compte, ce travail souligne la nécessité de mener davantage de recherches ancrées dans le contexte régional sur la mobilité étudiante dans les pays du Sud.

Mots clés: Mobilité étudiante, Enseignement supérieur, Néolibéralisme, Colonialité, Afrique de l'Est.

Introduction

Students usually choose higher education (HE) systems and institutions they perceive to be of high quality; that is, the quality of a HE system strongly influences students' decisions about where to study (Mitic and Mojic, 2020). Lo et al. (2022) note that the perceived quality of a HE system is one of the strongest predictors of international student mobility (ISM), as students tend to move from countries with lower-quality systems to those with stronger reputations. As Rodriguez et al. (2011) argue, the presence of highly ranked universities can significantly shape students' choices to continue their studies in a given country. Although Africa has relatively few globally top-ranked universities, these institutions may nonetheless play an important role in driving intra-African student flows.

Yet, defining "quality" in HE is far from straightforward. As Cadena et al. (2018) and Elassy (2015) observe, quality is often subjective and shaped by

context, perspective, and purpose. Students, academics, and policymakers may each define and evaluate quality differently.

The factors shaping the perceived quality of HE systems in Africa are deeply rooted in historical, political, and economic conditions including, colonial legacies, the structural adjustment policies of the 1990s, and Education for All programmes. These influences continue to shape how HE systems in Africa function today. Scholars (Kigotho, 2020; Kupriyanova et al., 2018; Zeleza, 2021) have highlighted persistent concerns about the quality of HE systems in Africa, citing issues such as limited access (Musau, 2018), low research productivity (Zeleza, 2021), and inadequate teaching and learning resources (Musau, 2018). Such disparities across universities and countries can have significant implications for student mobility within the continent. Much of the research on ISM has focused on South-to-North flows, where students primarily seek higher-quality HE services in the global North (Didisse et al., 2019; Hossain et al., 2025). Far less attention has been paid to student mobility within Africa itself. This paper investigates how the perceived quality and governance of East African HE systems shape intra-Africa student mobility. As Van Bouwel and Veugelers (2013) point out, few studies have examined the role of HE quality in driving mobility between countries with comparable levels of development, a gap this study aims to address.

Uganda, for instance, attracts many international students from neighboring East African countries (Kiiza, 2019). In this study, Uganda is treated as a receiving (host) country, while Rwanda and Burundi are considered sending countries (Itaaga et al., 2013). As Lomer (2018) suggests, the absence of high-quality HE institutions in one country often drives students to pursue their studies elsewhere, an idea this paper examines in the East African context.

The study is guided by this question: How do the perceived quality and governance of HE systems in students' home and host countries shape patterns of intra-Africa student mobility within East Africa? and aims to shed light on how colonial legacies and neoliberal reforms continue to influence HE choices and mobility trends within the region.

The paper is structured as follows: the next section reviews relevant literature on HE quality and ISM; this is followed by an explanation of the mixed methods research design. The findings section presents key results from the survey and interviews, which are then discussed in relation to regional HE policy and practice. The paper concludes with recommendations for policymakers and directions for future research.

Literature Review

Recent trends in ISM within Africa show both encouraging growth and enduring structural challenges. According to UNESCO's Global Flow of Tertiary Students database (UIS, 2022), more than 500,000 African students now study in other African countries, an increase of approximately 18% since 2017. This reflects ongoing efforts toward regional integration and growing interest in strengthening HE capacity within Africa (Knight and Woldegiorgis, 2017).

However, as Amutuhaire (2024) argues, these headline figures can mask persistent inequalities in access to mobility opportunities. Students from rural areas, low-income households, or refugee backgrounds remain largely excluded from formal mobility pathways. Building on this emerging conversation, this paper examines how recent mobility trends intersect with the perceived quality and governance of HE systems in East Africa, shaping students' decisions to pursue regional study opportunities.

