

A snapshot from Ghana

On scientific collaboration in unprecedented times

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Since 2019, Freie Universität Berlin and the University of Cape Coast (UCC) in Ghana collaborate in the project Equal Opportunities in Higher Education (EQUIP). It is led in Germany by Prof. Dr. Gülay Çağlar (Gender & Diversity Division, Otto-Suhr-Institut für Politikwissenschaft) and Dr. Mechthild Koreuber (Chief Gender Equality Officer of Freie Universität Berlin) and in Ghana by Prof. Dr. Akua Britwum and the heads of the Centre for Gender Research, Advocacy & Documentation (CEGRAD) of UCC.

The four-year collaborative project aims to develop and implement crucial equal opportunity measures. In this manner, the project intends to establish UCC as a hub for disseminating equal opportunities, knowledge and good institutional practices in African countries, starting with a pilot partnership with Kenyatta University (KU). The global pandemic COVID-19 that started in 2020 has negatively impacted international scientific collaborations. In this article, Amanda Odoi and Janet Amoah-Arthur, members of CEGRAD in UCC describe how the situation affected their academic practices and international research collaborations, particularly EQUIP.

COVID-19 and its impact on EQUIP at the University of Cape Coast

We would divide our experiences because of COVID-19 and its impacts here at the University of Cape Coast in two levels – the institutional and the individual. At the individual level, there have been changes to employees' domestic and career lives. Staff had to adjust to the shock of working from home without resources such as computers and internet services. Parents also had to adjust, combining care work with their regular office work. Due to the fear of spreading the infection, the services of domestic workers were withdrawn, burdening families and especially women, who had to reconcile their paid work with childcare and other household chores. Parents had to take on other roles such as teaching and assisting their children with online teaching. Additionally, they faced the financial burden of having to acquire laptops and other gadgets. At the institutional level, the closing down of schools altered the academic calendar, methods of teaching and learning, as well as the design of projects, partnerships and conferences.

When Ghana recorded its first cases of COVID-19 in March 2020, the government introduced diverse measures to curtail the spread, like a ban on travels and social gatherings, closing down schools as well as borders. The University of Cape Coast also introduced measures such as a mandatory two-weeks break for staff followed by a shift system for administrative staff. Before these, UCC had issued a notice suspending all international conferences, international travels by staff to conferences, outgoing and incoming exchange programmes and international visits of professors and foreign partners until further notice.

What these measures meant for us was that there was the need to make changes to our activities as a Centre, including how we engage with our

partners. One such activity and partnership that was impacted at our end is the EQUIP project. Some of the activities planned for 2020 were interviews for a SWOT analysis and the conduction of an equal opportunities training, for which members of the German team were to visit UCC. Measures for these activities were already in place to meet the plan of activities for the year. The activities for the SWOT analysis scheduled for 21st March to 11th April 2020 for example had already begun. Instruments for the interviews had been prepared, invitation letters for securing visa and accommodation arrangements had been made and meetings had been held to prepare for the arrival of the team from Berlin. Letters had also been sent to the vice-chancellor and other key officials of the university inviting them to the project and visiting their offices.

When the university issued its notice postponing travels and international visits, we could not fathom the extent to which this would go, which affected our response. Hoping that the measures in various countries may soon be relaxed and grappling with the new experience of COVID-19 delayed the initiation of alternative approaches. There was a gap of about two months between the scheduled date for the SWOT interviews before a new strategy had been adopted. The new arrangement, the cancellation of the face-to-face interviews, required that CEGRAD reinitiated the contact process with the target groups, informing them of the new means for the data gathering process and offering new dates for the interviews. It was not until mid-July before we started getting responses to our invitations. The new schedule of not being present at the office, teaching online and the busy schedule of the key officials in getting the activities of the university back on track is still causing a delay in getting responses to our invitations.

The release of funds to procure from the funder is also affecting our ability to access some of the resources to speed up the activities. All these factors have pushed back the project timelines to about seven months. This notwithstanding, we would say that COVID-19 has come with several positive changes and opportunity for the growth of the university and CEGRAD as a whole. We have introduced a new way of teaching –moving to online platforms to engage with students and undertaking research which hitherto would have been challenging. The university, in an attempt to meet the digital demands among others, is introducing new ways of working.

In the midst of renewed lockdowns globally, academics will continue to find innovative ways to keep research partnerships alive. The members of EQUIP are no exception. We believe that listening to our mutual experiences during these challenging times allows us to truly learn from each other and stand together. And that is what scientific collaboration is all about.