

**ENTRENCHING QUALITY ASSURANCE CULTURE THROUGH GRADUATE TRACER STUDIES IN EAST AFRICA: LESSONS LEARNT, CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS FROM MUTRACE**

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**ABSTRACT:** *In many countries especially in Europe, a new demand has emerged in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) that they should provide empirical evidence regarding the professional relevance of their study programs. Africa is following suit. The experiences and knowledge gained in Graduate Tracer Studies (GTS) including Methodology, Interpretation of Findings and Dissemination, Lessons Learnt and Challenges should be shared and utilized for quality assurance not only in Moi University but also in East Africa Universities and elsewhere. This paper highlights the experiences with graduate tracer studies at Moi University including the methodology adopted, results obtained from graduates, opportunities, lessons learnt and challenges. The methodology of the study includes survey preparation and field phase, data analysis, interpretation of findings and dissemination. Moi University Tracer Studies (MUTRACE) experiences presented a lot of opportunities and challenges which are discussed in this paper. If the findings of Graduate tracer study are adapted, they can immensely help to improve the quality of education and services in HEIs. They can also be of value at informing policy and guidelines for HEIs, CUE in Kenya and IUCEA. In conclusion, GTS culture should be embraced in all HEIs in East Africa and the findings of graduate tracer studies used for Quality Assurance purposes among other objectives.*

**KEYWORDS:** MUTRACE Experiences, Graduate tracer studies, results, opportunities, challenges, lessons learnt

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## **INTRODUCTION**

In many countries especially in Europe, a new demand has emerged in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) that they should provide empirical evidence regarding the professional relevance of their study programs. These institutions are formally required to conduct

Graduate Tracer Studies in order to get the accreditation of their study programs by their governments. Besides the aspect of accountability, these HEIs are becoming more and more interested to get a systematic feedback from their graduates mainly for the improvement of the study programs, and more specifically for the revision of the curricular as the core objectives of the Graduate Tracer Studies. Higher education institutions in other regions including Africa and East Africa in particular, have in the last two decades also responded to such demands especially by the Commissions of University Education by establishing Internal Quality Assurance systems characterized by setting of QA Units, developing QA Policies and frameworks, conducting internal quality programmes and assessment (e.g. Moi University Internal Quality Audits) among other activities. These efforts have had various challenges. The University Graduate Tracer Study Training (UNITRACE) offered by the International Centre for Higher Education Research at the University of Kassel in Germany (INCHER-Kassel) targeted people between 2010 and 2013 for training from HEIs who would be responsible for realizing graduate tracer studies to enable them to conduct professional tracer studies in their respective institutions and enhance quality assurance in these institutions respectively. Through a rigorous competitive proposal scrutiny by experienced researchers in Germany, the authors of this paper; Dr. Mary Wahome and Prof. Omar Egesah were selected from Moi University, Kenya, to undergo the course, and sustain UNITRACE by scale up activities in the East African region and most importantly to inculcate a graduate tracer culture for quality assurance at Moi University. This paper shares important experiences accrued thereof.

## **METHODOLOGY ADOPTED**

Moi University Tracer Studies (MUTRACE) was part of a wider University Tracer Studies Initiative (UNITRACE) that took place between October 2010 and February 2013 in Germany, Indonesia and Kenya driven by a series of 3 training and interactive tracer studies workshops. It involved paired participants from higher institutions one with wide knowledge of the policies and the other, an expert in empirical research or a statistician. These participants came from Eastern Africa's Moi University, Kenyatta University and University of Addis Ababa; Central America, South East Asia and Germany. They were trained by experienced researchers in the major steps of tracer studies as indicated in the following workshops:

**Workshop 1: Survey preparation** (relevant theories, design of the survey, addresses of the graduates, organization of the field work, methods to achieve a high response rate). Location: University of Kassel, Germany. Time and duration: two weeks; October 11<sup>th</sup> – October 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2010. This was followed by graduate tracer study; data collection at Moi University, before workshop 2.

**Workshop 2: Data analysis** (data entry and editing, coding, data analysis). Location: University of Kassel, Germany. Time and duration: two weeks; September 4<sup>th</sup> – September 17<sup>th</sup> 2011). This was followed by analysis of graduate tracer study data from the Moi University GTS (MUTRACE), before workshop 3.

**Workshop 3: Interpretation of findings and dissemination** (the role of comparisons, presentation of findings, different kinds of reports, tables and figures).

Location: Sanur (Bali), Indonesia. Time and duration: one week; October 18<sup>th</sup> – October 25<sup>th</sup>, 2012.