While student mobility within Africa has traditionally focused on corridors from Francophone West Africa or Southern Africa (Woldegiorgis, 2024), the East African region has seen significant growth in intra-regional student flows in recent years, yet remains underexplored in empirical research. For example, Uganda is a desirable study destination for international students due to its relatively peaceful environment compared to some East African countries, lower education costs, and lower cost of living (Hassan, 2020; Herrmann, 2013; Itaaga et al., 2013; Kanyesigye, 2024), among other factors. However, South Sudan and Somalia, which were previously at war and sent international students to Uganda, are gradually restoring peace. Nonetheless, Uganda continues to receive students from these countries. Thus, national security influences ISM trends in conjunction with other criteria, as this paper investigates.

However, lecture halls and other facilities in some Ugandan institutions do not meet appropriate standards (Ssempebwa et al., 2012), and technology is underutilized (Woldegiorgis and Amutuhaire, 2023). Thus, if institutional services contribute to student flows, as Erdei and Káplár-Kodácsy (2020) claim, it is unclear how Uganda can continue to attract large numbers of international students in the face of problematic institutional services. The preceding notwithstanding, Rwanda's HE system is in its early phases of growth; it offers limited educational programmes, particularly at the PhD level, and does not fully meet the needs of its students (Trines, 2019). Consequently, Rwanda has high outward mobility rates, with students looking for preferred academic programmes and higher-quality teaching elsewhere. However, this scenario does not necessarily justify Uganda as

a destination for Rwandan students. Although the ICEF Monitor (2017) reports that the quality of Uganda's HE system has positively influenced its inbound ISM, Hyuha (2017) argues that the quality of Uganda's HE has deteriorated since 1992, making it impossible to account for the country's reported ISM trends fully.

At the same time, Sangwa et al. (2025) hold that access to Rwanda's HE sector is limited due to, among other things, exorbitant expenses, while Uganda's HE offerings are considered to be cheaper than those in its East African Community partner nations (Herrmann, 2013; Itaaga et al., 2013). The cost issue may also help to explain the type of student exchanges between the two countries. However, according to Murphy et al. (2017), the cost of education (tuition fees) typically increases with the quality of services delivered. This implies that Uganda's education quality is low and insufficient to attract international students, but universities in Uganda continue recruiting many international students.

According to Walker (2022), the HE industry worldwide is underfunded, making students a popular source of institutional revenues (Alstete, 2020). As a result, HEIs in East Africa are progressively admitting high-fee-paying international students to help offset the costs of HE services. As the case elsewhere, these perspectives have accelerated the commercialization of HE, such that it is now a tradable item (Wilkinson and Wilkinson, 2020), and HEIs are investing substantially in advertising and branding to entice more students to choose their institution over others (Münch, 2014). This scenario has bred competition for students (or 'customers') and other resources between HEIs in East Africa (Oanda and Matiang'i, 2018). However, if students are considered customers, economic interests may eventually override the ethical obligation to offer education. The concept that education is a marketable good ignores education's significance as a practice of human freedom (Hooks, 1994) and a vital component of human transformation and growth. Furthermore, highly entrepreneurial and market-oriented HE systems are vulnerable to scams with fraudulent providers exploiting profit-making opportunities.

Tannock (2018) expresses concern about the marketization of HE, claiming that it has weakened social justice and educational equity imperatives. First, treating international students as 'cash cows' or outsiders violates social justice and educational equity (Yang, 2020). HE will undoubtedly remain an item on the global market, but as Mittelmeier and Lomer (2021) point out, the question is whether it should be sold as a commodity. The duo also claim that education is a service, but is now viewed as a good and an export. Educational services are evaluated in terms of their cost-

effectiveness, influenced by functionalist and instrumental approaches that have economized education's historical, social, and cultural contributions to society (Mittelmeier and Lomer, 2021).

The research capacity of a country's HEIs is one component that contributes to the quality of its HE system (Griffioen, 2020). Despite this understanding, research capability in Sub-Saharan African universities, notably East Africa, has remained low, resulting in their exclusion from global university rankings (Waruru, 2017). This is due to inadequate investment in research capacity since no African country invests more than 1% of its GDP in R and D (Kigotho, 2021). That is why Burundi reportedly has limited research capability (Tuyisenge, 2020) while Rwanda has few professors and doctoral researchers to engage in research (Trines, 2019). However, a lack of investment in research decreases the quality of the HE system and influences ISM.

