

AFRICA HIGHER EDUCATION CENTERS OF EXCELLENCE FOR DEVELOPMENT IMPACT

MINUTES OF THE MINISTERIAL AND EIGHTH PROJECT STEERING COMMITTEE MEETING

November 14, 2022

Banjul, The Gambia

MINISTERS/ REPRESENTATIVES PRESENT

1. Prof. Pierre Gomez (Minister of Education, The Gambia) – Chair
2. Prof. Balde Moussa (Minister of Higher Education, Senegal)
3. Prof. Mamoudou Djibo (Minister of Higher Education, Niger)
4. Mr Tossou Makpehou Rogatien (Representative, Minister of Higher Education, Benin)
5. Prof. Sado Traore (Representative, Minister of Higher Education, Burkina Faso)
6. Mr. Lawrence Agyekum (Representative, Government of Ghana)

MEMBERS PRESENT

1. Prof. Aboubacar Marcos (Benin)
2. Prof. Ramané Kaboré (Burkina Faso)
3. Dr. Arona Diedhiou (Côte d'Ivoire)
4. Dr. Fahmi Ahmed (Djibouti)
5. Prof. Mohammed Salifu (Ghana)
6. Prof. Mamadou Saliou Diallo (Guinea)
7. Prof. Kouami Kokou (Togo)
8. Dr. Yusupha Touray (The Gambia)
9. Dr. Didier Acouetey (Private Sector)
10. Mr. Stanilas Jean Ouedraogo (UEMOA, Burkina Faso)

FOCAL POINTS

1. Dr. Djibiliour Sanogo (Côte d'Ivoire)
2. Dr. Edmund Aalangdong (Ghana)
3. Prof. Adamou Mahaman Moustapha (Niger)
4. Dr. Joshua Atah (Nigeria)
5. Prof. Amadou Abdoul Sow (Senegal)
6. Mr. Tchadom Dondja Agbetetiroo, Representing Prof. Koffi Agbenoto (Togo)
7. Mr. Samba Sowe (The Gambia)

IN ATTENDANCE

World Bank (WB), Agence Française de développement (AFD), Association of African Universities (AAU) and Others

In-person

1. Dr. Ekua Bentil (ACE Impact Task Team Leader, WB, Washington)
2. Mr. Harry Crimi (ACE Impact Core Team Member, WB, Washington)
3. Ms. Djeneba Gory (ACE Impact Core Team Member, WB, Niger)
4. Mr. Said Abdo (Country CoTTL, WB, Djibouti)
5. Mr. Hyacinthe Gbaye (Country CoTTL, WB, Benin)
6. Dr. Moustapha Lo, (Country CoTTL, WB, Togo)
7. Mr. Akinkunmi Oladipupo Onimole (Procurement Specialist, WB, Nigeria)
8. Mr. Laurent Cortese (Deputy Director for Education, AFD, Paris)
9. Prof. Olusola B. Oyewole (Secretary-General, AAU)

10. Dr. Sylvia Mkandawire (Program Manager, ACE Impact, AAU)
11. Ms. Nodumo Dhlamini (Director, ICT and Knowledge Management, AAU)
12. Mrs. Adeline Addy (M&E Specialist, AAU)
13. Mr. Williams Dzonteu (E&S Specialist, AAU)
14. Mr. Abednego Corletey (IT Specialist, AAU)

Virtually

1. Dr. Quentin Delpech (Lead Expert Higher Education, AFD)

Absent with apologies

1. Prof. Abubakar Adamu Rasheed (Nigeria)
2. Dr. Dègla Hyacinthe Hessou (Benin)

Introduction

1. The 8th seating of the ACE Impact Project Steering Committee took place in hybrid mode on November 14, 2022 in Banjul, The Gambia. Being a ministerial edition, ministers of higher education of the ACE Impact participant countries (or their representatives) were in attendance. Discussions focused on (i) project progress with indications of challenges encountered; (ii) advancement of the project development objectives, achievement of disbursement-linked indicators, and disbursement and fund utilization rates; (iii) updates on project extension and implications of the project mid-term review; (iv) AFD support; (v) highlights of PASET RSIF activities over the reporting period; and (vi) country roundtable discussions.

Welcome Remarks

2. Opening the meeting at 9.15 am, the Chair, **Honorable Professor Pierre Gomez, Minister of Higher Education, Research, Science and Technology of The Gambia** extended a warm welcome to all making special mention of the Ministers, the World Bank (WB), AFD and AAU Project Teams, and the AAU Secretary General. He underscored the importance of the meeting, noting the very crucial role higher education plays in development.
3. **Prof Olusola B. Oyewole, Secretary-General, AAU** observed that it was a pleasure to deliberate on the progress of the ACE Impact Project and to advance higher education in Africa in general. He appreciated the Ministers for their leadership and commitment to leveraging higher education for development in their respective countries; the PSC for their dedication to the project; and the Government of The Gambia for graciously hosting the meeting and extending various courtesies. Prof Oyewole noted that the project is delivering on its expectations with wide-reaching spill-over effects. He emphasized that higher education is an indispensable component of the economy and therefore investment needs to be increased in the sector. He was happy that thematic networks have been prioritized under the project and expressed the hope that the ACE Impact initiative will continue to respond to development challenges. Finally, he assured all present of the AAU's preparedness to champion the ACE concept as a paradigm of excellence and innovation.
4. **Mr Laurent Cortese, Deputy Director for Education (AFD, Paris)** was honoured to be participating in the meeting for the first time and echoed the appreciation to the Government of the Gambia, the World Bank and the AAU, noting that the AFD is happy with the progress of the project. He observed that the mid-term review exercise is critical for assessing the project achievements and impact at country and centre levels. He singled out notable achievements including the number of enrolments and externally generated revenue. Mr Cortese observed that despite these gains, some project aspects need urgent attention, mentioning in particular fund disbursement and utilization. He was hopeful that the current meeting would address project challenges to help concretize the gains already achieved.

