

**MINUTES OF THE  
AFRICA CENTRES OF EXCELLENCE (ACE)  
SEVENTH PROJECT STEERING COMMITTEE (PSC) MEETING**

**16 November 2015**

**Hotel Azalai, Cotonou, Benin**

**MEMBERS PRESENT:**

- 1. Prof. Jean-Claude Codjia (Chair, Benin)**
- 2. Prof. Messanvi Gbeassor (Togo)**
- 3. Dr. Joshua Atah (Nigeria)**
- 4. Dr. Cherno Barry (Gambia)**
- 5. Dr. Emmanuel Barry (UEMOA)**
- 6. Prof. Fulgence Nindjin (Cote d'Ivoire)**
- 7. Prof. Marcel Fouda (Cameroon)**
- 8. Prof. Mohamed Salifu (Ghana)**

**MEMBERS ABSENT:**

- 1. Prof. Aminata Sall Diallo (Senegal)**
- 2. Prof. Salifou Ouiminga (Burkina Faso)**
- 3. Prof. Tewfik Nawar (Health)**
- 4. Dr. Didier Acouetey (Private Sector)**
- 5. Dr. Irene Annor-Frempong (Agriculture)**

**In attendance**

1. Mr. Andreas Blom
2. Ms. Himdat Bayusuf
3. Dr. Olatunde Adekola
4. Dr. Vincent Tanoe
5. Mrs. Eunice Ackwerh
6. Prof. Etienne Ehile
7. Prof. Jonathan Mba
8. Mr. Maxwell Amo-Hoyte
9. Mrs. Adeline Addy
10. Mr. Abednego Corletey
11. Ms. Gabrielle Hansen
12. Prof. Mamadou Diallo (STEM Expert)
13. Prof. Idris Assani (STEM Expert)
14. Dr. Michelle Niescierenko (Health Expert)
15. Prof. Raphael Wahome (Agriculture Expert)

## Introduction

1. The Seventh Steering Committee meeting of the Africa Centres of Excellence (ACE) Project was held at the Azalai Hotel de la Plage, Cotonou, Benin on November 16, 2015. The meeting was to review the progress of the project, discuss next steps and generally provide leadership for the success of the project. Specifically, the meeting discussed the following:
  - i. Project progress
  - ii. Status of Activities of the Regional Facilitating Unit (RFU)
  - iii. Status of National Review Activities
  - iv. Next Steps of the project
2. The agenda was adopted by common consensus and is attached as Annex 1.
3. Prof. Jean Claude Codjia, Chair of the meeting, welcomed all to Cotonou and extended wishes for fruitful discussions. Prof. Etienne Ehilé in his welcome remarks noted that in spite of earlier challenges the project was now on course following disbursement of funds and the technical support of experts. He noted also the contribution of earlier meetings and workshops to the successful take-off of the project. On her part, Ms. Himdat Bayusuf, World Bank (WB) Representative informed the Committee that the Bank had worked hard to ensure the Centers achieved effectiveness and received their first disbursements. Now that disbursement has been achieved, the focus has shifted to support implementation and monitoring achievement of results.

## Agenda Item I Project Progress

ACE Project Activities: For the review period, May 2015 to November 2015, the Project Coordinator reported that individual ACEs initiated various project activities including a workshop for all the Agriculture ACEs organized by the West African Centre for Crop Improvement (WACCI) and National Review Committee meetings in Benin, Ghana and Senegal. In addition, the Centre of Excellence in Reproductive Health Innovation (CERHI) at the University of Benin, Nigeria plans to hold the inaugural meeting of its International Advisory Board on December 1, 2015. Additional financing was secured for Côte d'Ivoire and three new ACEs on Climate Change (Université Félix Houphouët Boigny), Mining and Mining Environment (Institut National Polytechnique Felix Houphouët-Boigny) and Statistics (Ecole Nationale Supérieure de Statistique et d'Économie Appliquée) were selected through a competitive and transparent process. Initially, the proposal for the Centre on mining did not meet the minimum cut-off mark but given the critical importance of the sector, a resubmission was allowed and after revisions, an improved version of the proposal was approved. The total number of ACEs now stands at 22.