Building on Kiiza's (2019) doctoral thesis and subsequent book chapter (Kiiza, 2022), which examine Uganda's emergence as a regional hub for intra-Africa student mobility, this article extends that foundational work with updated empirical evidence and a decolonial perspective on regional mobility policy frameworks.

Methodology

This study examined the following research question: How does the quality and governance of HE systems in students' home and host countries influence intra-Africa student mobility in East Africa? In so doing it studied the quality of HE systems in international students' home and host countries. Using mixed methods, the researcher collected data from international students, university staff in charge of international students, and national HE councils. The researcher used self-administered email surveys to collect quantitative data from a sample of 208 international students at Kampala International University (KIU) and 229 from Makerere University (MU) in Uganda. The researcher also interviewed 15 informants, including two staff members from HE councils, three from MU, six from KIU, and ten international students. In the quantitative data analysis, descriptive statistics such as percentages were determined using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) which was used to categorize the study variables. Thematic analysis was used to study qualitative data, which included categorizing it into themes, coding it, and tabulating the results. Representative quotes were generated to examine the themes discovered among the respondents, and summary statements were built utilizing the coded data.

Findings

This section presents and discusses findings on the influence of HE systems on ISM by considering the quality of HE in sending and receiving countries in East Africa.

Quality of HE in the Sending Countries

International students were asked to rate eleven aspects of HE quality in their home countries. According to Cadena et al. (2018) and Lourenço and Sá (2019), the quality of a HE system is measured using criteria such as institutional administration, research output, student services, and teaching quality. Furthermore, studies (Bratti and Verzillo, 2019; Kosztyán et al., 2021; Lourenço et al., 2020) indicate that HE systems are distinguished by the language of instruction, university ranking and reputation, facility quality, and educational costs, all of which influence student in-and out-flows in a given country. These variables were considered in this study, and an average index of international students' responses was calculated to provide an overall picture of the quality of the HE system in the sending countries. Table 1 displays the pertinent descriptive statistics.

Table 1: Pertinent Descriptive Statistics of the Self-Administered Survey

Statistic	Value	
Mean	3.39	
95% confidence interval	Upper	3.50
	Lower	3.32
Median	3.34	
Standard deviation	0.48	
Range	2.55	
Skewness	0.70	

International students' perceptions of their home countries' HE systems are slightly greater than three (mean = 3.40) on a Likert scale of five options. A mean value somewhat greater than three suggests uncertainty about the negatively stated items used to assess HE quality in the sending countries. Furthermore, international students' perceptions of HE systems are slightly grouped around the mean, as shown by a low standard deviation of 0.48. Moreover, individuals' perceptions of HE quality in their home country are normally distributed, as shown by a slight positive skew (0.70). Thus, there are approximately similar levels of satisfaction and dissatisfaction with the quality of HE in international students' home countries. While the quantitative data revealed virtually similar levels of satisfaction

and dissatisfaction with the quality of HE in international students' sending countries, the qualitative findings revealed that the sending country's HE system had quality challenges. According to an informant from the National Commission of Burundi:

The quality of education in Burundi is low, mainly due to underfunding. Those who study in other countries do so in search of better quality education. Besides, the language of instruction used in universities in Burundi encourages students to study in other countries. English has been promoted as the lingua franca, yet it is not used for instruction in most HEIs in Burundi. This forces students to study abroad. (Interview with an official from the National Commission for HE in Burundi, December 1st, 2022).

From this response, Burundi's outbound mobility is influenced by a search for higher-quality education, including English language instruction and educational resources. Furthermore, this response reflects English's predominance as HE's most widely used language. As Altbach (2011) notes English as "the language of academic neo-colonialism, ... scholars everywhere are under pressure to conform to the norms and values of the metropolitan academic systems that use English" (p. 18). It is consequently difficult to dismiss the argument of Schinkel (2018) and Zuchowski et al. (2017) that internationalization is related to neocolonialism, particularly in developing nations and intra-African ISM should decrease, not enhance, the relationship between internationalization and neocolonialism.