5. **Dr Ekua Bentil, ACE Impact Task Team Leader (WB)** presented greetings to all present and apologized for the absence of some key WB Managers which she noted was because of competing engagements. She was particularly pleased with the presence of the Ministers and observed that it reflects their commitment towards the project and higher education. Dr Bentil noted that centres at the forefront are usually those whose governments show strong ownership of the project. Speaking to the issue of procurement-related challenges, she emphasized that despite project successes, the project is past mid-term and there is little time left. Dr Bentil, therefore, called on the respective governments to help accelerate project implementation. She underscored the importance of governments working together with the universities and centres to sustain the project as it nears the end, noting that leveraging regionality will be key. On behalf of the WB, Dr Bentil expressed appreciation to the AAU, the AFD and other partners for their contributions towards the success of the project.

Adoption of Agenda

6. The agenda for the meeting was tabled for adoption and it was unanimously accepted without amendment. The complete agenda is set out in Annex 1.

Key Decisions of the 6th and 7th PSC Meetings

7. Key decisions of the two previous PSC meetings held virtually and in Cotonou (Benin) respectively, spoke to project update reports; AAU work plans and budgets; and country roundtable discussions. Under project updates, it was agreed to provide more clarity on reporting periods; do a paper on the effects of political disturbances on the project in Burkina Faso and Guinea; strengthen support to low-performing centres; share the concept note on the Students' Innovation and Research Award (SIRA) Initiative; and provide more details on the evaluation of previous regional workshops. For budgets and work plans, decisions centred around providing separate budgets and financial reports for the 1st and 2nd ACE Impact projects respectively with indications of key trends and lessons. Under round table discussions, it was agreed that the PSC would help improve efficient funds usage and resolve procurement challenges while the AAU in collaboration with the WB would hasten results verification and countries would submit project extension and restructuring requests. All these had been duly addressed and details of the interventions were provided and accepted by the PSC.

Project Progress and Update

8. The status of project progress was presented by Dr. Sylvia Mkandawire (Project Manager) and highlighted (i) Key Project Development Objectives (PDOs); (ii) General Project Activities; (iii) Regional Networks; and (iv) Challenges, Reflections and Next Steps. Best performing PDOs vis-à-vis project end targets included National Programme Accreditation (158%), External Revenue (107), Enrolment of PhDs (69%), Regional Enrolments (74%), Masters (64%), and Female Enrolments (65%). As part of general project activities, several capacity enhancement initiatives were undertaken and included 6 project compliance and performance training sessions on *Development Impact*, *Institutional Impact*, and *Innovation and Entrepreneurship*; a week-long session on *Negotiation Skills for Women*; and Implementation Support Missions to 18 low performing centres, as designated by their low disbursement, fund utilization and implementation rates, to assist with the development of their acceleration plans. The National Facilitation Units - Ministère de l'Enseignement Supérieure, de la Recherche et d'Innovation (MESRSI), Burkina Faso; Project Coordinating Unit (PCU), The Gambia; the Ghana Tertiary Education Commission (GTEC), Ghana; and the National Universities Commission (NUC), Nigeria - undertook several activities aimed at improving project implementation and performance. These included project performance reviews, trainings in *Procurement*, *Financial Management* and *Safeguards*; engagement of national subject matter experts to support implementation monitoring missions; recruitment of core project staff, commissioning of financial audits; brokering of partnerships; and procurement of equipment.
9. Partnerships brokered with IBM, École Polytechnique Fédérale de Lausanne (EPFL), Institut de Recherche pour le Développement (IRD) and Elsevier to strengthen the centres yielded significant results over the reporting period. These included the award of up to 6 million Euro in grants to 4 thematic networks in Health, Water, ICT and Mining; the setup of centres of digital competencies and digital education

training for faculty, experts and technicians; the establishment of student Internships at IBM's research laboratories in Kenya and South Africa and advancement in digital training for faculty; and capacity building in research, publication and communication of scientific results. Recognition of and awards to centres were also highlighted and essentially involved the appointments of some centre leaders to higher offices within their universities and at national, regional, and international levels. An update was also provided on the progress of the 2022 student-focused innovation and research awards initiative (SIRA) aimed at promoting innovative and impactful research by young African researchers. It is planned to give out 15 awards annually under the initiative. For the inaugural 2022 edition, a total of 108 applications (23% female) were received from all 11 ACE Impact countries. Efforts are underway to seek partnerships for sustaining this initiative. To disseminate the impact of the ACEs in addressing key regional development challenges and global crises in various thematic areas, and to promote collaboration with various development, industry, and academic partners, a high-level meeting was held with partners on October 17 – 21, 2022 in Washington DC. Recommendations arising from the discussions centred on (i) the need to increase the visibility of ACEs and communicate their impact; the importance of establishing endowment funds to assure the sustainability of the projects; (iii) the exploration of additional funding avenues with other World Bank projects, development partners, and foundations; and (iv) the invitation to explore promising partnerships with select US universities.

10. Challenges that were highlighted included (i) improved but still low Fund Utilization Rates across the project; (ii) the negative effect of the high teaching load of ACE Academic Staff on their involvement in centre activities; (iii) limited visibility of ACEs' research output and low social media presence of some centres; (iv) procurement challenges due to global logistic bottlenecks and inefficient systems at the institutional and national levels; (v) high inflation rates and market disruptions that have led to necessary changes to and delays in annual work plans, centre budgets and procurement plans; (vi) evidence of limited teamwork in project implementation at centre level resulting in low performance, and the submission of centre documents that are either of low quality or are late; and (v) evidence of a lack of strong national level coordination in some countries to support centres and resolve bottlenecks.
11. On the basis of the project update it was concluded that (i) The ACE model can be replicated to transform higher education at institutional and national levels; (ii) Sustainability of the ACE Impact project is key and the time for action is now; (iii) Urgent government support is critical to the project's success in areas of procurement and development of ultra-modern infrastructure; (iv) Strategic national coordination and support are important for centres to achieve international accreditation, particularly in countries with no national accreditation bodies; and (v) Digital infrastructure investment at the national level is urgent given the new norm in higher education delivery.

