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Conference Report
Rethinking Educational Research in African Contexts
First CERM-ESA International Conference
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Moi University, Eldoret, Kenya

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The first East and South African-German Centre of Excellence for Educational Research Methodologies and Management (CERM-ESA) international conference on *Rethinking Educational Research in African Contexts* took place within the scope of the official opening ceremony of CERM-ESA at Moi University, Eldoret, Kenya. Fifty delegates from the four other CERM-ESA partner universities—Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University (NMMU), South Africa; University of Dar es Salaam, Tanzania; University of Oldenburg (UOL), Germany; Uganda Management Institute—were joined by more than 50 participants from Kenya. The conference consisted of three sessions. First, an official inauguration of the Centre of Excellence, Moi University, with speakers from the host and partner universities, the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD), the Kenya Commission of University Education (CUE), and the governor of Uasin Gishu County. Second, three keynotes on issues of educational research and management in African contexts followed by plenary discussions, and third, a visit to a county school and interaction with its management, teachers, and learners.

In the first session, the speakers from Moi University—Acting Vice-Chancellor, Nathan Ogechi, Deputy Vice-Chancellor, Bob Wishitemi, and Dean of School of Education, Jonah Kindiki—elaborated on their vision of how the centre of excellence based at Moi University should contribute to relevant, solution-oriented educational research and management in the East and South African regions and beyond. The theme of the conference was motivated by the initiators and project leaders of CERM-ESA—Julius Tanui (Moi University), Paul Webb (NMMU), Karsten Speck and Bernd Siebenhüner (UOL), Proscovia Namubiru (Uganda Management Institute), and Eugenia Kafanabo (University of Dar es Salaam)—who explained that the centre of excellence not only provides a springboard for investigating methodologies and approaches that are both compatible and rooted in the African context, but also issues a challenge to African higher education institutions to adopt approaches that are critical to sustainable human development on the continent. Professor Emeritus Wolfgang Nitsch of UOL was honoured in absentia as one of the masterminds behind CERM-ESA and the driving force behind all cooperation activities with South and East African educational institutions at UOL. Nitsch's written message was read to the audience; he stressed the need to establish a culture of evidence-based or

research-responsive professional management practice in order to link education research and management, and to disseminate and apply relevant educational research effectively. Hence, he argued that the style of education research management that promotes social change is collaborative, inclusive, and participatory, that is, education administrators, school principals, school governing board members, teachers, cooperating artists, and vocational experts should all be partners in a system of participatory and research-responsive education management. Helmut Blumbach, director of DAAD's Nairobi office, Anne Nangulu of the Kenya Commission for University Education, and Uasin Gishu County Governor, Jackson Mandago, congratulated the initiators of CERM-ESA and emphasised the centre's responsibility to not only produce excellent graduates, but also to partner with the schools, teachers, and education managers in the region so that schools from preprimary to high school will benefit from the centre's activities.

In the second session, the keynote speakers elaborated on what makes education research and management in Africa special, and why Africanisation and decolonisation are crucial to better serve African societies. Catherine Odora Hoppers shared her experience of research in South African universities where she has identified changes in the content of academic offerings and in the paradigms of knowledge production towards including indigenous knowledge systems. In her view, rereading, rethinking, and reconceptualising academic content, knowledge production, and justice issues in a democratic dialogue will lead to a shared paradigm shift and to transformation. Julius Jwan, director of the Kenya Institute for Curriculum Development, spoke about transformational leadership as critical pathway to changing educational institutions. Transformational leadership provides intellectual direction within the organisation with the aim of empowering and supporting staff as partners in decision making. It also focuses on problem solving and the need for collaboration with stakeholders in order to be effective. Birgit Brock-Utne of Oslo University also spoke about the decolonisation of research in the African university. She referred to the *Narrative Study of Lives* approach (Coetzee, Elliker, & Rau, 2013) as a way to explore ways to listen to "ordinary people" that is applicable all over Africa. On a more general note, she asserted that if knowledge was to be decolonised in the African university, one could not avoid the difficult and not much appreciated question: In which language should the knowledge be conveyed?

During the third session of the conference, Moi University School of Education staff members took all the delegates to a secondary school in a rural area of Uasin Gishu. Peris Kosgei, principal, and the school management board introduced the school to the visitors, and the principal recalled how the school had changed since she began working there some years back. One of the impressive examples she gave as to how things can be changed, even in a neglected sub-county school, was that of gender. Just a few years earlier, only 10–20% of the learners in each of her classes were girls; boys received preferential treatment with regards to education. Together with the community, Kosgei initiated a process to increase the numbers of girls in her school and successfully managed to reach the situation in which girls now make up 50% of the school's population—and, in recent years, perform better than their boy peers in terms of achievement. She noted that one of the crucial aspects of leadership in the change process was her serving as rare role model for girls in a region where most educational leadership positions are held by men.

In conclusion, we can say that the first CERM-ESA international conference contributed to promoting educational research for social change on various levels, namely:

- All contributions were framed by questions around rethinking educational research, especially in African contexts, and how it can become more relevant to African societies.
- The international delegates were offered a perspective for future collaborative educational research within the ambit of the CERM-ESA project.

- The conference included, and transferred, knowledge to external stakeholders from policy making, curriculum development, and county government.
- It did not remain on the university campus but engaged with teachers, school managers, and learners in a real-life school context where delegates could listen to their needs and expectations and link theoretical deliberations with practical experience—something which is absolutely essential for socially relevant and solution-oriented research.

References

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