To a question to international students, "How likely is it that the HE quality in your home country influenced your choice to study in Uganda?" over 75% responded that the quality of their home country's HE system informed their mobility choice. In contrast, almost 12% of respondents reported that the home HE system had little influence on their choice to study abroad. In agreement, the informant from the International Students Office at MU, while remarking on Uganda's inbound ISM, claimed that:

Uganda used to admit many international students from Rwanda, Burundi, Somalia, and South Sudan, which faced instabilities at times. With peace prevailing in these countries, the number of international students from these countries has reduced. These countries built their education systems to attain the desirable qualities. (Interview with the International Students Officer at Makerere University, November 15th, 2022)

This response implies that challenges threatening the quality of a country's HE system promote outward movement. Thus, Uganda's role as a host country for many international students in the East African region is not guaranteed; its position will likely change as neighboring nations create more powerful education systems, hence reducing outbound ISM from such countries.

Considering the aforementioned concerns, this study hypothesized that a student's choice to become internationally mobile is determined by the listed HE quality indicators (e.g., tuition and other education expenditures) in their home country. The null hypothesis was that a student's likelihood of becoming internationally mobile is independent of the identified HE quality indicators in the home country. The research hypothesis was tested on each HE quality parameter using the Chi-Square test for independence, with the findings reported in Table 6.3.

Table 2. Chi-square Tests for the Relationship between HE Quality Indicators and the Likelihood of Mobility.

	Indicator of higher education quality at home	Pearson Chi-Square	df	P Value (2-sided)
1a	The tuition and other education costs in my country are very high	27.251	16	0.039
1b	The quality of teaching in universities at home is low	31.380	16	0.012
1c	I was not admitted to the chosen programme in home universities	24.123	16	0.087**
1d	Universities in my home country do not provide chances to improve competencies in the English language	41.876	16	<0.001
1e	There are a few reputable universities in my country	40.207	16	<0.001
1f	The quality of university programmes in my home country is low	24.518	16	0.079**
1g	Higher education institutions in my country are unattractive	40.963	16	<0.001
1h	Universities in my home country offer fewer academic programmes	29.011	16	0.024
1i	Higher education policies in my home country are poor	16.470	16	0.421**
1j	The higher education system in my home country encourages the development of a few soft skills among students	11.551	16	0.774**
1k	There are few research opportunities in my home country universities	41.762	16	<0.001

Table 2 displays the indicators used to measure the quality of HE in international students' home countries, together with their chi-square values and p-values. Four indicators (1c, 1f, 1i, and 1k) exhibit a significant Chi-Square value (those with a **p-value). The p-values for these indicators are greater than the rejection value of 0.05. Thus, the null hypothesis is upheld on indicators 1c, 1f, 1i, and 1k, i.e., the mobility tendency for a student is independent of the HE quality indicators with a significant value of Chi-Square. For example, we infer that the likelihood of a student becoming mobile is unaffected by the quality of HE policies in their home country (item 1i). Other quality indicators (1a, 1b, 1d, 1e, 1g, 1h, and 1k) have p-values lower than the 0.05 rejection level. The null hypothesis is rejected on these items, whereas the research hypothesis is upheld. On such items, the proclivity for ISM is dependent on the HE quality indicator. For example, the mobility tendency for a student depends on the availability of adequate study programmes in the home country (item 1f).

According to Nyerere (2021), students frequently become mobile in pursuing higher-quality education. Van Bouwel and Veugelers (2013) investigated the quality dimension as a determinant of ISM in Europe and concluded that the overall quality of a country's HE system influences the extent and direction of student mobility. Because their study found no significant association between the quality of the home HE system and students' likelihood to become mobile, they concluded that HE quality influences inbound rather than outbound ISM. On the contrary, the current study demonstrates that low-quality HE in the home nation promotes outbound migration and thus, regardless of the direction, the quality of HE determines ISM trends.

