Institutional Practices for International Academic Mobility at the University of Juba, South Sudan

Adrew Kiri[1], Irene Etomaru[2], Kadian Wanyama[3] & Akuei Kuol[4]

[1] Directorate of Research and Publications, University of Juba. Box, 82, Juba South Sudan

[2] East African School of Higher Education Studies and Development (EASHED), College of Education and External Studies (CEES), Makerere University. P.I Box,7062, Kampala Uganda.

[3] School of Management Sciences, University of Juba. Box, 82, Juba South Sudan.

[4] Directorate of ICT, University of Juba. Box, 82, Juba South Sudan.

Correspondence: Andrew Kiri, Director of Research and Publications, University of Juba, Juba, 82. Juba, South Sudan. E-mail: kiri_adnrew@yahoo.com

Abstract

International academic mobility is crucial for the internationalization of higher education. However, information on the practices at the University of Juba in South Sudan is limited. In this article we explore these practices through data from 14 knowledgeable participants. Findings indicate that mobility practices for students and staff are ad hoc and primarily focus on outbound mobility. This imbalance could lead to brain drain and negatively impact the university's reputation and competitiveness. The University of Juba needs to prioritize the development of comprehensive academic mobility programs.

Keywords: University of Juba, international academic mobility, mobility of students, mobility of academic staff

1. Introduction

In recent decades, internationalization has gained traction in universities for instrumental, economic, political integration, academic, and scholastic purposes (Marginson, 2023). It is seen as a strategic avenue for enhancing academic excellence, cultural understanding, and contribution to the wider society. Thus, higher education institutions around the world are facing increasing pressure to internationalize (Brandenburg et al., 2019; De Wit & Altbach, 2021). Though interpreted as coercive and neocolonial (Teferra, 2019), both young and old nations in sub-Saharan Africa are steadily making progress toward the internationalization of their higher education systems. In South Sudan, the world's youngest nation, its universities have been no exception to this pressure.

International academic mobility is one of the key factors that contribute to the internationalization of higher education institutions. The roots of international academic mobility in higher education can be traced back to the Middle Ages and the Renaissance period when pilgrims or travelers (religious pilgrims, university students, and professors) were familiar sights on roads in Europe. According to Ridder-Symoens (1992), their pilgrimage was to a university where they hoped to find learning, friends, and leisure. The historical connection of the internationalization of higher education to the Middle Ages and Renaissance period can be seen in the fact that the European Commission named its flagship mobility program after the Dutch philosopher Erasmus, an exemplary pilgrim of that period (De Wit et al., 2015). They also noted that, in Europe, internationalization as a strategic process began with the Erasmus+ Mobility Programmme, which the Bologna process further reinforced.

De Wit and Merkx (2022) noted that in the 17th and 18th centuries, the Grand Tour revived students' mobility in their pursuit of degrees and pleasure. The authors listed rationales ranging from the mobility of competition for students, teachers, and scholars; export of academic systems and cultures; research cooperation; knowledge transfer and capacity building; student and staff exchange; and projects and institutions to virtual mobility, digital learning, and collaborative online international learning.

International academic mobility involves both students' and faculties' movements across borders (Rostan & Höhle, 2014). The concept of international students' mobility has been widely understood in terms of students' credit-seeking on short-term international programs as part of their home degree, such as Erasmus, or their degree-seeking when

enrolled in an entire program abroad (De Wit et al., 2015). According to De Wit et al., student mobility may take the form of credit mobility and degree mobility in terms of scholarships for joint degrees, student loans, study abroad or placement abroad, and student exchanges and virtual program mobility.

According to De Wit et al. (2015), staff mobility involves programs for academic exchange for either teaching or research, encompassing short mobility periods of a few days or weeks. Staff exchanges may take the form of teaching at a partner university to gain new skills by experiencing a different type of international classroom, international staff weeks at foreign universities, and job shadowing at a partner university. Staff exchanges serve the purposes of gaining firsthand intercultural experience; exchanging ideas and best practices with colleagues abroad; building, expanding, or maintaining staff and program professional networks; and staying on top of developments in professional fields to develop or improve professional and personal skills and initiate various types of collaboration.