Project Implementation Status and DLI Achievement

12. **1st ACE Impact (Burkina Faso, Djibouti, Ghana, Guinea and Senegal):** Performance-wise, the First ACE Impact Project is on track for most disbursement-linked results (DLRs) except for those tied to activities that are either time-consuming or rely heavily on procurement and national intervention, such as accreditation and infrastructure. Since May 2022, the average DLI Achievement has increased from 51% to 57%. Areas of strong performance include *External Revenue* (85%); *PhD Enrolment* (74%); *Research Publications* (72%); and *MSc Enrolment* (71%) with individual centres distinguishing themselves under specific indicators: (i) **External Revenue (100%): Burkina Faso** (2iE, CoE_2iE), **Guinea** (PCMT), **Senegal** (SAMEF, MITIC, AGIR), and all **Ghana** ACEs; (ii) **PhD Enrolment (100%): Ghana** (CoE_KEEP, RCEES, WACCI) and **Senegal** (SAMEF and MITIC); (iii) **Research Publications (100%): Burkina Faso** (ITECH), **Ghana** (WACCBIP, WACCI, WAGMC), **Guinea** (PCMT), and **Senegal** (AGRISAN). Performance has been low for DLRs on Institutional Impact (16%); Infrastructure (23%), Programme Accreditation (27%) and Fiduciary Management (28%). However, progress is being made and key solutions have been discussed at the individual country roundtable meetings to increase earnings under these DLRs.

13. **2nd ACE Impact (Benin, Côte d'Ivoire, The Gambia, Niger, Nigeria and Togo):** For the Second ACE Impact Project, 42% of DLIs have been achieved – a 9-point improvement over the May 2022 average with notable performance under External Revenue (65%); Short Course Enrolment (65%); and PhD/MSc Enrolment (58%). Exceptional achievement by individual centres included (i) **External Revenue (100%): Benin** (SMIA, C2EA, CoE_EIE); **Côte d'Ivoire** (ENSEA, CCBAD, VALOPRO); **Nigeria** (CERHI, CEFOR, ACEGID, CDA, ACEPHAP, CAPIC, PUTOR); **Niger** (EMIG); and (ii) **Short Course Enrolment (100%): Nigeria** (ACEGID, CEFOR, ACEDHARS, PUTOR, ACETEL, ACENTDFB, CEFER, CERHI), **Benin** (SMIA), and **Côte d'Ivoire** (CCBAD). Performance under Institutional Impact (7%); Teaching and Research Infrastructure (9%); Fiduciary Management (24%) require urgent attention. However, progress is being made and key solutions have been discussed at individual country roundtable meetings to increase earnings under these DLRs.

Disbursement and Fund Utilization

14. For the First ACE Impact, the total IDA funds received (Disbursement Rate) was 51% as of October 31, 2022. The disbursement rate is expected to increase to 55% by January 31, 2023 with an expected disbursement rate per country as follows: Ghana (65%); Burkina Faso (53%); Senegal (46%); Guinea (34%); and Djibouti (27%).
15. For the Second ACE Impact, the overall disbursement rate was 31% as of October 31, 2022. The disbursement rate is expected to increase to 37% by January 31, 2023 with an expected disbursement rate per country as follows: Côte d'Ivoire (41%); Benin (47%); Nigeria (39%); The Gambia (33%); Togo (32%); and Niger (27%).
16. With respect to fund utilisation, for the First ACE Impact Project, performance improved significantly over the 6-month period from May 2022 to November 2022 with individual countries recording between 8-to-13 percentage point increases. Overall fund utilisation for the First ACE Impact was at 34%. For the Second ACE Impact Project, the average performance was at 19% although between May and November 2022 individual centres recorded increases of between 5 and 9 percentage points.

Reactions to the Presentations

17. **Ghana (Prof. Mohammed Salifu, PSC Member)** contended that the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic was significant and should be the basis for the extension of the project. Reacting to the presentation on the students' research award scheme (SIRA), Ghana recalled its earlier reservations about the number of awards and the proposal that it be narrowed down to make the scheme more competitive. It was suggested to discuss an effective way to proceed on the matter. Regarding institutional accreditation, it was noted that there may still be challenges regarding the availability of data and this may explain the low performance reported. Given that there are multiple disciplines within institutions, accreditation at that level could be tricky and finding appropriate agencies may be challenging. It was recommended to focus on programme accreditation. The Colleges of Engineering would be better candidates for institutional accreditation.
18. **Niger (Prof. Mamoudou Djibo, Minister of Higher Education)** noted that some results particularly related to student enrollment, research and infrastructure had either not been considered or not been submitted which could in part explain the country's low performance. Internal challenges affecting the submission of results are being resolved. In terms of accreditation, a decree has been adopted as part of efforts to set up a national higher education accreditation agency that would take over all accreditation issues. The hard work of the Niger teams and the monthly performance monitoring meetings were applauded. Regarding procurement challenges, it was reported that concessions for the project are under consideration to facilitate implementation.
19. **Djibouti (Dr. Fahmi Ahmed, Advisor – Ministry of Higher Education and Research)** emphasised that as the project nears its end, it is very important to consider employability and put in place facilitating strategies. Questions were raised about why there are no related indicators under the project, and it

was suggested that in collaboration with the private sector, an observatory could be set up to help promote employability. On accreditation, it was noted there are challenges as a national agency is now being set up. Regarding the possible extension of the project, it was observed that the COVID-19 pandemic, the fact that some centres are very young, and other relevant challenges should inform a favourable decision. Djibouti made a plea for the AAU to support the request for an extension. It was further noted that clarification on reallocation proposals and when they would take effect would be very helpful in planning for the remainder of the project. Confirmation was needed on whether reallocated funds would be kept within countries.