HE System and International Student Mobility in the Receiving Country (Uganda)

This section presents and discusses findings on whether Uganda's HE characteristics, such as university management, teaching quality, student service quality, links between society and universities, university research, and university resources, influence ISM flows.

The findings indicate that most international students in the sample (80.5%) were satisfied with the quality of HE in their host universities in Uganda. This suggests that there is potential for progress beyond the well-known narrative of Africa's weak educational system. Most of the available literature focuses on inadequacies in Africa's HE systems, such as low access rates for students of the relevant age and under-representation of women, particularly in science fields (Mba, 2017), while ignoring self-improvement efforts in Africa's HE and contextual factors. However, this

should not imply complacency; African countries must continue to improve the quality of their HE systems. In analyzing the level of self-improvement to date, the study investigated the quality of HE in the host Ugandan universities. Figure 1 demonstrates international students' satisfaction with Uganda's HE:

Figure 1: Degree of International Students' Satisfaction with Uganda's Higher Education System

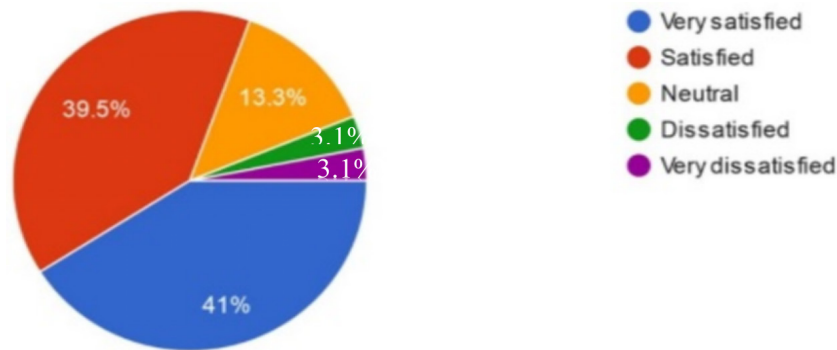


Figure 1 reveals that 80% of respondents were satisfied (sum of Satisfied and Very unsatisfied) with Uganda's HE system, while only 6.2% dissatisfied (sum of dissatisfied and very dissatisfied). As a Kenyan international student at MU explained his satisfaction:

I could study in Kenya, but I wanted to be part of 'the famous MU,' the oldest university in the region. My father studied here and resided in Livingstone Hall; I plan to reside in the same hall next year. (Interview with a Kenyan national studying at MU, November 15th, 2022).

This response highlights Uganda's history of providing HE when it was developed as a center of HE in East and Central Africa, during the colonial period. This historical aspect, intrinsically linked to excellent education at MU and Uganda in general, attracts international students. For example, when asked why MU is among the top recruiters of international students in East Africa, the International Students' Officer at MU responded:

Makerere University has a long history; it is the oldest university in Africa, giving it an extra advantage compared to other regional universities. Secondly, the university offers quality education. I do not know whether you have heard about the 'Harvard

of Africa.' This old term was used to describe the quality of education at this university, and the university has continued to work towards maintaining that legacy. Makerere also has memoranda of understanding with several universities within and beyond Africa. Through these understandings, Makerere continues to receive international students on exchange programmes. (Interview with an official from the International Students Officer at MU, November 15th, 2022).

This demonstrates how colonialism continues to shape ISM in East Africa. Furthermore, the Belgian education policy, which constrained education development in Rwanda and Burundi and the political instabilities in these nations following independence (Mugisha, 2010; Nganga, 2014), slowed the growth of their HE systems. The inadequately developed HE systems fail to provide the needed quality services, which justifies outbound ISM. This viewpoint supports Rodriguez et al.'s (2011) contention that the quality of education delivered by an institution impacts its ability to recruit international students. Thus, as seen by their quantitative responses, international students in this survey were content with the quality of education in Uganda, which explains their mobility to the country.