Theoretically, in this study we adapted Schatzki's (2022) four principles of practice, namely practical understanding, rules, tele-affective structure, and general understanding as a lens to examine the institutional practices for academic mobility at the University of Juba. He defined practice as a temporally evolving, open-ended set of doings and sayings linked by his four principles (Schatzki, 2002). Practical understanding contains the expertise and implicit knowledge of those responsible for internationalization to conduct, recognize, and react to other activities presumed necessary in the internationalization of a university. Rules refer to policies, strategies, governance, procedures, and statements that will enable internationalization.

Tele-affective structure refers to the goals to be achieved through internationalization and how various emotional components and motivations shape these goals (Clegg & Cunha, 2019). A university's vision, mission, and policies shape the goals of internationalization, such as enhancing the institution's profile, improving graduate employability, and improving the quality of teaching and learning. The last principle—general understanding—refers to the values that shape practices. Regarding internationalization, a university must uphold its values expressed through its vision, mission, and policies in its drive for internationalization.

The extent of the institutional practices for academic mobility at the University of Juba is not yet well understood. This scenario may retard the attainment of the university's aspirations of internationalization. Therefore, in this article we examine institutional practices for international mobility of staff and students at the university.

The results of this study have generated useful information for policymakers at the University of Juba that could help in developing sound policies on staff and student mobility. The findings and recommendations of the study may guide administrators and managers' planning and practice of activities for staff and student mobility at the university. At the national level, the study findings could guide the Ministry of Education in South Sudan on policy development, advocacy, and investment in the education sector, particularly the internationalization of higher education.

2. Methodology

We adopted a qualitative research approach, specifically utilizing phenomenology design that allowed for a rich and nuanced understanding of the participants' experiences and perceptions of the institutional practices for students and staff mobility at the University of Juba (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015), which is particularly relevant in this context given the university's unique historical and cultural context.

We collected both primary and secondary data through interviews and review of relevant documents, such as university policies, strategic plans, and reports on internationalization initiatives. These provided a contextual understanding of the university's academic mobility practices. Data collection encompassed the period from the start of the implementation of the current strategic plan for the university, which corresponds with the period when the university implements its strategic direction of becoming an internationalized university.

Through purposive sampling, we collected primary data from 14 participants in the study. These included two participants from top management; one each from the directorates of International Relations and Alumni Affairs, Academic Affairs, Human Resource Management, Internationally Funded Projects and University Enterprise Development, and the Research Department; and six from the university's board. We based the selection of these participants on their positions and the special roles they play within the university, which are critical to understanding institutional practices and decisions related to students and staff mobility, as Creswell (2013) suggested.

To ensure anonymity and confidentiality, we assigned pseudonyms to the participants. Those from top management were TM1, TM2, and TM3; unit directors were PD1, PD2, PD3, PD4, and PD5; and university board members were UB1, UB2, UB3, UB4, UB5, and UB6. We examined students' mobility practices in terms of their credit-seeking, degree-seeking (credit mobility and degree mobility), and virtual mobility. We examined academic staff mobility by staff exchanges for teaching and research at the university.

We used thematic content analysis to analyze qualitative data obtained from key informant interviews and document reviews using ATLAS.ti 9 software. This enabled the extraction of meaningful patterns, themes, and relationships from the data.

3. Findings

We asked participants about their experiences and views on (a) institutional practices for international mobility of students regarding degree mobility, credit mobility, and virtual mobility, and (b) staff mobility practices in line with academic exchange for teaching and research. Overall, the participants' views showed that the current academic mobility practices at the university were ad hoc, and not anchored in a comprehensive policy framework. Only a few students and staff participate in international mobility programs due to several challenges.