20. **Togo (Prof. Kwame Kokou, PSC Member)** reiterated the call for an extension of the project noting also that it is too early to consider fund reduction. If possible, the decisions to take funds from low-performing centres and reassign to better-performing centres should be reviewed. Concerns were raised about DLR 5.3 regarding its clarity, the motivation behind it and its feasibility. Against this background and based on complaints by centres on the difficulty of implementation and the generally low performance under this indicator, Togo called for further reflection.
21. **Senegal (Prof. Balde Moussa, Minister of Higher Education)** needed clarification on accreditation, particularly with regard to the challenges. On procurement, it was suggested that centres could be given some concessions at the national level to facilitate project implementation. Regarding proposed fund reductions, Senegal recommended that low-performing centres should instead be assisted to improve their performance. Questions were also raised about the future of doctoral students and plans to either integrate them into the universities or to ensure they remain on the continent.
22. **Benin (Mr. Tossou Makpehou Rogatien, Representative, Minister of Higher Education)** observed that there is general agreement for the extension of the project and requested that clearer details are provided on the process. On challenges, it was noted that the centres work hard and appear to be doing well on all indicators except in cases where they have no or little control, as in the case of procurement. Suggestions were made to try and harmonise the WB and national procurement mechanisms. Benin requested that the AAU facilitates the sharing of experiences with accreditation between the centres.
23. **Côte d'Ivoire (Dr. Arona Diedhiou, PSC Member)** reported inadequate data reporting and communication between the centres, the AFD and AAU, leading to discrepancies in the data from the different actors. There were calls for more dialogue between the parties and a request that AAU participates in the national review committee meetings held half-yearly. There were questions on the protocol for submitting fiduciary results and overall concerns about the nature and scope of these results.
24. **Burkina Faso (Prof. Sado Traore, Representative, Minister of Higher Education)** emphasised the need for more reflection on the implications of not extending the project, particularly in relation to the achievement of the project objectives with a focus on activities that are time-consuming.
25. Responding to the issues raised, the WB clarified that beyond the numbers reported, there are a lot of research efforts in the background with significant impact on communities. The numbers help to identify low-performing indicators and help to make a case for the extension of the project. Throwing more light on DLR 5.3 (Entrepreneurship), the WB noted that centres had to develop entrepreneurship models and establish technology transfer offices and innovation-related structures but benefited from flexibility and several discussions about how to implement these activities. Therefore, centres should be well informed about this indicator, although it was acknowledged that the definition of the indicator came late. The AAU noted further that several clinic sessions were held with the centres on this DLR, clear guidance notes were shared, and formulations were thoroughly reviewed. The centres are right on track with the implementation, but regular reviews will be done to inform the way forward. Regarding industry input under DLR 5.3, the Bank observed that much effort is being made in that direction and the AAU has

initiated the recruitment of an Industrial Liaison Officer to lead that drive and provide more in-depth support to the centres on industry linkages. There have however been challenges with the quality of candidates attracted so far and so it is proposed to consult the industry PSC Member to help in a headhunt. In addition, the European Union has expressed interest in collaborating with certain centres on their entrepreneurship and innovation activities, and the WB Entrepreneurship and Innovation expert is further assisting with this.

26. On employability issues, the WB emphasised that this is given due attention under the project. Within the framework of DLI 2 (development impact), centres are assessed based on the employment of their graduates. Furthermore, the project insists on industry internships for practical hands-on experience. Centres are therefore required to seek approval for their internship hosts. Additionally, a tracer study is planned to track the graduates under the project. A consulting firm that did a similar study under ACE I has already been engaged but the process was delayed to make way for previous verification processes. It is planned to start the study in February 2023. The employment-related aspects of the project will be well documented, and the information made available on the project website.
27. On concerns about the SIRA, the WB noted details of the scheme had been shared with the PSC but there had been little feedback. In terms of categorisation, the scheme looks good but there is more room for improvement and AAU should resume the conversation with the PSC on possible upgrades. Additional information from AAU noted that there are 5 thematic areas which explains why there are 15 awards (3 per theme). The 2022 edition is a pilot event and the lessons learned will inform future editions. Currently, there is a drive to get more partners on board and the AAU will be working closely with the PSC Industry Member on this.
28. Regarding accreditation, the WB agreed that programme accreditation was easier but also noted that about 5 institutions have already gone through self-evaluation/ gap assessment towards the international institutional accreditation and not many complaints have been recorded so far. The assessments have detailed many gaps that need to be addressed before the international level process which takes between 18 to 24 months. For Nigeria, disbursements started only in 2021 so they have now started the process. Based on the project targets, if 4 or 5 institutions get international accreditation, it would be a significant achievement. However, the status of this indicator will be reviewed for all countries and based on whether an extension is granted, the associated funds may be reallocated as necessary. Regardless of how funds are reallocated under this DLR, it is highly recommended that the PSC continues to encourage all institutions to continue the institutional accreditation process as this adds significant value to the higher education sector in Africa. For institutions that are already advanced in the process, it would be good that they conclude, as many lessons can be drawn from the exercise, particularly on how data is managed.
29. The WB reported that among the countries, only Niger and The Gambia benefit from regular monthly meetings to help boost their performance. The Gambia has made much progress as a result. For Niger, the composition of the project team was a challenge. The absence of critical staff for the procurement, financial management and, Monitoring and Evaluation functions resulted in the late submission of results. Generally, there has been a problem with low capacity in some countries. This, coupled with poor teamwork and staff attrition, has negatively affected project implementation. In Niger, there is the need to build the team and ensure all members play their expected roles. Procurement in Niger has also been problematic. All the project countries except The Gambia use their respective national procurement policies so essentially, the challenges are at country level. Bureaucracy and interference from government bodies are causing delays and some concessions are needed to fast-track processes.
30. In terms of the submission of data, the timelines are applicable to all centres. Late submissions may mean that results may not be verified and therefore, not paid for. This may explain why results may be achieved but do not reflect in the performance reports, as results are only computed after they have been verified. On the issue of COVID-19 being considered as a case for project extension, it was noted

that since all centres (both high and low performing) were affected, there should be other substantial conditions to warrant an extension. Responding to issues around reallocation proposals, the WB explained that for the 1st ACE Impact centres, the proposals have been approved and the decisions communicated during the recent roundtable discussions. The Djibouti roundtable is yet to hold which explains the information gap. The WB commended the idea of an observatory on employment noting that this falls under DLR 5.3 and interested countries may take this up in collaboration with industry. Platforms could be created to facilitate university-wide industry engagements.