Other elements, such as students' attributes and networks, influence their decision to study abroad. According to an interview with a Kenyan student at KIU:

My elder brother studied in Uganda; he advised me to study here. I am studying for the Diploma in Clinical Medicine, and the 'cut-off' points for this programme in Kenya are very high. My brother advised me that KIU would admit me to this programme, which was impossible in Kenya.... (Interview with a Kenyan national studying at KIU, November 18th, 2022).

According to Beech (2015), ISM occurs and is perpetuated via predetermined 'pathways' suggested by foreign students' social networks. These networks and students' previous mobility experiences increase the likelihood of ISM as the case of the two brothers here indicate.

Mobility networks also suggest that ISM trends typically follow specified streams and established social organizations, which makes it difficult for nations and institutions without a track record of enrolling international students to establish themselves as worthy of consideration (Oleksiyenko and Sa, 2010). Uganda, with a history of accepting international students since colonial times, is better positioned to continue doing so than Rwanda

and Burundi, which established their first universities after gaining independence. Thus, the pattern of ISM in East Africa is designed to perpetuate colonial disparities between partner states, as only dominant institutions and nations remain appealing destinations for students.

One important issue that surfaced through both interviews and document review was the inconsistency in how tuition fees are applied across regional lines. While the East African Community (EAC) framework proposes harmonized tuition structures to support educational integration, this promise has yet to be realized in full. Many universities in Uganda continue to charge EAC students—like those from Rwanda and Burundi—the same fees as students from outside the region. This practice undermines the principles of regional cooperation and disproportionately affects students from lower-income backgrounds who may already struggle to afford HE abroad.

Further, the preceding interview response calls into question the quality of education at Uganda's private HEIs. The student hints that he was admitted to KIU with lower grades than those required in Kenya. Admitting students with lower entrance grades raises the question of whether the goal is to increase student access to HE or to earn a profit by admitting a large number of high-fee international students. Universities in Uganda are said to be aggressive recruiters of international students (ICEF Monitor, 2017) and charge lower fees (Itaaga et al., 2013). As Chemsripong (2019) explains, reducing fees is a strategy established by Ugandan universities to maintain local students while simultaneously attracting international students. This reflects marketization, neoliberalism, and academic capitalism tendencies currently transforming Africa's HE system (Maringe and Chiramba, 2020). HE has become commodified with these tendencies, and the number of private institutions competing with public ones has grown, shifting the responsibility for education provision from the state to the private sector. While this would diminish the government's pressure to offer HE, profit-making ambitions in public and private institutions may limit the equity and quality of service delivery (Johnson and Hirt, 2011), hence challenging the ethics of IHE.

According to Chao (2014), ISM initially meant to enhance cross-cultural understanding, mutual understanding, and friendship, but is now driven by commercialization with profit maximization as the prime interest. This is particularly relevant in Uganda since education is one of the country's exports (Othieno and Nampewo, 2012). Moreover, by offering their services at a lower cost, universities in Uganda are not necessarily meant to promote ISM for its good, but to maximize

profits by attracting a large number of international students. According to Wakeling and Jefferies (2013), some students may sometimes be willing to pay higher tuition prices, mainly if their participation in ISM is motivated by a desire to obtain quality HE. Higher tuition fees are associated with higher-quality education (Wyness et al., 2017), such that one may question the quality of HE services received by international students in Ugandan universities. However, the Dean of Students at KIU, whose office is in charge of international student affairs, clarified on this issue and revealed that students who do not meet the admission requirements must attend the Higher Education Certificate Program (bridging courses) to gain the necessary competencies. The programme allows international students to achieve the minimum entry requirements for a preferred course while preserving high-quality standards.

The quality issue was further addressed by a HE officer at Uganda's National Council for Higher Education (NCHE), who explained that:

The Higher Education Certificate Program enables students without the National Council for Higher Education entry admission requirements to gain admission into a degree programme. This mainly applies to international students whose home country's HE entry qualifications are not equivalent to Uganda's Advanced Certificate of Education. On successful completion of the programme, the student gains admission to the desired course. (Interview with NCHE official, December 15th, 2022).