Regarding the mobility of students, inbound student mobility was limited to neighboring countries only. PD2 stated that *". . . the University of Juba currently does not have any international students enrolled, except refugees from neighboring countries such as Sudan, Somalia, and the Democratic Republic of Congo."* PD2 attributed the negligible inbound student mobility to the prevailing *insecurity in the region*, expressing that, *". . . insecurity is a major deterrent for international students who might otherwise consider studying at the University of Juba."* This suggests that South Sudan's unstable political environment is a significant barrier to attracting a more diverse international student population at the University of Juba.

Participants identified *the lack of a regular academic calendar* as one of the challenges affecting students' mobility at the university. PD2 noted that *". . . the absence of a consistent and predictable schedule for the academic year makes it challenging for international students to plan and integrate their studies at the University of Juba."* The combination of security concerns and the lack of a stable academic calendar appears to make the university less attractive to a global student population. Thus, inbound student mobility practices were not well developed.

Practices for outbound student mobility were noticeable in participants' views. The university had established partnerships for promoting outbound student mobility through study abroad exchange programs. For instance, TM3 expressed the following:

I am proud to say that we have made significant progress in promoting student and academic staff mobility through various programs and initiatives. We have established partnerships with over 20 universities abroad, including universities in the USA, Europe, and Asia. We also have a robust exchange program that allows our students to study abroad for a semester or a year.

Similarly, UB1 stated   the following:

I can assure you that we have made significant progress in promoting student and academic staff mobility through various programs and initiatives. We have established partnerships with over 20 universities abroad, including universities in the USA, Europe, and Asia. Our students are encouraged to participate in exchange programs, internships, and research collaborations abroad. We also have a strong focus on attracting international students to our university. We have a policy on internationalization that outlines our goals and strategies for promoting internationalization at the University. We also have a framework for international student mobility that outlines the procedures for sending students to study abroad.

Participants pointed out partnerships and collaborations that the University of Juba has established to promote outbound student mobility. PD4 clearly illustrated this in the following remark:

The University of Juba is actively engaged in project collaborations with other institutions, particularly through externally funded programs like a collaborative initiative supported by the Norwegian government under the NORHED (Norwegian Programme for Capacity Development in Higher Education and Research for Development) program. Under this NORHED program, the University of Juba is sending 2–3 of its PhD students to participate . . . these types of collaborative internationally funded projects are important mechanisms for the University to access resources and opportunities that may not be available through its internal funding channels.

Relatedly, PD1 expressed that the University of Juba has a framework for outbound student mobility:

We have also developed a framework for international student mobility and have been sending students to study abroad . . . Dual Degrees, the University has established arrangements that allow master's students to earn degrees from two different universities as part of the same program.

These statements indicate that, in addition to fostering student mobility, the university established such collaborations and partnerships as avenues for leveraging funding from international partners as a key strategy to expand educational and research opportunities for its faculty and students.

However, UB3 expressed the need for the university to do more to enhance student mobility:

We've made some progress, but we're still working on strengthening our partnerships and programs. We've had some successful exchanges with universities in Europe and Asia, but we need to do more to increase student mobility.

Therefore, student mobility practices at the University of Juba have promoted outbound student mobility. Practices for inbound student mobility were not well developed due to contextual challenges ranging from security issues to a lack of infrastructure and facilities.

Concerning the mobility of academic staff, as with student mobility, inbound academic staff mobility practices were not noticeable. The University of Juba currently has no international staff from outside Africa, except a few individuals from neighboring countries such as Ethiopia, Eritrea, Kenya, Uganda, and Sudan, mainly employed on a contract basis. This could be attributed to the *low salaries/compensation and insecurity in the region*. For instance, PD2 stated that *". . . the low level of payment and compensation offered by the University is a major deterrent for attracting and retaining international faculty and staff."* This suggests that the university's compensation packages are not sufficiently competitive to attract academic talent from abroad. Regarding insecurity in the region, PD2 expressed that *". . . the unstable political and security environment is a major disincentive for prospective international faculty and staff."* Although the University of Juba has been able to attract some staff from neighboring countries, it faces difficulties in diversifying its staff with a pool of international academics and professionals.