31. Regarding concerns over possible fund reductions, the WB explained that it is critical to avoid funds being left over after the project ends, as this is a signal that the higher education sector in the region is not capable of absorbing funds. It is therefore advisable to reallocate the funds to better-performing centres that can use them within the project period, rather than have the funds returned to the Bank. This was done under ACE I and allowed countries to earn as much as 90% of their total allocations. The practice also aligns with the project policy of rewarding good performance. It was clarified that the related funds stay within the same country.
32. Regarding project extension, the WB explained that all participating countries would need to send formal requests to the Bank, and these would be considered in light of the mid-term review decisions. The 1st ACE Impact Project has gone through the process and model letters are available which would be shared with other centres. The WB Project Team would then need to do a restructuring paper detailing all proposed changes, reallocations, and adjustments to project targets. This restructuring would be followed by meetings with the country management teams to discuss the process; discussions with the Regional Unit of the Bank; and then formal submission of the request for WB approval. It was emphasised that the extension, if granted, would likely be budget-neutral, with no additional funds allocated except what is left after the mid-term decisions have been implemented. Essentially, the extension would allow time for completing all pending activities at an accelerated pace and within the grace period. On the implications of no extension, the WB reported that much work has been done to justify an extension. However, there is need to demonstrate that capacity exists to complete all project activities within the extension period. The capacity element must be highlighted in the individual country aide-mémoires to go to the WB, to justify the specific activities to be implemented within the additional time granted by the extension.
33. Regarding harmonising procurement between the WB and individual countries, the WB noted that the Bank organises related capacity-building events and they would discuss with the Country Management teams the possibility of centres benefitting from these if there is strong interest. Contributing to the discussion, the AAU Secretary-General proposed the establishment of alumni groups to facilitate the tracking of graduates. The PhDs produced under the project could also help address the challenge of the ageing professoriate. He noted that the PhDs are also making development impact through their research. He reported on concerns at African Union fora regarding the absence of a regional accreditation body under the ACE Impact project and the hope that the proposed Pan-African Accreditation Agency would be recognised by the WB within the framework of the project. He proposed that the AAU provides a forum for sharing programme accreditation experiences between the project countries. The WB explained that the approved accreditation agencies were selected based on their track record over time. CAMES is recognised under the project as a regional accreditor. There is need to agree on indicators for qualifying agencies. Regarding the Pan-African Accreditation Agency, more discussions will be required to understand its mandate and scope. It is a good initiative but is coming in too late for the ACE Impact centres to benefit.
34. Responding to issues raised by Côte d'Ivoire, the AFD noted collaboration with the AAU has improved significantly and supported the idea that AAU participates in the national review meetings as an observer. The roundtable meeting could not be held before the regional workshop as expected and efforts are needed to ensure the timing is respected. The AAU clarified that all project information is collected via the digital platform regardless of the sponsor. This is verified and the results are shared

with the centres for confirmation before they are reported to the relevant funding body and the PSC. Disbursement letters are then issued based on the agreed information. The AAU has agreed to hold monthly meetings with the AFD and the Côte d'Ivoire centres and is committed to supporting all centres equally.

Key Decisions/Resolutions:

Following the discussions, the AAU agreed to:

- **facilitate sharing of experiences on accreditation between the centres**
- **participate in Côte d'Ivoire half-yearly national review committee meetings**
- **in collaboration with the WB, document the employment-related aspects of the project and make them available on the project website.**
- **resume the conversation on SIRA with the PSC for pointers to possible improvements in the next round of awards.**

AFD Update

35. The AFD reported that under the ACE Partner Project, 4 inter ACE thematic networks (on *Responsible Mining and Sustainable Development*, *Sustainable Water Management*, *Digital Science and Technology*, and *Infectious Diseases*) are being supported. The networks comprise 21 centres in 8 West African countries (Benin, Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Guinea, Niger and Nigeria) and are aimed at (i) addressing major development issues (ii) creating a shared higher education programme for responding to the needs of local expertise; and (iii) establishing a knowledge community linked to the socio-economic sector. These objectives would be achieved through scientific research, training programmes, sharing of best practices, resource generation and academia-socioeconomic linkages. Key outputs so far include 54 fellows (44 PhD and 8 MSc); 9 regional research programmes; 135 outreaches; 26 scientific papers in Web of Science; 10 thematic workshops and over 30 international workshops. Areas of impact achieved include: the creation of business Incubators; the organization of training sessions; the creation of training programmes; the initiation of several calls for proposals; and the generation of over 4 Million euros in project financing. Important events for 2023 and partners were outlined. Prospects include collaborations with leading scientific actors in West Africa, multi-disciplinary/ multi-actor approach at the regional level, north-south partnerships, modern infrastructure and equipment, and diaspora relations. Under collaborations, there is advocacy with the European Union (EU) within the framework of the EU/African Union Summit; joint proposals under the Erasmus+ Programme and joint events both at the regional and international levels.

PASET-Regional Scholarship and Innovation Fund (RSIF)

Update

36. The RSIF initiative focus on building sustainable doctoral training research and innovation ecosystems for development in Africa, with particular attention to science, females, and disadvantaged groups was highlighted. Areas of intervention include scholarships, research and innovation grants, and an endowment funds for sustainability beyond the current project end dates (December 2023 for First ACE Impact and June 2024 for Second ACE Impact). Beneficiary students spend between 6 to 24 months at an advanced institution for access to cutting-edge facilities and mentorship. To date, 291 PhD scholarships have been awarded to 4 cohorts of students in 15 African host institutions and 22 international partner universities, and over USD 3.2 million spent on 44 research and innovation grants to 7 sub-Saharan countries. About USD 3.1 million (26%) of the funds committed by ACE Impact countries (Benin, Burkina Faso, Ghana, Nigeria and Senegal), have been received. Nigeria just processed its first disbursement of US\$904,000 following delays with lifting disbursement conditions, and the programme is on course in Burkina Faso in spite of recent political challenges. Of the 120 students being sponsored by the ACE Impact countries, 111 are hosted at ACE Impact centres pursuing programmes in *ICT, Energy, Food Security/ Agribusiness, Mining, Minerals and Material Science*, and *Climate Change*. A total of 97 publications have been produced by RSIF students in African host institutions. Nine (9) of the Cohort 1 students have completed their programmes with some winning travel grants and research awards. To date committed funds from African countries (Benin, Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Kenya,

Mozambique, Nigeria, Rwanda, Senegal), South Korea, the EU and WB total USD 54.7 million and more funds are expected from other sources. Countries were encouraged to provide more opportunities for students to contribute to national institutions and to consider additional direct contributions to RSIF. Key next steps included inviting non-PASET countries to join the initiative; discussing with countries and WB how to align project end dates and student completion; inviting member countries to the upcoming PASET governance meetings in Kigali, Rwanda (January 2023); and inviting all ACE impact countries to the next RSIF Conference planned for Dakar, Senegal.

