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‘Health Africa Exchange Can Hit You Like a Sack of Bricks’

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Internationalisation has been one of the core elements in development of universities of applied sciences. Lapland University of Applied Sciences (LUAS) among others has pursued international co-operation on various levels and enhanced capacity building significantly over time. The concept internationalisation refers to the process of developing the international activity of an institution and it can be framed as a means of improving the quality of education and research as well as serving larger social goals, bringing a positive contribution to society narrowing gaps between institutions, communities and countries. (Marinoni, Egron-Polak & Green 2019. Universityworldnews.com; Nokkala 2007, 26.)

Mobility, international and intercultural dimensions should be incorporated as natural elements in studies and work to give people global perspective. “Students graduating from Finnish higher education institutions should have the ability and willingness to be involved in international, multicultural environments and understand diversity, global challenges and the principles of a sustainable society.” (Grahn-Laasonen 2018. minedu.fi). The student, teacher, staff and researcher exchange has afforded many benefits to higher education. Through international and intercultural co-operation of students, LUAS has contributed to developing global citizens as well as altered every conceivable aspect of their lives and promoted the professional development of students and teachers.

A special example of long lasting (since 1994), international network accomplishment is Health Africa Development Cooperation Organization (HADCO), which is a non-governmental

organization (NGO). Health Africa Network comprises of eight Universities of Applied Sciences in the fields of Health Care, Social Work and Nutrition in Finland and two partner universities in Kenya and Uganda. Over the years this network co-operation has incorporated activities from various development projects (e.g. school meals, clean water, school health care services) to mobility (e.g. developing e-learning and nurse education) with the focus on global education services (The Sustainable Development Agenda 2030). Implementation of multi-professional and cross-disciplinary approach has been used in exchanges and it has promoted development of professional competencies, social work and health care practices in local communities for sustainable development. This co-operation has ultimately advanced teaching, learning, research and development in

the collaborative institutions and it has had a positive impact on even other emerging socio-economic needs in the surrounding communities. New ways have been developed to work with communities and in human activities linkages have been brought about so that those involved do not stand alone but share the best practices.



Image 1. Lunch break at Kibuuka Primary School in Uganda (Seppälä, M.).

Besides Erasmus + Global funding, the partner universities of applied sciences have supported Health Africa network co-operation and activities in various ways. Positive attitude towards student and staff mobility, in respect of time resources and economical support, has been crucially important in realization of network and student-centered goals. Our students and teachers in Kenya and Uganda have been following the target of human rights-based procedure in co-operation, the local development needs and systems introduced by representatives. In accordance with the resources the main focus has been on activities close to social- and healthcare work and human beings.

According to LUAS student feedback the partnership in Health Africa Network has exposed to different cultures and enhanced appreciation of human beings. They have identified increased international awareness and deeper engagement with global issues as an important benefit and increased international networking. Consequently their exchange and experience have greatly and positively challenged, nurtured and strengthened their professional service and improved graduate employability.

Each year International Services of Lapland UAS advertises the Health Africa exchange opportunities to students and staff in the health care and social services. The general goal between the organizations (Lapland UAS and Health Africa) is to maintain, to support and to develop co-operation between Uganda, Kenya and Finland. During the years of the co-operation, student exchange to Africa is ~640 and to Finland ~105 and staff exchange numbers are ~85/75.

The network chooses students on the basis of the application. About 8-10 students per the country/ term are chosen for the programme. Before the exchange, the Health Africa organization arranges two orientation days, and students go through the practical arrangements and all the matters which are related to safety and health. The duration of the practical training exchange is 90 days and during the training students will practice in 2-5 different training places.

After each practical trainee, the exchange students need to give feedback in SoleMOVE. This system has been designed to support the processes of the international exchange. Every student going abroad must fill in the SoleMOVE application. The SoleMOVE system is designed also for returning necessary forms after the exchange period, one of these is the feedback page. Students can choose if the anonymously given feedback is open for everyone to read.

We can truly say that the feedback of Health Africa exchange given after in SoleMOVE is unique. Nearly every student has mentioned how they have grown during their exchange, how the experience has been mind-opening and richened their cultural knowledge. In this article we have gathered some of feedback given by LUAS students and more feedback can be read in the SoleMOVE (https://saas.solenovo.fi/solemove/disp//16_/en/public/nop/nop).

How did the student feel about the exchange country and cultural differences?

Kenya is a beautiful country, especially near Lake Victoria. It's very fresh and lush, except for the lake which is polluted like no other. The culture is very different - women aren't respected in the same way as back at home, so it was a shock to the system at times to see how badly some women and children were treated. But we had been prepared for it beforehand so it didn't come as such a shock as it could have. The poor are really poor and it's rare to see anyone help them. I'd known that, true, but it was still a shock to see it with my own eyes. It hits you like a sack of bricks. (Nursing student, Health Africa exchange in Kenya 2015)

Uganda is a country also known as the pearl of Africa located in East Africa with 38 million people in population. Kampala is the capital city with 1.3 million population. Being a small country it's densely populated. Uganda has a wonderful culture where strangers are greeted with smiles and it was wonderful being there because I really felt at home. Ugandan people are really warm, friendly and welcoming. In the University, students were free and ready to help. (Nursing student, Health Africa exchange in Uganda 2015)



Image 2. 'Let's make friends' (Vinkki K.).

During the training exchange in Africa, Lapland UAS students have had so much to learn about themselves, African culture, working in the field and received golden lessons for a lifetime as well as encouraging other students to jump out of their comfort zone and choose Health Africa exchange.