Participants expressed concern over challenges that hinder the university's ability to attract international staff. These included low salaries/compensation, insecurity, lack of suitable housing and living arrangements for international staff, lack of travel support, and work permit issues. Thus, a combination of these challenges makes the University of Juba unappealing to international staff. The following representative excerpt demonstrates this scenario: *". . . the University has faced instances where international candidates have turned down contract offers due to the insufficient payment and compensation packages"* (TM3). Participants expressed a desire that the university address these challenges. For example, PD3 said, *". . . these staffing challenges are a key obstacle in the University's broader internationalization efforts, [so] addressing these challenges is crucial for the University to enhance its global appeal and staff mobility."*

Outbound staff mobility practices occurred mainly the exchange programs where the university has partnerships for staff exchange. TM3 said, *". . . we have faculty exchange programs that allow our faculty to participate in research collaborations and teaching exchanges."* Similarly, UB6 stated that *". . . we've made significant progress in promoting academic staff mobility. We've established partnerships with universities in the USA, Europe, and Asia, and our staff are encouraged to participate in exchange programs and research collaborations abroad."* In the same way, PD6 mentioned that ". *. . the University of Juba has established an Office of International Collaboration . . . through this office, the University is working to create more opportunities for its faculty to engage in international exchange programs, joint research projects, and co-publications with peer institutions."*

TM2 stated that staff mobility practices at the university tend to focus on outbound mobility through exchange programs for visits:

We have a faculty exchange program that allows our faculty to visit other universities abroad . . . we have been working to develop programs that allow our students to study abroad and our faculty to participate in international exchange programs, [and] we have also established partnerships with universities abroad to facilitate this mobility.

The findings show that academic mobility practices at the University of Juba incline toward the outbound mobility of staff and students. Practices for inbound mobility of staff and students are not noticeable. The findings reveal several challenges affecting student and staff mobility at the university. The combination of funding challenges, low uncompetitive compensation/salaries, poor housing facilities, and insecurity seem to be the primary factors limiting the university's ability to attract a more globally diverse student and staff population. The limited student and staff mobility programs indicate a need for improvement in this area. Developing a clear policy framework for student and staff mobility is crucial to providing clarity and guidance for students and faculty members.

The findings show that institutional practices for academic mobility were skewed to the outbound mobility of staff and students. Outbound staff mobility took the form of externally funded exchange programs, short visits, research collaborations, and teaching exchanges. Low salaries/compensation, insecurity, lack of suitable housing and living arrangements for international staff, lack of travel support, and work permit issues hindered inbound staff mobility, which made the University of Juba unappealing to international staff. Some international candidates have turned down contract offers due to insufficient payment and compensation packages.

Outbound student mobility took the form of externally funded study abroad exchanges, internships, dual degrees, and research collaborations. With the exception of refugees from neighboring countries such as Sudan, Somalia, and the

Democratic Republic of Congo, no international students enrolled in the University of Juba. This was a result of a combination of challenges, such as security concerns and the lack of a stable academic calendar, which made the university less attractive to a global student population. Thus, inbound student mobility practices were not well developed.

Although outbound academic mobility yields benefits such as funding opportunities, international exposure, and strengthened collaborations, the lack of balance in academic mobility at the University of Juba is unhealthy. Outbound academic mobility may exacerbate the problem of brain drain with all the negative consequences.

4. Discussion

We examined the institutional practices for students' international mobility regarding degree mobility, credit mobility, and virtual mobility, and we assessed staff mobility practices in line with academic exchange for teaching and research. The findings show that the academic mobility practices at the University of Juba were ad hoc, and not anchored in a comprehensive policy framework. Institutional practices for the mobility of staff were skewed to outbound mobility in terms of externally funded exchange programs, short visits, research collaborations, and teaching exchanges. Low salaries/compensation, insecurity, lack of suitable housing and living arrangements for international staff, lack of travel support, and work permit issues made the university unattractive to international staff.