4. Progress towards the objectives of the project and intermediate indicators: The AAU M&E Expert presented a summary of preliminary and yet to be verified project results showing progress towards achievement of targets set for performance indicators. Generally, performance was above average for seven indicators measuring regionality, outreach, training and research quality, and governance. The number of project meetings held, quantity of research publications and the number of partnerships recorded a high performance of 101%, 80% and 66% respectively. Performance was however not encouraging with respect to generation of external revenue, student and faculty internships, and accreditation.

5. The Progress on the key indicators by the ACEs: The ACEs showed progress towards achieving the Key Project Indicators (KPIs) despite different effectiveness and receipt of first disbursement (updated as of November 25, 2015):
  - 2409 students enrolled in either masters or PhD courses, of which 967 are regional students.
  - A number of centers have initiated the steps for accreditation and gap assessment with the majority still identifying potential agencies for international accreditation.
  - Some of the centers have also placed at least 171 students and faculty in internship in companies under faculty exchanges.
  - On externally generated funds, the ACEs have generated \$9.8 million in external funds.
6. The report however noted that the results were yet to be verified. Challenges regarding monitoring and evaluation were also highlighted and included delays in submission of results and inadequate monitoring at some centres. To resolve these, the RFU proposed to provide technical assistance where necessary, introduce a quarterly reporting schedule and step up follow up efforts. Annex X contains the results framework for the project overall.
7. The members congratulated the AAU for the presentation and highlighted the importance of results reporting, analysis and communication. The M&E of the project is just being set up, and this work is critical to achieve the project objectives. The following decisions were made regarding monitoring and evaluation:
  - The AAU with support from the World Bank would ensure all ACEs report close to complete information on all indicators.
  - The AAU with support from the World Bank would develop an institutional standard format for documenting the progress the ACEs. Hence, each ACE would receive a brief illustration of its performance. The briefs would allow for comparison over time, comparison towards targets, and comparison towards project and country average. *A template for one ACE would be shared by December 20, 2015, by AAU, and the ACEs would receive a brief by January 31, 2016.*
  - These institutional performance briefs should be seen as a constructive manner for evaluating performance, not as a ranking of performance. It was well understood that each Center of Excellence has its particular background with idiosyncratic strengths and weaknesses. Some have strong background for attracting regional students, others have advantages in revenue generation while some Centers have just been formed. This diverse background should be recognized and the most important aspects is improvement made by each ACE during the project implementation period.
  - Steps should be taken to ensure that all ACEs have a common understanding of the performance indicators and reporting requirements for the project.
  - Indicators should continue to be submitted on a semi-annual basis. Most results would not change substantially from one quarter to the next. That is, student enrolment is normally done on a semester if not annual basis and in this case quarterly reporting may not show substantive differences from one quarter to the next. A quarterly reporting basis would therefore tend to create additional reporting burden while not leading to more timely decision making.

8. Attribution of the education and research output to the project: Generally, it was understood that the ACEs have been selected based upon existing work, capacity, and other technical and financial partners. It is therefore difficult to fully or even partially attribute the outcome of the ACEs in terms of students, new programs, and research uniquely to the ACE project. In terms of recognition of results for disbursement, the World Bank informed the ACEs and governments during the negotiations that results would count from February 2014 even though most of the ACEs had their project approved after this date. This was decided in order for ACEs to be encouraged to start new programs, publications, accreditation, enrolment of students etc., and also to recognize that the project is supporting already established centers.
9. Progress on disbursement: The World Bank reported that 19 out of 22 ACEs and the RFU had received funding to the tune of over USD 15 Million representing 14% of the total funding earmarked for the project. Annex 4 presents a table of disbursements from the World Bank per country.