**Regional Workshops** (sharing of experiences and dissemination of findings)

Location: In participants home countries e.g. Kenyatta University, Kenya for those from East African region; i.e. Moi University, Kenyatta University and University of Addis Ababa. Time and duration: two days; February 11<sup>th</sup> – February 12<sup>th</sup>, 2013

### **MOI-UNIVERSITY GRADUATE TRACER STUDY (MUTRACE) EXPERIENCES**

The UNITRACE training programme at the University of Kassel- Germany, aimed at providing opportunities for the exchange of valuable experiences and knowledge among divergent participants and other GTS stakeholders. In the 1<sup>st</sup> Workshop, a universal UNITRACE questionnaire was adopted to survey all undergraduate cohort of 2009. After 1<sup>st</sup> workshop, and armed with the universal questionnaire, a report was written by the Moi University participants, Omar and I to the University about the training workshop and requested for support to embark on the graduate tracer survey. Consent was obtained from the Deputy Vice- Chancellor in charge of research and extension (DVC-R&E ). We got request forms which we sent to graduates through their email addresses and telephone contacts. We sent them the questionnaires and requested them to fill, assured them of confidentiality, and we promised them that we would share with them our findings. Finally, when they responded positively by sending filled forms back, we sent them an acknowledgement and appreciation note.

We attempted at a census but it was not possible as there were challenges at the Alumni office because the Address Data Bank was inadequate and so we had to go to the 10 schools to try and obtain the contacts within Moi University. Some schools did not have adequate or systematic data bank. We only managed to sample 7 out of 10; these were, Schools of Arts, Information Sciences, Law, Technology, Medicine, Nursing and Public Health.

The tools used were: universal UNITRACE questionnaire, accurate functional address data bank, email attachment and consent document form DVC, AAR&E. Data collection was done through telephone to ascertain email contact, email explaining purpose and seeking consent from the respondents, email attachment of questionnaires according to faculties, 3 follow-up reminder phone calls. The data obtained was mostly quantitative but also qualitative. We obtained data from 5 areas: socio-biographic characteristics, study conditions, provisions and experiences, job search and transition to work, employment, work and competencies. We got some responses from the graduates with which we did Data Entry. We were required to go with this raw data back to Kassel-Germany for the 2<sup>nd</sup> workshop which was mainly on Data Analysis using SPSS and QTAFL.

The 3<sup>rd</sup> workshop was on Interpretation of Findings and Dissemination. Feedback, recommendation and evaluations made by graduates about their experiences during degree study and transition to the job market were analyzed. All the participants from all the regions presented their findings of their survey and dissemination activities. The key focus was on the Interpretation of the results.

## **SOME FINDINGS AND INTERPRETATIONS FROM MUTRACE AND THEIR USEFULNESS TO QUALITY ASSURANCE AND OTHER STAKEHOLDERS**

What can higher education institutions students, teaching staff, employers and other stakeholders learn from the results? This was one of the areas of focus in the workshop.

### **a) Learning Methods**

1. One of the key findings by the graduates was on the rating of the learning conditions and facilities at Moi University. Overall, these were rated at 37%. This is interpreted to mean that these should be improved by the University to ensure quality.
2. It was found that 92% of the graduates completed their studies in time which is a positive indication. However, efforts must be made to find out about the 8% who do not complete in time and address the challenges.
3. The mode of learning through lectures was rated very high at 78%, of research at 53%, of internship at 57%, practical or field work at 62% and through discussions at 59%. This is interpreted to mean that all these methods are not 100% therefore efforts must be made ensure improvement for quality assurance.
4. Demonstrations method were found to be less emphasized (33%). This was interpreted to mean that here is need to improve on these method of learning.
5. Community services were found to be neglected (21%). There is need to improve on this method.
6. Graduates were found to have undertaken additional education training during their degree study. This training may include courses such as computer skills, accounting and foreign language. The University should include these courses in their curricular.
7. The relationship between study field and area of work was rated very highly (70%). Despite this high rate, there is need to improve the curricular to fit into the job market.
8. It was found that graduates searched for jobs using various methods which included work placement, internship and attachment (21%). Career office, internet, fairs, government and commercial agencies were not used which was rather surprising. There is need to improve on these especially in the career office at the University which needs to be more enhanced.
9. It was also found that 75% of the graduates gained required competence from the University and 64% of them indicated that the University contributed to this. Though this rating is positive, there is need to increase courses that provide competence to the graduates while they are still at the University. These may include team-work, tolerance, working under pressure among other competences.

### **b) Study and Employment**

1. It was found that 52% of the graduates took some courses when they were still at the University and after graduation to prepare themselves for the workplace. The

University therefore should include these courses in their curricular. These trainings were mainly strategic to add advantage for competition in job search and were useful at work.

2. Relationship between the field of study for graduates and the area of work was rated very highly (70%). Though this is a high rating, a lot more needs to be done to ensure improvement to reach 100%.