The Higher Education Certificate Program, according to the Higher Education Officer at Uganda's NCHE, is an alternative entry pathway into HE and not a mechanism for permitting failures into HE and further stated that functional educational systems in the current times must be designed to offer multiple entry routes.

HEIs usually offer international students preparatory programmes (bridging, route, or foundation programmes) to help them acclimate to the sometimes different educational environment in their host country (Faulkner et al., 2017) and strengthen their language abilities in preparation for their studies. According to research, international students frequently suffer linguistic barriers that impede their progress (Terraschke and Wahid, 2011), emphasizing the importance of such preparatory programmes. Furthermore, Floyd (2015) adds that such programmes allow international students to meet the minimum academic entry requirements for the degree programmes they wish to pursue.

With these considerations, while profit-making intentions are associated with ISM in Uganda, provisions for maintaining high standards have also been implemented. That is why an international student from South Sudan at MU stated:

Uganda's education quality is much better than that of South Sudan and other East African countries. Another plus is that Uganda is safe; my parents got me out of South Sudan when war destabilized everything – even our education system was affected. (Interview with an international student from South Sudan studying at MU, November 15th, 2022).

Bisaso (2017) and Bukuluki et al. (2017) concur that education at MU is of excellent quality, as evidenced by the high research output, including international collaboration and the support provided to academic staff pursuing higher degrees. Indeed, MU has a long history of providing high-quality education in East Africa and is known as the 'Harvard of Africa' (Tabaire and Okao, 2010) though, this may not be true for other Ugandan universities. According to Hyuha (2017), only MU engages substantially in research, whereas other institutions primarily focus on teaching. This disparity reflects broader systemic challenges within the HE sector, including underfunding, low research output, limited staff qualifications, inadequate infrastructure, and pervasive corruption within and beyond the sector. However, this study contradicts such views by highlighting a satisfactory quality of HE in the sampled universities.

Furthermore, the study coincides with Lo et al. (2022) that global ISM trends are expanding as international students seek quality HE opportunities elsewhere. As a result, the influx of international students in Uganda reflects a desire for a high-quality education. However, pursuing quality education is not merely an aim but also a hunt for the benefits of quality education, as Raghuram (2013) argues, an individual's studies and qualifications influence their employment possibilities and should not be overlooked. Teichler (2011) also claims that ISM from a nation with a poor HE system to a stronger one or from a less to a more economically developed country results in higher returns for students and their home countries.

The preceding viewpoint emphasizes East Africa's unequal HE environment as the foundation for ISM to Uganda. However, according to Knight (2014), internationalization should be centered on "cooperation, partnership, exchange, mutual benefits, and capacity building instead of competition, commercialization, self-interest, and status building" (p. 76).

Contrary to this view, universities in Kenya and Uganda actively compete for students at the expense of collaboration, partnership, capacity building, and mutual benefit. This has effectively divided ISM in East Africa into senders (e.g., Rwanda and Burundi) and receivers (e.g., Uganda and Kenya) of international students, with winners and losers. An internationalization designed in this way is unsustainable (Ramaswamy and Kumar, 2022) and may not achieve the desired development goals. It should be noted that all East African Community partner nations should equally participate and benefit from its internationalization, as HE is critical to achieving development goals (UNESCO, 2023).

Typically, student mobility decisions are based on a programme's prestige and institution (Waters, 2006). A student may be able to acquire admittance to their home nation, an alternative programme of study, or a lower-class institution. However, students frequently choose high-class international universities to acquire or retain a high social status. This concept was further expressed by a Kenyan international student at MU:

My father wanted me to study law at the University of Dar es Salaam. I applied for this course while completing high school, but was not admitted. Knowing that Makerere is in the same league as the University of Dar es Salaam, I applied for admission here (Makerere University) and was admitted. (Interview with a Kenyan national studying at MU, November 15th, 2022).

