

THE STATE OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN KENYA: PROBLEMS AND
PROSPECTS

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Introduction

In 1986, the realization that there is a very intimate connection between deterioration of standards and professionalism in higher education and conditions of dictatorship in addition to economic decay dawned on me. In 1998, I did an article on 'The University of Nairobi: The Chronicle of Higher Education'. In this article, the explanation of what had led to the deterioration of higher education in Kenya using the University of Nairobi as a preeminent case was explored. Reasons like political conditions and political authoritarianism featured at the fore. For instance, it was evident that only one person, the head of state, was able to serve as a chancellor for every public university and all the policies, administration and management of these universities was beheld to him as a person.

Secondly, the salaries of university staff decreased in real terms by 40 per cent between 1985 and 1995. This meant that the purchasing power of lecturers, professors and senior administrators diminished. By 1995, they were able to buy only about a half of what they could buy before 1985. Due to this, university staff was forced to form a body to unveil its suffering. This led to the establishment of UASU.

The high inflation experienced in Kenya in 1993 was one of the major factors that led to the decreasing emoluments of the staff at the university. The great British economist Lord Keynes observed that if one wants to destroy a society, he should debauch the currency. Lenin, the great revolutionist argued too that this is a good tool to use when one wants to destroy a dictatorship; make sure that prices rise way above what they deserve and you will have a revolution. In Kenya at the time when inflation was high, various categories of people went on strike. Be it teachers, civil servants, doctors, nurses, unions and so on. The momentum of resentment towards authoritarianism, economic decay and corruption accelerated after the 1990s.

In realms of higher education however, values and beliefs on which higher education is based are more important than the books, salaries, teacher-student ratio and so on. The German Sociologist Max Weber, in his book 'Science as a Vocation' noted that a person should commit himself to the scientific and academic career as a vocation just like religious leaders commit themselves to work because they believe in certain things of the hereafter and of the divine. Every university therefore is to be founded on a philosophy of society and of life. Consequently, the only difference between a university and the church or mosque is just that a university is devoted to a philosophy of a secular world. Notably, institutions like Harvard, Cambridge and Oxford all begun initially as religious institutions. There must be a core belief that involves higher education. Africa has deceived itself that the problem of higher education is one of lack of resources, donors, equipment and strategic plan. Although all these may lack, what is more important is to know the philosophy and the purpose that govern the university. Thomas Kuhn argued forcefully in his 'scientific revolution' that no scientific enterprise or research can be conducted before identifying the paradigm that guides it. For instance someone cannot start collecting data in Mathare or Kibera unless he is angry or happy about what goes on there. This then sets a moral conviction that justifies the research.

In the aforementioned article 'the chronicle of higher education', I quoted a US supreme court judge who gave a commencement address in the college graduation ceremony at the college of William and Mary in Virginia. He posited that 'degrees, qualifications and certificates are articles of commerce. They can be bought and sold in a marketplace. The only thing that you have which is not for sale is your principles and conscience and if that does not guide you, you will do the world more harm than good.'

For one to understand what is wrong with higher education in Kenya, they should focus more on the values that govern higher education institutions than on the technical and financial aspects on which the concentration of reform in Kenya has been.

History of Higher Education in Kenya

The philosophy governing education in Kenya was that Africans were not in a structural frame of mind that will make them amenable to being useful in institutions of higher education rather manual work and manual training is what they needed so that they can be disciplined in both mind and spirit before they could proceed to higher education. When Makerere College was founded in 1922, it was supposed to be a teacher's college with a bias towards the technical subjects. It offered a little bit of Agriculture and Nursing. This went on up to the period after the Second World War. African nationalists from Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania kept recommending that Africa be given more institutions of secondary and post secondary education. They also argued for a delinking of primary and secondary education from religion and missionaries. This disadvantaged the non-Christians and those who wanted to maintain their African religions. In essence, this theme informed the national struggle in Kenya considerably.