**c) Employer consideration in recruiting a graduate**

It was found out that when considering a graduate for recruitment certain factors were important.

1. The University where a graduate studied (65% of the graduates reported) and the degree obtained were held as important (46%).

2. It was surprising to find out from the graduates that grades (64%), area of specialization (52%) and computer skills (52%), experience (71%) and organizational skills (75%) were not highly regarded by employers. This can be interpreted probably in reference to the employers' ability to pay for a highly competent and skilled graduate which would mean higher pay than to the one who is not.

**d) Comparison between competencies of graduates obtained from universities and those not obtained from universities**

Competences attributed to the University included knowledge of one's field, critical thinking, research skills, communication skills, ability to learn under pressure, to work independently, adaptability, loyalty and integrity, report writing, presentation, and capability for continuous learning. The competences not attributed to the University included knowledge of other fields, subsidiary knowledge, computer and internet skills.

**DISSEMINATION OF RESULTS**

The results of graduates tracer studies should not be stored in shelves but instead should be shared to all stakeholders for quality assurance including: students, graduates, lecturers, members of senate and management of higher education institutions. They should also be shared with parents, members of public, employers, government and non-governmental organizations, other institutions of higher learning in Kenya, East Africa, Africa and other continents. Dissemination is done through diverse platforms including academic report writings, in seminars, workshops, and conferences both local and international. Moi University participants have done this through presentation of papers in various fora both locally and internationally. It is also done through publications and also sharing in the media like in newspapers, newsletters, radio, television and also in online internet sources. Dissemination is an important means of sharing what happens in the institutions of higher learning including the challenges thereof thereby ensuring improvement in provision of quality education. It should be noted that dissemination strategies should be adopted to ensure that specific results are disseminated for consumption to a particular or relevant stakeholder.

## **TRACER STUDIES IMPLICATIONS FOR QUALITY ASSURANCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS**

1. Given the importance of Graduate Tracer Studies, East African Universities and other institutions of higher learning everywhere should mainstream these activities in their operations and regularize their conduct.
2. Using Moi University results as an example, we learn that demonstration, practice- based learning and outreach should be improved and strengthened.
3. UNITRACE has offered great potential in methodological capacities for tracer studies. These capacities should be built further and multiplied at university levels and at national, regional and international spheres.
4. There are available opportunities for implementing and utilizing tracer study results for HEIs . We must start utilizing these opportunities now and strengthen partnerships & collaborations for good practice and continuous improvement.

### **OPPORTUNITIES**

First, were the UNITRACE threefold training workshops which provided opportunities for the exchange of valuable experiences and views among the participants. Second, were methodological capacities and potential for multiplication for other research areas for example in Kenya, there was an attempt at Kenya National Multiplication Training (KNMUT) last year, presentations in seminars, workshops and conferences locally, regionally and internationally, scholarly research and publication platforms and customized dissemination strategy to various stakeholders. Third, was Moi University which provided the researchers time off to train and carry out the survey as well as financial support. Finally was support from DAAD and INCHER-Kassel, Germany. The opportunities can be outlined as follows:

- Funding from DAAD and goodwill from Moi University enabled great methodological strides gained by researchers through a series of training workshops in graduate tracer surveys. Aforementioned is the comparative international standard measure obtained through these trainings.
- UNITRACE researchers were paired up to ensure teamwork proliferates complimentarily. This has benefits of methodological cross examination between the two researchers for reliability and validity of processes and outcomes regarding process implementation and findings. While one researcher is responsible for methodologies, the other ensures desirable outcomes are appropriate for dissemination and use locally, nationally and internationally.
- Build-on methodology of UNITRACE training workshops relentlessly culminated in dissemination of tailor-made results for example, results for continuing students, the graduates, parents, the University departments, HEIs, employer and the public and international user. Conferences such as the International EXLIMA- Bali 2012, MUAIC 2012 in which this paper was presented and UNITRACE Eastern Africa regional dissemination conference 2013 were appropriate venues for such forms of dissemination. In addition were East African Quality Assurance Network Workshops, 2012 and 2013.

- This study could not conduct a paper survey because it was expensive, time and material consuming and untidy. Our own graduates could not fully afford online internet usage to respond to such an arduous and exhaustive questionnaire used here. The opportunity to use a midway email and telephone survey ensured desirable responses were returned and objectives of the survey met. This strategy somehow placed a human face to the study and drew phenomenal acknowledgement and enthusiasm from the graduate respondents, while saving on time, material and human resource costs. This presents an encouraging future for panel or even cross-sectional graduate tracer surveys at Moi University.
- Results of this tracer survey are abounding with benefits. The University has built tracer study methodology capacities that can be cascaded to other researchers at Moi University and in the region. Results indicating frayed facilities, study contexts and programmes can be used as lesson for intra-institutional strengthening. Such end points can only be achieved through application of robust tracer study methodologies. The finding of graduate tracer studies should be disseminated for consumption to relevant stakeholders. Moreover, such then is platform for the University and other institution of higher learning to embrace the culture of tracer studies for quality assurance.