## **Agenda Item II RFU Activities**

10. Capacity Building for Revenue Generation: As part of efforts to ensure sustainability of the Centers of Excellence, training in revenue generation was organized between March and November 2015, for ACEs in all countries except Burkina Faso, Nigeria and Côte d'Ivoire.
11. The Revenue Generation Workshops will be held for the 10 Nigerian ACEs in February 2016.
12. Selection of consultancies for bibliometrical indicators and for DLI verification of other ACE level results: Elsevier has been engaged to provide the relevant services and is set to sign a contract with the AAU. A second call for expression of interest was issued for DLI verification and seven firms have so far indicated interest. Six of the firms were shortlisted and requested to submit their proposals. Given that the DLI verification through the firm to be contracted is a requirement for all disbursements, the Steering Committee agreed that a timely selection and verification is a high priority task for the Regional Facilitation Unit (AAU).
13. In response to comments, it was clarified that all consultancy services are open to firms and consultants from all countries including participating countries. Further, *it was agreed that members of the Steering Committee and government Focal Points will be copied on subsequent Requests for Expression of Interest.*
14. On the coverage of Elsevier bibliometrical/citation database: There was a concern that the consultancy with Elsevier citation database would imply that Centers of Excellence must publish in Elsevier managed journals. This concern has also been raised by Center faculty. Importantly, the Elsevier Scopus Database is a citation database and covers broadly and substantially beyond Elsevier's own journals. In addition, there is in the proposed contract the opportunity to add other recognized journals, such as specific African journals. *AAU will contact Elsevier to share the list of journals covered in the proposed scopus database with all ACEs.*
15. 2016 Activities: Activities planned for the year 2016 include technical support to the ACEs for monitoring and evaluation, capacity building in revenue generation, collaboration with regional bodies, supervision missions to the ACEs, review of implementation plans for CDI and

verification of results. The full presentation on AAU's report on activities undertaken and planned is in Annex.

16. Execution of Budget for the RFU for 2015 and Proposed budget for 2016: The AAU Director of Finance noted that the project had been audited and has received an unqualified report. Total income for the period ending June 2014 was USD3,995,927 while expenditure for the same period was USD3,643,654 leaving an excess of USD352,273. The AAU Director of Finance explained that given delays in achieving effectiveness, some Centre activities were held up hence the positive balance. **Annex X,Y, Z are the Financial Audit, Spending report and Budget for 2015, and Proposed budget for 2016.**
17. Members commended the RFU for good management. The Steering Committee recommended that the Audited Report, Spending report for 2015 and the approved budget for 2016 be posted online for information and to promote transparency.
18. The budget for the year 2016 was also presented and covered costs related to project activities, support to the RFU, capacity building, monitoring and evaluation, and other administrative items. The proposed budget totaled USD1,209,734. AAU explained that the budget for the year 2016 is lower because the 2015 budget covered a period of eighteen months while the 2016 covers only twelve months.
19. The following budget issues were subsequently discussed and decisions made:
  - Supporting national review meetings. One of the under-utilized budget lines was for AAU financing of national review meetings. The SC Member representing The Gambia requested for support towards its national review meetings and this was granted. There was general agreement on the importance of monitoring and evaluation, and other supervision activities at the national and institutional levels. Members from Ghana and Cote d'Ivoire requested provision to be made in the 2016 budget for minor specific governmental supervision activities, such as a few visits. The World Bank explained that the case of Ghana and Cote d'Ivoire were special because they have 3 ACEs, but no national IDA provided for governmental supervision, while the majority of the participating governments have only 1 ACE or national IDA for governmental supervision (in the case of Senegal through a separate project). Any potential support would have to be audited which is why it is routed through the AAU. It was recommended that the two countries make requests to their ministries of education for this support. The World Bank would support this request for counterpart funds. Alternatively, it could be explored with the AAU whether small travel costs associated with national supervision activities could be supported via the RFU budget.
  - Support to the Regional Agenda for Higher Education. The UEMOA steering committee member proposed that the RFU budget and activity plan should include a specific activity to promote expansion and harmonization of quality assurance of higher education in the UEMOA and ECOWAS areas. There was a general recognition of the importance of the proposed activity. However, there was a need to prepare a more specific proposal and a consideration of the alternative regional priorities for higher education that could be supported. Further, the overall budget envelop would need to be considered. *In preparation for the next Steering Committee meeting, the RFU will prepare a proposal regarding support to specific and strategic activities to increase*

*regional higher education*. Such proposal should also gain the support from the majority of the regional bodies for the project.