The watershed of higher education in Africa was experienced at the establishment of colleges that were affiliates of the university of London. For example Makerere was giving external degrees of the university of London. Other institutions that were appendages of the University of London included University of Ibadan in Nigeria, University College of Ghana at Legon and Fourah Bay College at Freetown, Sierra Leone. The implication was that higher education institutions in Africa should maintain the same parity in instruction, teaching and culture as the University of London.

A debate arose as independence approached about what kind of higher education institutions we should have in Africa. The most viable response was given by the former president of Tanzania, Mwalimu Julius Nyerere, who became the first chancellor of the university of East Africa in 1964. The core argument was that neither serious social and economic development was going to take place nor germination of ideas of nationhood in East Africa or Africa in

general if the universities were not active contributors to this nation building process. The university by 1964 could not manage to be a disinterested party in meeting degrees and standards abroad. It was to be an active player in nation building.

In 1961, Tanganyika African National Union gave up its own headquarters in Dar-es-Salaam for the founding of a new university college of Dar-es-Salaam to begin instruction in subjects that were not being taught in Nairobi or Makerere particularly Law. Earlier, it was impossible to study law in East Africa until the 1960s. A few people went to India, Namibia and others London but not South Africa since it applies Roman Dutch law while we follow common English law. So law studies at South Africa would not serve East Africa. In Kenya, the Kenya-Indian community, after the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi was considering building an institution of higher education in his honor. They started raising funds for the Gandhi Memorial Academy. Remarkably, the earlier letterheads of the University of Nairobi incorporated the Gandhi Memorial Academy. In 1956, the colonial government gave some money and combined it with the money that had been raised from East Africa, India and the Asian community to put up a college of higher education which they called the Technical College of East Africa. It was to concentrate on Engineering, accounting, business and architecture. When the University of East Africa was founded in 1964, there was a clear division of labour: Makerere was a pre-eminent institution of higher education in East Africa with an established strength in medicine. At that time, it was producing world class quality research in medicine and was also reputable for Liberal Arts and Agriculture. On the other hand, Nairobi was to concentrate on Engineering and Business while Dar-es-Salaam was to specialize in Law and Development studies. Students graduating from high school in any of the three institutions were free to apply to any one of them.

Mwalimu Julius Nyerere maintained therefore that universities in Africa and particularly in East Africa can no longer afford to be disinterested parties to the task of nation building. A university in a development cost context in which most of the taxpayers are poor must use as

its first sense of moral and intellectual obligation, divining the ways in which society can answer best to the needs of the vast majority of the people. Following this observation, a developmental university was established in East Africa. A developmental university met all the standards of higher education everywhere else in the world but was an active participant in the process of nation building. Hence its curriculum, syllabus, research, personnel, moral code and philosophy are forged towards involvement in development in the society.

In 1966, University College of Dar-es-Salaam students went on strike due to Nyerere's insistence that they be involved in nation building by serving in the National Youth Service for six months. Following the strike, the then president sent all students away and made National Youth Service compulsory to all Tanzanians. The problem alluded to here is the belief in university students of entitlement to elite status which was not in consonance with the political philosophy that Nyerere was articulating.

In Kenya, just like in other societies, we have a system that is highly elitist. This highly competitive system of learning picks out the best in competition but neither in learning nor in moral commitment. The entitlement to status, recognition and privilege always oppose the notion of a developmental university. The incapacity to reconcile an elitist entitlement and privilege seeking student elite and faculty with cannons of nation building is a recurring issue. The first major strike at the University of Nairobi in 1965 was not about African Socialism and application to planning in Kenya which was what the debate on nationhood was about, nor was it about the threat of decolonization; it was about the demand for a tunnel between the main campus and the halls of residence. The students argued that as university students, vehicles should wait for them to cross the road and not them to wait for vehicles. Even today, most of the strikes at universities have tended to be about basic issues of entitlement for example food and conditions in the halls of residence. Teaching takes a very low hierarchy in the basis for strikes in universities. The era of a developmental university was one characterized by tension between imperatives of nation building and problems encountered by universities themselves.