With the exception of refugees from neighboring countries such as Sudan, Somalia, and the Democratic Republic of Congo, the University of Juba enrolled no international students. Outbound student mobility took the form of externally funded study abroad exchanges, internships, dual degrees, and research collaborations. Inbound student mobility practices were not well developed because of security concerns and the lack of a stable academic calendar, which make the university less attractive to a global student population. Although outbound academic mobility yields benefits such as funding opportunities, international exposure, and strengthened collaborations, the lack of balance in academic mobility at the University of Juba is unhealthy. Outbound academic mobility may exacerbate the problem of brain drain with all the negative consequences.

The findings highlight the challenges the University of Juba faces in implementing international mobility initiatives. This resonates with Carvalho et al. (2020) who noted that many European higher education institutions encounter challenges in effectively implementing and evaluating staff mobility programs. Similarly, Tam et al. (2020) highlighted the challenges international students face in adapting to a new culture and environment, which the university can overcome by providing language support, facilitating cultural adaptation, and offering career development opportunities. In the same way, Gutema et al. (2024) identified key factors influencing student mobility as the quality of education; visa requirements; academic reputation; tuition fees; availability of scholarships; job opportunities; social, economic, environmental, individual, and cultural factors; language barriers; visa policies; and social integration difficulties.

We emphasize the importance of understanding the specific barriers and facilitators of staff mobility in African higher education institutions, as Carvalho et al. (2020) highlighted. We reveal that the University of Juba faces challenges in securing sufficient funding, alleviating security concerns, promoting staff mobility and retention, addressing lack of capacity and resources, and improving low salaries and compensation. These challenges are unique to the African context and require tailored strategies to address them. Dennis (2023) stressed the need for proper strategic planning for international student mobility by deans and recruiters and the need to research what international students want in their study abroad. Equally, Tam et al. (2020) posited that effective strategies are necessary to support international students and enhance their overall experience.

Finally, we identify knowledge gaps in terms of understanding specific barriers and facilitators of academic mobility in the context of the University of Juba. This is consistent with previous studies that show scholarship on academic mobility is still fragmented and fuzzy. For instance, Carvalho et al. (2020) indicated that there is a knowledge gap in terms of understanding specific barriers and facilitators of staff mobility in European higher education institutions. Similarly, Tam et al. (2020) identified knowledge gaps in terms of understanding specific strategies and interventions that can further enhance student mobility. De Wit (2023) noted that scholars of international student mobility do not distinguish between different types of student mobility by, for instance, differentiating among degree-seeking, credit-seeking, and certificate-seeking international students in their rationales, experiences, and outcomes, or among levels of international students and their origins and motivations. Bonaccorsi et al. (2019) pointed to a lack of information on foreign academic staff in higher education systems.

The findings highlight the challenges African higher education institutions face in implementing internationalization initiatives, including limited student and academic staff mobility, lack of clear policy frameworks, and funding

constraints. In our study we emphasize the importance of understanding the specific barriers and facilitators of academic mobility in African higher education institutions and developing effective strategies to support staff and student mobility.

5. Conclusion

We based our conclusions regarding the international mobility of staff and students at the University of Juba on our findings.

First, the lack of balance in academic mobility at the University of Juba is unhealthy, although outbound academic mobility yields benefits such as funding opportunities, international exposure, and strengthened collaborations. A skewed focus on outbound academic mobility may exacerbate the problem of brain drain with all the negative consequences, and the university's failure to attract diversity in the staff and student population will affect its reputation, status, and international competitiveness. This is because academic mobility practices at the University of Juba were limited, ad hoc, and not anchored in a comprehensive policy framework.