Discussions

37. In discussion, Nigeria raised concerns about: (i) the availability of funds and modalities for funds transfer after the ACE Impact Project ends; and (ii) the fate of RSIF students who will complete their programmes after 2025 and measures to ensure RSIF graduates stay within Africa. Nigeria also sought clarification on the percentage of non-nationals to benefit from country contributions. Ghana reiterated the question on the quota of non-national beneficiaries and sought clarification on what happens to uncommitted and undisbursed funds after the project closure.
38. In terms of the implications after the closure of the RSIF project, it was explained that initially the project was to end in June 2024 but it was extended to cater to similar concerns. Currently, there is a big resource mobilisation drive including the establishment of an endowment fund. The latter process had significant delays so it has not generated sufficient funds to run the programme. Discussions are ongoing with financiers, and it is planned for all students to complete their programs by 2028. Countries may be required to make administrative payments to cover overheads for the extra time after project closure. Alternatively, and as a last resort, the programme may be handed over to the universities to manage the remaining students. Regarding the quota of nationals versus non-nationals, it was clarified that 80% of funds support national students while 20% caters for non-nationals. No country is short-changed as the countries benefit from each other. The integration of the RSIF into the ACE Impact project is to ensure that the graduates stay on the continent. Regular student conferences and other fora also help to anchor the students and this approach has been successful until now. On committed versus received funds, it was noted that funds are released per the work plan and the remaining funds are with the financiers while country contributions come directly to icipe (regional facilitating unit for the RSIF). In the case of Nigeria, an extension is being discussed to ensure that the RSIF aligns with the ACE Impact Project and that funds are available for the former. It was explained that the approach of having one project fund another is not typical and so there is need to figure out how best to handle this situation especially if the ACE Impact Project is not extended.

Key Decision/Resolution

- **WB to work out modalities to ensure continuity of the PASET-RSIF scheme especially should Project extension not be granted**

Session with Centre Leaders

39. **Nigeria** (ACEPHAP/ Focal Point) cited interruptions to the academic schedule due to strike actions, also noting its adverse effect on the recruitment of regional students. Digital education was proposed as a solution – it would allow learning and teaching to continue remotely. The late disbursement of project funds meant that implementation was only possible through pre-financing. Centres that could not prefinance therefore suffered. The security situation in-country is also unattractive for regional students while increasing inflation rates have required adjustments to work plan budgets and infrastructure milestones. Cash flow and rising exchange rates are also significant challenges. Additionally, frequent and inconsistent financial policies at the central bank level have affected disbursement and cash flows. Going forward, what measures to help circumvent these? Should investment in digital education be increased? The absence of financial motivation for project functionaries is also a challenge as their participation in the project involves additional responsibilities beyond their primary functions. Questions were raised on how lessons learned will inform subsequent projects. There were also concerns about the low or total absence of intra-WB project collaboration. Although there are many WB health projects in Nigeria, there is no collaboration between these and the ACE Impact health centres, a situation that

does not augur well for sustainability. There should be more effort at the WB level to facilitate this kind of cooperation. Without an extension, project activities under accreditation and infrastructure risk not being completed. A 24-month extension should be considered. It was also recommended that expertise could be procured across countries.

40. **Togo** (CERSA) highlighted cash flow challenges and observed that given the absence of a funds advance mechanism at the WB level, and the fact that disbursement is triggered by results, it would be helpful if the respective countries could advance funds for project implementation against a refund once disbursements are received. Togo previously had procurement challenges, but these were resolved with the help of the WB.
41. **Niger** (MS4SSA) noted all its 3 centres were at 0% under infrastructure (DLR 4.3) due to procurement-related challenges and called on the government to fast-track the related processes. It was emphasised that the project is assessed not only at centre level but also at the national level and the challenge affects both fund utilisation and project implementation. Under accreditation, it was observed that because all the steps are linked, the challenge with national accreditation is affecting progress. The Government of Niger was called upon to facilitate processes at the national level. All 3 centres are new and so there is no renewed experienced centre to learn from. The centres would benefit from additional assistance from the AAU/WB project teams to complement the efforts of the sector ministry particularly regarding procurement, accreditation and the supervision of doctoral students.
42. **Djibouti** (CEALT/ PSC Member) reported challenges with revenue generated because it goes to the host institution and not directly to the centre. Suggestions were made to increase the rounds of results verification per year to increase disbursements and address cash flow problems. As new centres with no prior experience, it took some time to understand and adjust to the project resulting in some delays. An extension would be necessary to ensure all activities are completed. Infrastructure-related activities have suffered some delays because of the slowness of some procurement processes. Djibouti also noted the need for a support policy to ensure assistance from the sector ministry. It was suggested that AAU intervenes to facilitate the implementation of infrastructure-related activities.
43. **Guinea** raised issues regarding the bureaucracy in national procurement processes and attendant delays in project implementation and asked for the WB's intervention. Changes in leadership at the sector level, in this case, 4 times successively within the space of 18 months, have also contributed to delays. It was observed that while actors may change, the policies and mechanisms should remain the same. It was suggested that the WB discusses with the governments to stabilise the mechanisms as the problems are essentially due to bureaucracy. They asked for assistance to accelerate project implementation and use up the project funds. Procurement challenges have had a negative effect on fund utilisation. It was proposed that the WB should address the procurement issues on a case-by-case basis and measures should be put in place to facilitate the implementation of project activities should the extension be granted.
44. **Côte d'Ivoire** reported that with the intervention of the AFD working together with the National Review Committee (NRC) and the Ministry of Finance, all Ivorian centres now enjoy some tax exemptions. It was noted there had been challenges with disbursement and fund utilisation at country level but this has been partially resolved following meetings between the NRC and the agreement among all accountants associated with the project on some concessions to facilitate disbursements. Essentially, the project budget was integrated into the national budget and a process was agreed on to fast-track payments. On national accreditation, it was proposed that with the approval of the WB and AAU, countries that have no national accreditation agencies could use the agencies in other countries. This would promote the sharing of skills and competencies not only among countries but also among centres.
45. **Senegal** noted all centres have had procurement challenges at one time or the other and noted a solution was to recruit procurement specialists on a temporary or permanent basis, with the approval of the WB.