- Actual charges for running costs would follow the agreement made with the World Bank that charges for utilities (Fuel for generator, electricity, and water) and would amount to maximum, 20 percent of total invoice to AAU. Further, AAU was requested to separate fuel into fuel for vehicles and fuel for generators.
  - Actual staff time charges to the project would continue to follow actual time used on the project as evidenced by monthly time sheets shared with the World Bank.
  - A number of RFU activities and their budget would be specified during the year. This refers to the following activities: Monitoring and Supervision missions to ACEs, Support to ECOWAS and UEMOA, Capacity building of ACEs, Seminars/CONFAB, Capacity building of AAU, Evaluation and Quality Assurance, intervention tasks/policy studies, and Contingency. Once specified, the estimate budget for the specific activity would be shared with the World Bank and/or the Steering Committee.
  - The vehicle hire would follow standard form of charges. As previously agreed, if a detailed cost-benefit calculation shows that purchase of a vehicle would be more economical, then a vehicle could be procured.
  - *The AAU was requested to report back on the website improvement or development given a similar charge for website development was made in the previous year.*
  - *The World Bank requested AAU to prepare a budget for the RFU till the estimated end of the project in December 2018 with a contingency for a possible one (1) year extension within the existing budget envelop. This budget envelop is the maximum of the existing grant given to AAU of SDR 3.3 million. The draft multi-annual budget would be presented at the next Steering Committee meeting.*
20. In the absence of further comment, the budget for the year 2016 was approved.
21. Evaluation of the 3<sup>rd</sup> ACE workshop in Banjul in May 2015: The Project Coordinator presented the results of the evaluation of the 3<sup>rd</sup> ACE Project Workshop held in May 2015 in the Gambia. Response rate was an encouraging 94% of which 77% were from the ACEs as expected. The workshop was scored very high on overall organization while efficiency of travel recorded the lowest score. Satisfaction with the overall facilitation by both the World Bank and AAU was high.
22. Suggestions offered for a better workshop included the need for orientation of all project stakeholders on World Bank procurement and other procedures; focus on technical aspects of project implementation that responds to perceived needs of the ACEs; effective interpretation; to provide workshop documents to participants on pen drives after the event; for ACEs to have autonomy to reduce bureaucratic bottlenecks; and to pay stipends to ACE teams to motivate them.
23. The report also recommended that at subsequent workshops evaluation should be done on site and not after the event, and also more francophone participants should be encouraged to complete the online survey.
24. The Steering Committee (SC) member from The Gambia, noted that the success of the Banjul Workshop was partially because of the experience gained from the two earlier meetings.

25. While the satisfactory implementation of the Banjul Workshop was commended, it was suggested that for subsequent workshop surveys, participants should be asked to give reasons for their positive evaluation. The Project Coordinator noted that following disbursement of funds to most of the ACEs, satisfaction scores were expected to go up at the next workshop.
26. Regarding organization of the Steering Committee meetings, a member observed that the documents for the current meeting were received late but the Project Coordinator explained that this was partly due to time spent on translation. The latter also called on the SC to provide feedback promptly when documents are sent to them for review so that they can be finalized in good time.
27. In reaction to suggestions from the workshop survey respondents:
- “ACEs should be autonomous”. It was pointed out that this could negatively affect the university ownership of the Centres and jeopardize their sustainability after the project funding ends. The ACEs’ operations should fit into the general vision of the parent university.
  - “payment of stipends to motivate the ACE teams”. It was clarified during the PSC meeting that this would go against the financial constraint of the World Bank to provide monetary bonuses/rewards in the project. However, project team members can be sponsored to workshops, conferences, seminars to present scientific papers emanating from their ACE project activities.
  - “Provision of workshop documents on flash drives to participants”. *It was agreed that the AAU would in addition promptly upload all the workshop documents to the project website after the event.*
  - “2 day duration of the workshop compared to 3 days”. Some participants were of the opinion that the 3-day duration of the workshop should be reduced to 2 days. It was agreed that the current duration should be maintained because a number of things on M&E, Procurement, Financial Management, as well as on the status of each ACE, need to be discussed.
28. Importance of scientific and educational oversight on impact, relevance and quality: The Scientific experts of the project raised concerns about oversight of the scientific quality of the project. Administratively, a lot had been done to assure the success of the projects but this was not the case with regard to scientific quality. Further, the results-based financing focused primarily on quantitative results that only to a certain extent require scientific excellence, quality, relevance and impact. It was recommended that more intentional efforts were needed to ensure that the ACEs work and project funding translate into quality and relevant higher education service provision and research.
29. There was general consensus on the need for scientific oversight for the ACEs. However, it was also agreed that the Centre leaders had to be responsible for ensuring that their research output is published in relevant and recognized journals. The World Bank, Experts and the AAU were tasked to discuss the framework for scientific supervision of the ACEs.
30. The World Bank explained the concern regarding the pertinence of the indicators that they do not indeed measure all the complex facets of quality and relevance but provide a measure for inference. It was suggested that with regard to research, the emphasis should be on the usefulness of the study rather than exclusively on the impact factor.

