

The Complexities of Engaging Africa's Academic Diaspora

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In recent years, engaging the diaspora to leverage their intellectual resources has become a hot topic in higher education policy discussions. Many countries in Africa and elsewhere have developed policies to guide the broader engagement of their diasporas, while concerned government agencies and higher education institutions also craft strategies to enable the participation of diaspora intellectuals in academic, research and development, and innovation activities.

These policies and strategies, however, often focus on the circumstances and needs of the institutions on the receiving end of the relationship. They seem to lack—as does the literature on the subject—adequate accounting for the complexities and nuances in the experiences of the diaspora, which hold a significant bearing in shaping the decisions, nature, and persistence of their engagement.

Using the Ethiopian academic diaspora in the United States as a case, [a study recently published](#) by the author in the *International Journal of African Higher Education* explores some of these complex factors. The implications of the study have broader international relevance to how diaspora engagement in higher education is understood and how pertinent programs are designed and implemented in different contexts.

Abstract

Many countries have policies to leverage the intellectual resources of their diaspora communities in various areas, including higher education. Institutional arrangements, incentive schemes, and implementation strategies have long been the focus of these policy initiatives. The impact of the interdependent microfactors that shape the motivation and experiences of diaspora academics in their engagement with institutions in home countries seems largely overlooked both in research and practice. This article highlights some of these factors.

The notion that efforts directed to the home country are far more meaningful and rewarding is a key factor in transnational diaspora engagement in higher education.

Sense of Debt

Having received free education in their country of birth and being privileged to pursue studies and career in an advanced system, many in the diaspora carry a sense of debt and of duty to give back. Early age inculcations of the values of “love for one’s country” and patriotism lay the foundation for this sense of responsibility. The experience of having studied in extremely resource-constrained environments, compared with the abundance observed in their country of residence, further reinforces the aspiration to help create a better learning environment for the new generation of students back home. Continued social and cultural connections with their home country also present frequent opportunities to witness the struggle of higher education—making considerable progress, yet constrained by many factors—which, in turn, strengthens the urge to contribute to its improvement.

Outcomes of Engagement

The anticipated and realized achievements of engagement efforts constitute another set of factors that shape the nature and persistence of engagement. Outcomes expressed by such measures, such as the number of graduate students advised, the number of training sessions and people trained, the classes taught, the resources mobilized, and successful conferences and seminars organized, all underpin continued commitment, as much as they offer critical input for improving engagement efforts.

On the other hand, the notion that efforts directed to the home country are far more meaningful and rewarding is a key factor in transnational diaspora engagement in higher education. This notion is explained not only by the satisfaction derived from fulfilling the perceived duties discussed above, but also from the understanding that, for many, their field of expertise remains largely “embryonic” in their home countries. Therefore, small efforts can make a significant difference, compared to the well-established academic scene in their countries of residence, where opportunities for making a recognizable contribution are limited.

However, it is worth acknowledging that efforts by diaspora academics could also have hefty emotional and social costs, in addition to an economic one. The common case of academics going above and beyond to mobilize colleagues in their institutions and networks to organize such activities as research seminars and panel discussions, only to have a turnout that causes them social and professional embarrassment is a typical example. Similarly, it is not uncommon for engagement relationships to be a source of tension and even conflict. Such outcomes—both positive and negative—determine the success and continuity, or lack thereof, of engagement.

Racial Relations in the Home Institution

Whether it comes in the form of blatant discriminatory practices or subtle microaggressions, an unpleasant racial environment in the institutions where diaspora academics work has implications for transnational engagement in one of two ways.

Some state that their abilities are undermined, and their competencies routinely questioned, so that they have to prove themselves over and over again. This calls for them to put in much more effort than their colleagues to achieve the same in their careers. This burden of extra hard work and overconsumption of their emotional capital leaves them with little to no time and energy to spare for work with their home country and its institutions.

Others maintain that the racially charged environment in their institutions is full of constant reminders that they do not belong. Those signals of alienation push them to seek emotional refuge in their connection with their home countries. This, among other things, manifests itself in strengthening their relationships with colleagues and institutions in their country of origin, hence positively contributing to their professional engagement. This sentiment has become increasingly common with the rise of exclusionary nationalistic rhetoric in many parts of the world.

Personal Circumstances

The personal circumstances of the individual academic take a central position in the analysis of critical factors that shape and predict the success and continuity of transnational diasporic engagement. Schooling of children is, for instance, one of the most salient factors that determine availability of time and flexibility, particularly to travel for in-person engagement. Those with school-age children often tend to have a well-established routine with narrow scope for traveling. A critical enabling factor in this regard is, of course, the nature of the occupation of a spouse.

It is, however, worth noting that with the recent upward trend in virtual engagement, these factors are becoming less relevant than before. Activities like advising graduate students or occasionally conducting seminars are preferred for their flexibility, compared to more structured engagements like teaching courses or conducting major research projects.

Financial stability and the opportunity cost of time that could have been spent on income generating activities, such as grant writing, also have a crucial role. Grant writing is in fact identified as having a double perk—both financially and career-wise. Therefore, particularly for early career academics and researchers, diasporic engagement could appear as competing with these important endeavors. Robust approaches that encourage the inclusion of certain elements of diasporic engagement in these activities could easily address this predicament.

On the other hand, factors such as the philosophy and strategy of institutions regarding international engagement, the availability of support and resources at department/school level, and the burden of administrative responsibility account for the extent to which effective and sustainable diasporic engagement is possible.

Flexible Programming

A careful consideration of these factors and their complex interplay is key to tapping into the intellectual resources of the diaspora. A reasonable balance between flexibility on one hand, and accountable and efficient administration on the other, is important in setting policies and institutional arrangements. Programming needs to pay attention to possible nuances in experiences and circumstances (personal, familial, and institutional) on the part of the diaspora, in the same way as it takes note of broader factors such as disciplinary differences and academic calendars. ▲

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