The internships were very interesting. I learnt more fluent English and a little local language. I gained a lot of self-confidence and self-reliance. There was a plenty new situation where you just had to do your best gave you confidence in your own work. This exchange was the most unforgettable experience of my life that actually changed my life. There is no need to be afraid even if the culture is different. Please visit my Blog from the trip: <http://www.lily.fi/blogit/lost-african-time>. (Social Service student, Health Africa exchange in Uganda 2017)

I had many different duties on my practical training places for example, I attend ward rounds for in to assess patients' social needs, worked in files/records of ART/HIV/AIDS clinic. During the traineeship, I learned a great number of things on myself and mostly of the new culture I was facing. This experience helped me to get a job in Finland, because my supervisor at work was truly impressed that I was in practical training in Uganda. A good tip for someone planning his/her exchange to Uganda; be brave, ask if you don't know something. (Social Service student, Health Africa exchange in Uganda 2019)

While in Uganda I realized that students there were working really hard and compared with Finland it was really impressive and I adopted the culture of being a very serious student. I learnt how to be free and open to strangers and the element of hospitality really touched my heart and I have learnt how to be all that. I realized that when exchange students come to our school we are too busy to welcome and help them cope but in Kampala it was completely different because everyone was there always. Professionally I learnt that to be up to date in your career one has to keep studying and researching always. I learnt that language is an important factor in life and I did much more and felt professional because language was not a barrier. I also learnt that studying with others is better than alone as you get the best of everything and different opinions. (English degree Nursing student, Health Africa exchange in Uganda 2015)

Being an African I thought I have seen everything but I was wrong. I saw poverty, helplessness first hand than I have seen in Kenya. It was very humbling situation when I realized that we have everything but take it for granted. Seeing and experiencing the genuine love made me appreciate friendship and life. Sometimes we are too busy with life that we forget how to live it. Its love that we give to people who make a difference in life and now am a changed person. I have also learnt the importance of smiling and being appreciative with life. Seeing street children smiling and not worrying about a thing taught me that life is short and we should all strive to live it to the fullest. Smile, be kind and this are the qualities of a wonderful and fulfilled nurse. (English degree Nursing student, Health Africa exchange in Uganda 2015)

I've always been very open to new experiences and this isn't my first exchange, but I think I grew a lot more during these three months in Kenya than I did in ten months I was in France. The culture is so different and you learn to be more accepting of others and to help out of those in need if in any way possible. Africa changes you. And that's a fact. I think my attitude towards other people has changed in a positive way, be it a black, white or Asian person in front of me. I think I'm more open to the new ways of doing things and working. I'm also less judgmental of others and think I've come to accept that life goes on no matter how you live it, so why not make the best of it. You only get one life and everyone should live it to the fullest. I've become more positive towards everything having seen how well-off we are in the Western world. A good tip for someone planning his/her exchange to Kenya; I'd say be prepared for anything and everything. Anything could happen and if you think "That'll never happen" then it most certainly will! But enjoy the freedom you have and the experiences and memories you'll make while on the exchange - they are worth all the pain you experience for the short time you're away from home. Try to be positive and remember that they are people there, too. You are no better than they are, some of them are, in fact, better people than you. Judge not and enjoy!
(Nursing Student, Health Africa exchange in Kenya 2015)

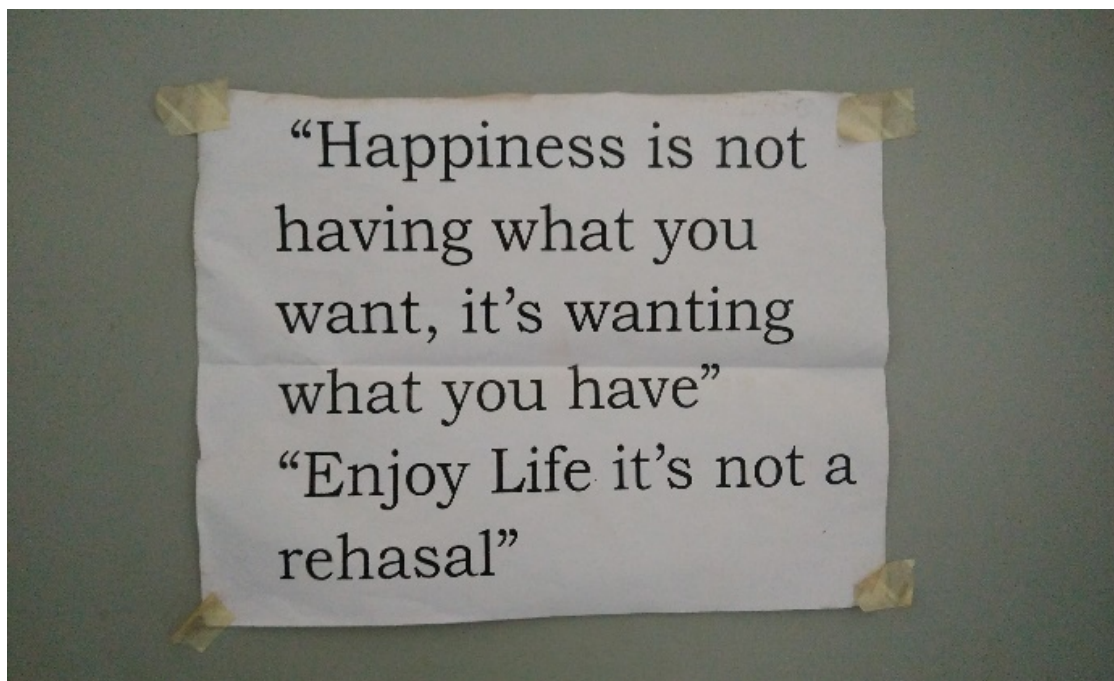


Image 3: Enjoy Life (Vinkki, K.).

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