31. It was recommended to set up a scientific oversight mechanism that would assess the usefulness of the educational, research and outreach output of the ACEs. It was agreed that the RFU should engage the project's scientific and educational experts to suggest an appropriate mechanism based upon their experiences from elsewhere. That being said, the need for scientific oversight should not result in complicated reporting arrangements and overburden of the Centers of Excellence. A proposal would be presented by the next Steering Committee meeting.
32. The current staffing of the RFU was reviewed along with the ToRs for the proposed hire for a Project Officer: Prior to the meeting, the World Bank and the AAU had agreed to maintain the existing reporting structure for RFU. The specific terms of reference for the Project Officer was being worked out between the AAU and the World Bank in order to ensure a fit with the general project structure of AAU, the ToRs with the project Coordinator and the optimal functioning of the RFU. The Steering Committee agreed that the ACE Management structure at AAU should remain and that the RFU should hire a new Project Officer. The SC requested the AAU and the World Bank to agree to a final set of ToRs for the additional RFU team member and proceed with the hiring process.

### **Agenda Item III Status Updates from PSC Members**

33. **Nigeria:** The Member representing the NUC reported that the ACEs had received advance disbursements of USD7.4 Million and higher education courses had started in earnest. In addition to the National Project Performance and review Committee, an ACE Advisory Committee had been set up to address various issues including reviewing the academic standards for existing programmes and developing benchmarks for new programmes introduced under the ACE project. Following achievement of effectiveness, a post effectiveness workshop was held on 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> August 2015 with assistance from the World Bank Country Office to discuss communication, quality assurance and project management. The autonomy of centres was also addressed and it was agreed to institutionalize the centres to ensure sustainability beyond the World Bank funding. With regard to procurement it was noted that an agreement has been reached with the World Bank to use existing country procedures and structures. Also, each ACE would be allowed to use their existing external auditors to audit their accounts at the end of each financial year, as required by law in Nigeria. In order to ensure effective monitoring, more staff of the NUC had been assigned to the ACE project at no cost to the World Bank. The Representative of the National Universities Commission (NUC) informed the Steering Committee of the new Central Bank of Nigeria's regulations that prohibit withdrawals and cash deposits in foreign currency and noted the possible adverse effect on special drawing rights for the Nigerian ACEs because the disbursements to the ACEs can only be in Naira. He noted also that more stringent rules were likely to be introduced soon.
34. In addition, a project website with links to the AAU and a World Bank website will be launched by close of 2015. Other plans include visits to the ACEs by the new Minister of Education; orientation of journalists to facilitate reporting on the ACE initiative; and more close collaboration with the AAU. The Member raised concern about some ACE centres' overdependence on their centre leaders and implications for the success of the projects should the leaders retire or leave for one reason or the other. Another challenge raised was the new

treasury regulations that require public entities to bank only with the Central Bank and the attendant difficulties in accessing accounts.