What happened to these institutions after 1975 up to the 1990s is probably the origin of the crisis in the state of higher education. These factors could be categorized into three;

- Resource problems within the campus
- Political repression
- Lack of a sense of direction or lack of a moral/ philosophical campus to guide the university to where it wants to go

Makerere University was founded in 1970 just a few months before the coup by Idd Amin. There was an erosion of ideals of academic freedom in university independence by an increasingly authoritarian and intolerant climate that insisted in using the university more or less as an arm of the police force and as an arm of the overall institutional oppressive structure of the state. Besides, the state found accomplices within the university who furthered its oppressive mission. On his Madaraka day speech, the former president of Kenya, Moi, was quoted to have said,

‘from now on, the University of Nairobi will be answerable to the government and to the ruling party KANU. I do not want to hear any more demands for such a thing as academic freedom. Who will give you academic freedom? Who pays your salary? Even at Cambridge, there is no such thing as academic freedom. Because the government pays it, they do what the government wants. What are you going to do with this academic freedom that you people of the University of Nairobi are calling for? At least in Cambridge and Harvard, they are able to build a car.’

Prior to that, in another speech, former president Moi said that he can understand why people can go to the university to study agriculture and Medicine but as far as sociology and Economics is concerned, he does not see the use of it. This was a trend which saw the university culminate into an instrument of the state. Sometime in the 90s, KANU had a desk at the institution where every teaching staff was required to take up membership. Staff salaries were then deducted compulsorily so that money can go into various KANU projects, research and so on. The adoption of the academic community and commitment to state and non-state activities and the use of that political commitment as a gauge for one’s academic merit rather than one’s economic academic output gradually led to the deterioration of the moral/philosophical commitment to academic excellence in its own right as a vocation.

Moreover, there was a decline of resources and facilities and the capacity of institutions to meet the demands that were imposed on them. It was not just the inflation and economic mismanagement that led to this deterioration. This can also be attributed to increased enrolment. For instance the University of Nairobi had a population of 9000 students in 1985, but numbers tripled due to the double intake by direct command from state house in 1987. Besides, by administrative fiat, the government Secretarial College which the suits in their commitment to women had built on purpose so that secretarial training for women in Kenya can be upgraded was closed and parklands became the Law School and Kenya Institute of Administration became the new Faculty of Commerce.

In 1985, I did a study on incentives for academic work in universities. With the singular exception of Zimbabwe and Botswana where salaries were holding up, benefits and salaries for all universities in Africa were very low. Deterioration in universities was due not only to the inadequate budgetary provisions of public universities, but also to the fact that facilities committed to them could not accommodate the numbers that were being admitted. Structural adjustment policies which were introduced in the 1980s' affected higher education negatively. In the decaying and deteriorating circumstances of the 80s, countries acceded to the donor's demand that the philosophical basis on which universities were founded as developmental institutions should be dismantled and that universities should become profit making institutions. This meant that degrees, diplomas and courses could be bought and sold to the highest bidder. The new paradigm held the premises that with the profits that you make after taking as many students as you can, you will be able to pay better salaries, re-equip your laboratories and provide a better learning environment.

Makerere took the lead in adopting this paradigm. Turning universities into profit making institutions can be done. It has been done by commercial universities and commercial colleges throughout the world since millennia. However, this is done since the vocation of those students and of the university community in those countries is geared towards making money

and using that money to provide education. Nevertheless, the best university education ever provided in the world is given by the institutions of higher education believe in a higher moral or philosophical ideal about secular society than profit.

Conclusively, if we have to rebuild the institutions of higher education in Kenya so that they can face the challenges of today, we must set a moral or philosophical basis for these institutions.