On the project extension, there was a reminder to the WB that the project funds are within a global portfolio, and as such specific country situations should be taken into account when deciding on the extension decision.

46. **Gambia** noted they have a peculiar situation given that they started off as a buyer of services under ACE I. Given the earlier engagement with the WB under ACE I, procurement issues had been largely sorted out. WB has been very helpful with consistent monthly meetings to boost performance. These monthly meetings are scheduled to continue in 2023.
47. WB noted the interaction is also for experience-sharing on issues relating to security, sustainability, and procurement. On cash flow issues, the WB agreed to review the arrangements and explore the possibility, particularly with respect to non-student results. It noted that the results verification process is very engaging. Currently, disbursement letters are being dispatched and it is planned to send out another set by end of January 2023. There are however concerns about low fund utilisation rates (funds spent over total funds allocated) for some centres, partly because of procurement challenges. The AAU committed to verifying all results that do not need the intervention of third parties to allow for a second round of disbursements.
48. Responding to procurement challenges, the WB Procurement Specialist noted substantial improvements going forward. Sessions are being held to address the issues raised in collaboration with the AAU Procurement Specialist. Procurement audits have been undertaken which identified some of the issues raised. These and corresponding solutions/ guidance will be shared with centres. One-on-one sessions are also planned to address centre-specific challenges. Essentially the challenges relate to low capacity and unnecessary bureaucracy at the government level. In-depth reviews on a case-by-case basis are planned. It was suggested to hold similar sessions to address environmental and social safeguards challenges.
49. In discussion, Togo suggested effort should be made to harmonise the salary of the specialists under the project to address the problem of project staff leaving for greener pastures. Niger reported losing both their finance and internal auditors to higher-paying WB jobs although the salaries are harmonised. In both cases, the WB had provided a “no objection”. It was suggested that for the success of the project, the WB should reconsider endorsing such resignations. Questions were raised about the WB policies on remuneration for specialists.
50. The WB applauded the proposal on helping other centres or countries noting this is in line with the spirit of the project as a regional initiative. Interested parties should liaise with the Bank for support and to facilitate this process. The WB reported increasing requests for collaboration with the ACE Impact Project. With regard to staff turnover, it was noted that in some instances, the staff concerned left for reasons other than higher remuneration. There have been reports of staff being denied access to the client connection portal. It is critical that affected centres find out the real reason why the staff disengaged. On fund reduction, the WB assured that the decisions will be reviewed by December 2022 based on updated performance data. The procurement and safeguards issues will be addressed at dedicated sessions during the regional workshop. Additionally, the WB and AAU will take advantage of supervision missions in early 2023 to address related issues.

Key Decisions/Resolutions

- **WB to put in place measures to encourage/ promote collaboration between WB-funded projects at country level and the relevant ACE Impact centres**
- **WB to hold further conversations with Niger to better understand their procurement and staffing challenges**
- **AAU to intervene to facilitate infrastructure-related activities**
- **WB/AAU to address procurement challenges on a case-by-case basis**

MINUTES OF THE EIGHTH PROJECT STEERING COMMITTEE MEETING (Representative Level)
November 14, 2022
Banjul, The Gambia

CHAIR: DR. YUSUPHA TOUREY

Overview

1. The Project Steering Committee (PSC) meeting began at 15:00 GMT to further discuss matters arising from the Ministerial discussions and receive updates on the activities of the individual national review committees.

Review and Adoption of Minutes of the Seventh PSC Meeting:

2. The Chair indicated that the minutes of the 7th PSC meeting had already been shared by email with the Committee for feedback and called for additional comments. Subsequently, the minutes were adopted subject to the following amendment:
 - Paragraph 29 (Line 3) of the French version: Replace “troubles” with “changement” so the sentence reads “... changements politiques dans des pays comme le Burkina Faso et la Guinée”.

Roundtable Discussions on National Review Meetings

3. **Benin** reported that CEA-SMIA’s performance was commendable which is not surprising given that it is a renewed centre. To address procurement challenges, a meeting was held on August 5 with the university rector in attendance where it was agreed to hire another procurement specialist who would be the substantive officer going forward. This contract is currently being signed. It is expected that the performance of the other 2 centres (2CEA and CoE_EIE) would improve given that procurement challenges were cited as the reason for the current low performance. It was also agreed to put in place a regular monitoring schedule to allow for early detection and resolution of challenges. The meeting also agreed on the distribution of the unallocated funds.
4. **Burkina Faso** organised its meeting in June 2022 under the chairmanship of the Secretary General of the Ministry of Higher Education. Representatives from the Ministries of Economy and Finance were also present. Several issues were discussed including procurement-related challenges, low fund utilization rates, low disbursement rates, low number of research publications, and slow progress with entrepreneurship and innovation activities. In addition, the meeting reviewed and approved the annual work plans and commissioned an audit whose report was shared with the WB. The Committee also participated in joint programmes by the centres. The committee agreed to meet next in December 2022.
5. **Côte d'Ivoire** reported that the AFD has continued to work together with the National Review Committee (NRC) and the Ministry of Finance to support the project. The issues discussed at the previous meeting relate to the verification process for fiduciary results of the centers, low disbursement rates, and low fund utilisation rates. It was requested that the AAU be present as well in future meetings. The discussions at the next meeting will be focused on the distribution of the country’s unallocated funds.
6. **Djibouti** reported that their previous national committee meeting discussed several challenges, including issues with procurement, delays with civil works, and challenges with several indicators linked to a strong PhD presence such as research publications. Despite its low performance, there is evidence of moderate improvement in several project activities including the launch of a second call for research proposals, the accreditation of certain master’s programs, and ongoing recruitment of regional students.
7. **Gambia** organised 2 meetings over the reporting period (with the most recent meeting occurring in August 2022) to review the progress of the project. At the meeting, they agreed on the Terms of Reference for the recruitment of new officers (including a project manager, a monitoring and evaluation officer and other staff to complement the team) for the implementation unit following a “No Objection” from the WB. They also made decisions regarding the construction of the university and reviewed

progress regarding the transformation of the Gambia Technical Training Institute (GTTI) into the University of Science, Engineering and Technology (USET). The contract for the construction of the university is at an advanced stage and the bidding process is underway. Collaboration meetings are planned to ensure proper leadership of the centre.