## CHALLENGES

**Dearth of addresses and contacts:** This is a challenge in conducting tracer surveys. Most of the addresses of graduates were missing and this could partly be contributed by poor storage of these contacts or a poor way of retrieving them from the graduates before they graduate. **Non-active contacts:** In this particular study, most of the contacts of graduates were not active and therefore this necessitated contacting these graduates for active contacts. Those whose telephone numbers could not work were not able to participate in the study and therefore this reduced the number of respondents.

**The use of email attachment:** The study used emailed questionnaire. This is because compared to other forms such as the use of telephone interviews and postal addresses; it is the cheapest method of conducting such a survey. However, this posed challenges because most of the graduates did not have access to the internet and even electricity for some who live in rural areas. Financial constraints were also an important factor. To participate, graduates had to use their own money to go to the cyber café. Most of the graduates were still unemployed and partly was reason why some could not respond to the questionnaire.

**Bulky questionnaire:** In order to capture most of the information, tracer studies questionnaires are usually bulky and have a lot of questions. This coupled with the cost of accessing the internet proved a challenge to the graduates. The bulky nature of the questionnaire required up to 15 minutes to fill.

**Response rates:** The response rate for this particular study 41%, considered low by any standards although commendable in graduate tracer studies. This was precipitated by a

number of factors including the dearth of contacts, the bulkiness of the questionnaire and also the email attachment method. For this reason, low response rate in some cases may not provide enough and accurate information to make inferences. This brings a challenge of representativeness to tracer studies.

**Goodwill from the University:** There is still a challenge by East African universities to appreciate the importance of tracer studies. There is need for the universities to appreciate how Tracer Studies are important to them and therefore the need to support them. Goodwill from the university is important for success of tracer studies. If universities do not understand the value of Graduate Tracer surveys it is impossible to mainstream them and reap the benefits. It has taken some effort to convince Moi University about the importance of GTS.

### **LESSONS LEARNT FROM THE MOI UNIVERSITY EXPERIENCE**

1. GTS are a vital ingredient worth introducing in HEIs.
2. GTS methodologies are unique but standardized universally. They are arduous requiring training skills good will and support from host institutions.
3. Results of GTSs can bear diverse implications. If analyzed systematically they are immensely useful for Quality Assurance at customized levels – departments, faculties, university management, students and parents, employers and HEIs.
4. University goodwill and recognition of GTS as valuable is vital.
5. It is imperative to disseminate GTS results to all key stakeholders to benefit from their apt and respective use

### **IMPLICATIONS OF GTS TO RESEARCH AND PRACTICE**

#### **Practical Implications of Graduate Tracer Studies**

A tracer study can immensely help to improve the quality of education and services in HEIs. They can also be of value at informing policy and guidelines for HEIs, CUE in Kenya and IUCEA for East Africa. Plans are underway in Kenya for example, for a national and regional multiplication training initiative in GTSs as a result outcome from MUTRACE and modeling on the Moi University GTS experience. It is prudent to design graduate tracer studies using well guided methodologies that can decipher desirable results given unique contexts, opportunities and challenges each tracer study is likely to face in East Africa, for example. Results of GTS s should be disseminated to various stakeholders for their use. Notwithstanding, this paper should arouse our desire to initiate and entrench GTS as means by which we can achieve quality assurance at universities and HEIs in East Africa. The value of this paper lies in its proposal for GTS suitable and domesticated for East Africa. The drafting of a guide for GTS in East African HEIs is already underway.



## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Tracer studies are valuable in ensuring quality. The paper concludes that HEI in East Africa region should embrace GTS culture, disseminate and make use of results accruing for quality assurance. One of the greatest challenges of tracer studies in Moi University was methodological. Tracer studies cannot be professionally done without an accurate address data bank and professional expertise. Experience from MUTRACE indicates that Moi University should develop these to enable researchers to conduct professional tracer studies. GTS should be embraced and nested in Moi University almanac of activities. Moi University and other universities in Kenya and East Africa should capitalize on the opportunity offered by UNITRACE and MUTRACE to train in GTS and to initiate and support GTS for a better quality future. If adopted as a culture, tracer studies can help accredit Moi University programmes and enable the University to compete relevantly and rank high globally. Researchers on this study recommend the establishment of a graduate tracer centre at Moi University hosted by DVC, AR&E to spearhead and actualize GTS process and culture at Moi University and in the East African region. Plans are underway in Kenya for example, for a national and regional multiplication training initiative in GTSs as a result, modeling on the Moi University GTS.

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