This viewpoint explains Brooks and Waters' (2009) argument that students frequently choose to study in foreign institutions after failing to acquire admission to prestigious domestic institutions. In such circumstances, the host university where international students are enrolled is their second-best choice.

According to Morano-Foadi (2005), an international university is the best option for students looking to optimize their symbolic capital. This is because, for such students, a qualification from a foreign university is more likely to deliver exceptional symbolic capital and benefits than a home institution (Vavrus and Pekol, 2015). Nonetheless, this must be considered given the current greater economic challenges. In East Africa, for example, the prices of international education in the global North are prohibitively expensive for most students, forcing them to study in their home countries. With African nations' increasing potential to provide quality HE services, others opt for international education in neighboring African countries (Sehoole and Lee, 2021), ideally at cheaper costs.

Conclusion

The study shows that the quality of HE systems in sending countries falls short of expectations of international students. It found that HE systems in international students' home countries (Rwanda and Burundi) have high tuition fees and other costs, and universities with low international repute. Other attributes include universities with few academic programmes, low teaching quality, few options for improving English language skills, less supportive HE policies, and limited research opportunities. These factors reportedly explained why such countries had pronounced outbound mobility trends, in that the quest for HE systems with desirable features led to students' outbound mobility. In this regard, 75% of respondents claimed that low-quality HE in their home countries motivated their involvement in ISM.

Further, the quality of teaching in Uganda's sampled universities reportedly attracted many international students. This is complemented by universities with a strong international reputation. This finding resonates with Kiiza's (2019, 2022) conclusions that Uganda attracts students from neighboring countries due to its historical reputation and perceived quality advantages. However, this study also indicates that improvements in HE quality in sending countries may gradually reduce Uganda's dominant hub role, signaling a potential shift in regional mobility patterns.

The sampled universities feature a high research output, a high proportion of researchers with doctoral degrees, and a wide range of academic programmes for international students to choose from. A sizable proportion of the student respondents in this study expressed satisfaction with the HE services at their chosen Ugandan universities. Despite such displayed efforts to strengthen Uganda's HE systems, there is always a need for improvement in university services. For example, the study reveals that international students did not accurately assess university resources favourably.

While the stated findings are valuable, they must be evaluated in light of the sociopolitical and historical difficulties confronting the countries that send international students to Uganda, especially the legacy of colonialism, and Uganda's historical positional advantage. Uganda's historical role as a center for HE in East and Central Africa during the colonial period continues to have a favorable impact on incoming ISM. The historical and colonial processes that drive ISM in Africa cannot be fully explained by drawing on the extensive research on south-to-north ISM.

The study also highlights the prominent neoliberal perspectives in intra-African ISM. For example, while the East African Community member states agreed to align tuition fees for mobile students in the region, this initiative has yet to be fully implemented; some universities continue to charge East African students the same fees as other international students from outside the region. Tuition fees are typically expensive, limiting the participation of students from less affluent backgrounds. Thus, profit maximization interests continue to impact regional internationalization and ISM levels in East Africa, such that disadvantaged students, such as refugees, students from low-income families, and those from poorer socioeconomic backgrounds, are denied access to international education. It is therefore vital to have a critical view of internationalization while prioritizing inclusivity as advanced by Stein (2019).

Notably, while the study identifies flaws in East Africa's HE systems, it also recognizes strengths that can be leveraged to advance education and internationalization in the East African region. For example, the study found that international students were satisfied with the quality of HE provided by Uganda's selected universities and the universities' links to society. Such capabilities can be built upon to provide a more efficient approach to IHE in the region.

However, this study's findings should be understood within the context of its limitations. The focus on a small number of universities in Uganda and neighboring countries means that the results may not fully represent the diversity of experiences across East Africa. Furthermore, the reliance on self-reported data may introduce subjective biases. Future research could build on this work by expanding the sample to include more countries and additional types of institutions, including both public and private, and by incorporating longitudinal data to track changes in intra-Africa mobility trends over time. It would also be valuable to examine the impact of evolving regional fee structures and policy reforms on equitable access to education for students.

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