Second, institutional practices for mobility of staff and students were skewed to outbound mobility in terms of externally funded exchange programs; short visits; research collaborations; teaching exchanges for staff; and externally funded study abroad exchanges, internships, dual degrees, and research collaborations for students. Inbound student and staff mobility practices were not well developed because the university was unattractive to international students and staff due to security concerns, lack of a stable academic calendar, uncompetitive salaries/compensation, lack of suitable housing and living conditions, lack of travel support, and work permit issues.

6. Recommendations

The findings highlight the current state of internationalization at the University of Juba regarding staff and student mobility. To enhance student and academic staff mobility, the university should prioritize the development of mobility programs, including scholarships, grants, and funding opportunities, to support international research collaborations, conferences, and study abroad experiences. Encouraging mobility will expose students and staff to diverse perspectives, cultures, and educational environments, enhancing their global competencies and fostering a more internationally minded community.

Promoting cultural exchange and diversity within the university community is essential. The University of Juba should create a welcoming and inclusive environment that celebrates cultural diversity through cultural events, student organizations, and exchange programs that foster intercultural dialogue and understanding. By nurturing a supportive atmosphere for international students and staff, the university can promote cross-cultural collaboration and cultivate a vibrant international community.

References

Bonaccorsi, A., Biancardi, D., Darairo, A., Lepori, B., Wagner-Schuster, D., & Breitfuss-Loidl, M. (2019). *Internationalization of Academic Staff in European Higher Education*. European Tertiary Education Register (ETER) Analytical Report.

Brandenburg, U., de Wit, H., Jones, E., & Leask, B. (2019, April). *Internationalization in Higher Education for Society*. University World News. https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20190414195843914

Carvalho, A. M., Lima, F. R. M., & Santos, M. J. V. F. (2020). *International staff mobility in higher education: To what extent could an intra-European entrepreneurial approach be applied to Sino-CEE initiatives?* ResearchGate.

Creswell, J. W. (2013). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (3rd ed.). SAGE.

De Wit, H. (2023). *Internationalization in and of Higher Education: Critical Reflections on Its Conceptual Evolution*. In L. Engwall (Ed.), Internationalization in Higher Education and Research (Vol. 62, pp. 17–31). Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-47335-7_2

De Wit, H., & Altbach, P. G. (2021). Internationalization in higher education: Global trends and recommendations for its future. *Policy Reviews in Higher Education, 5*(1), 28–46. https://doi.org/10.1080/23322969.2020.1820898

De Wit, H., Hunter, F., Howard, L., & Egron-Polak, E. (2015). *Internationalization of higher education*. Brussels: European Parliament.

De Wit, H., & Merkx, G. (2022). *The history of the internationalization of higher education*. In *The Handbook of International Higher Education* (pp. 23–52). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003447863-3

Dennis, M. J. (2023). International student mobility in 2023. *Recruiting & Retaining Adult Learners, 25*(7), 6–7. https://doi.org/10.1002/nsr.31008

Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (2011). *The Sage handbook of qualitative research*. SAGE.

Gutema, D. M., Pant, S., & Nikou, S. (2024). Exploring key themes and trends in international student mobility research—A systematic literature review. *Journal of Applied Research in Higher Education, 16*(3), 843–861. https://doi.org/10.1108/JARHE-05-2023-0195

Merriam, S. B., & Tisdell, E. J. (2015). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation*. John Wiley & Sons.

Ridder-Symoens, H. de. (1992). *A History of the University in Europe: Volume 1, Universities in the Middle Ages*. Cambridge University Press.

Rostan, M., & Höhle, E. A. (2014). The *International Mobility of Faculty*. In F. Huang, M. Finkelstein, & M. Rostan (Eds.), *The Internationalization of the Academy: Changes, Realities, and Prospects* (pp. 79–104). Springer Netherlands. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-007-7278-6_5

Tam, M. K., Yuen, S. C. S., & Tang, P. H. W. (2020). Student mobility in Australia: Trends, challenges, and future directions. *Australian Journal of Educational Technology, 36*(2), 1–15.

Teferra, D. (2019, August 23). *Defining internationalization – Intention versus coercion*. University World News. https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20190821145329703

Copyrights