- 35. Cameroon:** The ACE project had experienced a difficult start in Cameroon. This was partly because the Project was essentially an ECOWAS initiative and presented adaptation and governance related challenges. In addition, it appeared that only the Centre Leader had a good grasp of the project. More than twenty informal meetings were held to resolve the issues and arrive at some agreement. When these teething problems are resolved, formal meetings are planned and a website will be set up to promote transparency. Issues were raised regarding the definition and relevance of the project's performance indicators vis-à-vis the Centre's subject area. It was also noted that the university was by law not allowed to generate revenue so a separate commercial entity may have to be set up to fulfil that function.
- 36. Ghana:** Regular National Review Meeting have been held, the last being on November 11, 2015. Enrolment was on track and 2 Masters and 2 PhD programmes have been accredited by the National Accreditation Board. Revenue generation was well above the expected while regional participation was below the set targets. On research publication, clarity is needed regarding what was eligible under the project – is research funded fully or partially under the project? It was noted that the relevance of research publications in light of industry needs should be considered. Research and revenue generation is expected to increase. Given the substantial progress achieved, there were calls for the early start of results verification to ensure prompt disbursements and speedy implementation of project activities.
- 37. Togo:** Project activities had started in Togo. There had been a change in the Center Director of the CERSA ACE with the deputy center leader become the Center Leader. The ACE face difficult in attracting female students and in moving forward on the international accreditation due to the lack of an appropriate international accreditation agency. A National Review Committee meeting is under preparation and will be held subject to the availability of the Minister of Higher Education who will chair the meeting.
- 38. Gambia:** The Member representing The Gambia noted that project implementation had not gone as expected because of time constraints. A "no objection" was secured and negotiations carried out with the ACEs. Tuition fees, accommodation, cost of living and skill/ industry needs were considerations in determining which ACEs to purchase higher education services from. The National Review Committee has held regular meetings and this was possible because Sub-Committees could work in parallel. Students selected to go to Cameroon would leave for their programmes as soon as visas are secured. For some students, the opportunity had been lost because of the delays while for others negotiations were being carried out so students could start their courses in January 2016. It was noted that the majority of students would be taking courses at the Université Gaston Berger (CEA-MITIC). This arrangement became possible because of special arrangements to have the faculty deliver the courses in-country that is, in The Gambia. Details on the cost per student were also shared. The Member noted that given the success of the initiative, he hoped it would be possible to negotiate additional funding from the World Bank to scale up. He also recommended replication of the initiative in other countries of the sub-region. It was explained that measures had been put in place to ensure the students returned to the Gambia after their studies. All the contracts for the first call have been finalized and 141 students will be undertaking masters, PhD and short-term courses at the ACEs.

- 39. Benin:** In Benin, National Review Meetings were held every six months to take stock of activities and to plan for 2016 taking into consideration challenges encountered. It was planned to procure infrastructure for a library but procedural problems and political succession presented some difficulties. Communication was also a challenge and meant that students did not receive information on time. Other issues involved promoting interest in mathematics and the need for quality assurance systems. The ACE was ready to partner other universities in addressing these issues and would be discussing possible solutions at the national review meeting scheduled for December 2015.

#### **Agenda Item IV Next Steps for the Project**

- 40. Hosting of next PSC:** Based on preliminary discussion held, it was agreed that Ghana should host the next PSC meeting that would be held back-to-back with the ACE workshop. Tentative dates of May 16 – 20 were agreed and it was noted that the RFU (AAU) should coordinate to ensure the experts are on board.

#### **Closing**

- 41.** The Chair summarized the main discussion points emphasizing the need for a scientific committee to assure the quality of research; the need for clear definition of research that is relevant under the project; the importance of having monitoring and evaluation units in the ACEs; the need to ensure common understanding of performance and other parameters in the operational manual; and the need to be clear on when reports should be submitted.
- 42.** Additionally, he expressed the hope that Ghana would be willing and able to host the next meeting in May 2016, and thanked all present for their active participation.
- 43.** The meeting ended at 18:40.