

(Dis)Engagement of Eritrean Diaspora Academics with their Country of Origin

Samson Tsegay

Anglia Ruskin University, Cambridge, United Kingdom

Research Domains

Higher Education policy (HEP)

Abstract

Through the lens of social network theory and informed by document analysis and semi-structured interviews, this paper explores Eritrean diaspora academics' (dis)engagement with their country of origin. I argue that there is an interplay between migration and development. Thousands of youth, including those with higher education qualifications, have left the country due to unfavourable economic and political situations. Migration has deprived many sectors, particularly higher education, of their skilled human resources. Hence, the government of Eritrea has been looking for ways to engage the diaspora academics to support the country's higher education institutions. It created the Eritrean Diaspora Institute to coordinate the diaspora collaboration by liaising with Eritrean embassies overseas. The findings show that most Eritrean diaspora academics have a strong country of origin connection, and want to help the country they call "home". However, many of them declined the government's initiative due to personal, organisational and political reasons.

Full paper

1. Introduction

Education plays a vital role in developing a skill for employment and global citizenship, which greatly contribute to national and global developments (Torres, 1998). Similarly, the higher education policy of the Government of Eritrea is to expand access and maintain its quality so that citizens can be able to fully participate in the civic, cultural, political, social and economic affairs of their nation and the world (Ministry of Education, 2012). Accordingly, higher education institutions (HEIs) in Eritrea are expected to nurture qualified graduates to respond to the existing world market and engage in rational and enlightened thinking to make the world a better place (Tsegay, 2016). However, the HEIs in Eritrea lack human and material resources (Tsegay et al., 2018). In particular, migration has deprived them of their skilled human resources. In line with this, the Eritrean government sought to engage Eritrean diaspora academics to achieve the educational objectives. The government argues that the diaspora academics can greatly contribute to advancing the quality of the Eritrean HEIs and their graduates. Nevertheless, there is a lack of research exploring the willingness of Eritrean diaspora academics to accept the government's initiative.

This paper aims to interrogate the reasons behind (dis)engagement of Eritrean diaspora academics with their country of origin. Through the social network theory and informed by document analysis and 12 semi-structured interviews, the paper investigates the research questions: why do Eritrean diaspora academics (dis)engage in Eritrean HEIs?

2. Methods and Data source

The study is qualitative in nature and adopts a phenomenological approach. Qualitative research has an unrivalled capacity to constitute compelling arguments about “how things work” in a particular context, and at the same time is capable of producing very well-founded “cross-contextual generalities” (Mason, 2002:1). The study draws on a phenomenological approach to explore the participants' experiences from their perspectives (Creswell, 2013).

Moreover, I employed interview and document analysis for data collection and thematic approach for data analysis. I conducted

semi-structured interviews with 12 Eritrean diaspora academics with at least a master's degree. I used semi-structured interviews to obtain enough information by making the research questions flexible and asking additional questions based on an interviewee's response (Bryman, 2008). Appropriate ethical principles were followed throughout the research.

3. Main Findings

The data collected for this paper indicates that Eritrean diaspora academics engage in the HEIs in Eritrea for three reasons: strong national connection, the need to pay back, and to fulfil their goals and ambitions. The diaspora academics are Eritreans who are born and raised abroad or migrated out of Eritrea for economic or political reasons. However, they have a strong connection to their homelands. Therefore, they want to help the country that most call 'home'. Moreover, those who migrated out of Eritrea argued that they want to pay back the people who helped them reach where they are. Many Eritrean diaspora academics also stated that they have unfulfilled goals and ambitions that they want to carry out in Eritrea. Such plans motivate them to open consultancy or other centres in Eritrea, which are mutually beneficial to the country and the diaspora academics.

On the other hand, another three themes emerged explaining the factors that hinder the engagement of Eritrean diaspora academics in the HEIs. They are unfavourable political environment, government ownership of the collaboration program and socio-economic responsibilities of the diaspora academics.

4. Significance of the study

This paper interrogates brain circulation issues that have been given relatively little attention by researchers. In particular, it analyses the reasons behind the (dis)engagement of Eritrean diaspora academics with their country of origin. Therefore, it contributes to a better understanding of the case under study, particularly the nexus of

migration and development, especially with regard to highly educated migrants from the Global South.

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