8. **Ghana** observed it has very close relations with all 9 centres. Recent activities include the procurement of communications equipment to facilitate the coordination and oversight activities of the national review committee. As evident in the AAU and WB updates, all 9 centres are performing creditably on all counts - disbursement, implementation and achievement of disbursement-linked indicators (DLIs) and there has been progress since the last reporting. Areas of strong performance include external revenue, research publication and progress towards development impact. There are however some areas of concern regarding performance under internships where placement for biomedical students has been a challenge. The achievements under institutional accreditation and institutional regional strategies are lagging and would need improvement. Ghana would want a no-cost extension but currently is operating a “no extension” mindset and preparations towards project closure are underway.
9. **Guinea** noted that its national review committee was formalised following the last PSC meeting. Members who had left had to be replaced. A meeting is scheduled for later after the current PSC meeting. The major challenge for the 2 centers continues to be procurement, and it was reported that the processing of procurement documents is very time-consuming on the side of the Ministry of Finance and Economic Planning. It was agreed to discuss procurement-specific solutions at the various procurement sessions and clinics over the course of the workshop.
10. **Niger** held two national steering committee meetings in the reporting period, one in early September and one in early November. These meetings discussed the current challenges related to staffing, research publications, PhD enrollments, and international accreditation. Niger noted the generally low performance of its 3 centres and observed that, although the national average is low, the centers are not equal and their performance varies. They acknowledged the potential USD 1 million reduction for CERPP to ensure full use of the funds by the close of the project and observed that the latter decision had been based on the performance at the last PSC in Benin. Meetings had been held with the ministry to discuss the reasons and associated challenges and subsequently, the Director of Public Procurement confirmed his readiness to support the centres. Two officers (Finance and Procurement) have resigned and would need to be replaced. Against this background, Niger would need an extension to allow its centres complete their activities and earn the corresponding allocated funds. It was noted that this is the first time the University of Niger is benefitting from WB funding – the centres are therefore on a learning curve.
11. **Nigeria** reported that its national review meetings are usually held a month before each PSC meeting. The last meeting discussed the status of the projects, achievements, and challenges. Generally, there has been significant progress since the last review. Local experts have been hired to partner with the AAU subject-matter experts and this is helping with the project implementation progress and helping to resolve local challenges. Additional centres of excellence in Procurement, Social Safeguards and other areas have been set up with funding from the WB and the Tertiary Education Trust Fund. The extra centres are hosted within ACE Impact host universities, allowing for cross-fertilisation. Significant progress has been made including (i) resolution of procurement bottlenecks; (ii) installation of digital education equipment, including management information systems and anti-plagiarism applications; (iii) development of a sexual harassment policy at the National Universities' Commission (NUC); (iv) organisation of workshops to build capacity in procurement, monitoring and evaluation, financial management and project management among others; and (v) significant progress on RSIF with icipe, including the first PASET disbursement in November of US\$904,000. There were challenges including the continuing impact of the 8-month strike action in Nigerian universities, increased agitation by project functionaries for additional financial incentives given their high workload, attrition of students, and internship placement difficulties. It was also noted that the inflationary pressure of the current market and issues with the exchange rate

have upset centre budgets and required adjustments to their annual work plans. However, the major issue has been the late take-off of the project in Nigeria. Projects have only been active for 11 months and so they cannot be said to be at mid-term. Performance is being assessed after less than one year into implementation, and so an extension of 24 months will be necessary to avoid the problem of abandoned projects. High-level site visits are planned for early 2023 to help resolve challenges on a case-by-case basis and the NUC is expected to launch a procurement audit for all centres (this had been postponed because of disbursement delays). Nigeria called for measures to minimise potential adverse effects of project closure, cautioning that achievement of the project goals could be adversely affected.

12. **Senegal** highlighted its achievements since the last PSC (including the increase of revenue generated and verified for AGIR). It noted, however, the slow implementation of institutional impact activities for UCAD given that funds are now being directed towards the construction of the new three-storey research complex. Progress on this construction is now expected to accelerate given that the necessary safeguard documentation is cleared.
13. **Togo** appreciated the WB and AAU for their hard work. They observed that there has been significant improvement since the last two PSC meetings despite challenges, key among which was the change in leadership for CERVIDA and staffing issues due to the resignation of accountants. Concerns were raised about the proposed fund reduction for CERME especially given the centre focuses on electricity which is a national priority. This will weaken the centre. Since the last PSC meeting in Benin, an acceleration plan had been developed and support missions undertaken by the assigned subject-matter expert. The mission was assured significant improvement by the next visit. The mid-term review (MTR) decisions would need to be discussed with the Togolese Government. The Government is committed to taking the necessary action to improve CERME's performance even if that would require a change of leadership as done in the case of CERVIDA. Togo proposed that CERME should be given some more time and then be re-assessed. Currently, meetings are held twice a month to track performance and prospects for improvement look very good.
14. Closing the meeting, Dr. Ekua Bentil announced that the WB is exploring the possibility of holding the 9th PSC Meeting and regional workshop in Morocco to take advantage of potential partnerships in the country and in the greater North Africa region. If this venue is not feasible, then other venues will be considered. Cote d'Ivoire, Djibouti, and Niger have offered to host. The actual dates for the events are yet to be confirmed but are expected to hold in May 2023.
15. Lastly, there was unanimous appreciation for the improvement of AAU's reporting, presentations, monitoring, and overall performance as compared to ACE I. The PSC members applauded the AAU and recommended that the team should be recognised for their excellent overall performance as the regional facilitation unit for the project.