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Creating Global Universities at the Grassroots: Challenges and Prospects in East Africa with Reference to Kenya

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Abstract:

The paper explores how universities that have been established from scratch in East Africa have contributed and may contribute to the attainment of Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The paper interrogates the reasons for the establishment of these new universities through considering both the legislative, political mechanisms and community initiatives that support the establishment of these universities. It discusses how the programmes offered in these Universities (dis)connect with the local communities' aspirations in development; create new aspirations that may run counter to the position and definition of the university as a global institution and, at the same time, enable the universities to operate within a national, regional and international grid of knowledge creation and dissemination.

Keywords: Global universities, university education, grassroots

1. Introduction

The paper discusses how new universities that have been established from scratch in East Africa-Kenya and have contributed and may contribute to the attainment of Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). By the time many of the countries in East Africa were getting independence, (Kenya, 1963; Uganda, 1962, Tanzania, 1961, Rwanda, 1962; Burundi, 1962) the main universities in the region were Makerere University (with a history going back to 1922) and the University of Nairobi (with a 1956 history as a Royal Technical College) and the University of Dar es Salaam. In immediate post-independence East Africa, the few people in the region who yearned to go for further studies competed for the airlifts to the West or, fought to get the few chances that would enable them join the then few prestigious universities in the region. The impact of this departure from the village to go for further studies was that the few university students were made to be international by default especially since they were forced to go and learn out of their villages. This would contrast with the graduates from the present universities and university campuses whose universities are just a stone's throw away and are located within the confines of the village.

In the context of the sprouting universities and university campuses in the East African region, we envisage that the campuses are all pulling in one direction. It is also to be expected that the quality will be the same in these campuses and universities. This would be in line with the definition of the university. The word University comes from two Latin words *uni* (meaning One) and *versus*, meaning in the direction of, toward, into: *uni-versus*, towards one, into one (Nsokika, 2009).

The Commission for University Education in Kenya (CUE) was established under the Universities Act, No. 42 of 2012, as the successor to the Commission for Higher Education (CHE). The core functions of CUE are to regulate and ensure quality university education through setting standards & guidelines and monitoring compliance to achieve global competitiveness, to promote the objectives of university education, by regulating, accrediting universities and programmes and approval of universities in Kenya among others. Due to the growing number of Kenyans seeking university educations, there has been a tremendous growth in the number of universities established. This universities have been established in all regions of the country contrary to the belief that all universities belonged to cities. As a result, the country has a total number of 31 public universities contrary to 7 universities that were there before the end of 2010 (Universities Act, No. 42of 2012)

The creation of University campuses has been as a result of universities trying to get their niche and exploring their full potential in their regions of establishment. Although CUE has been mandated to regulate and inspect the establishment of University constituent colleges and campuses this function has been abused by universities which established universities in rural setups within their regions. The established campuses in the rural areas negates the concept of the university being a universal institution because they get their students in their localities.

2. The position and function of the present university in East Africa

The position and function of the modern university has changed tremendously. According to Calhoun and Rhoten (2011),

...The university is a venerable and wonderful institution. Although it has ancient roots and played a crucial role in the Middle Ages, it has been distinctively important to the modern era. The production of knowledge and the education of

a growing number of professionals are basic to both capitalist and socialist economies, to technologies that expand human capabilities, to the growth of the state and of citizen participation, and to the flourishing of civil society... Despite its achievements, the university is an institution in upheaval. In the countries where it has been strongest, it now faces financial shortfalls, new pressures for external accountability, and competition from new ways of organizing research and scientific communication. This is partly a product of growth itself. Universities have added new functions and new fields of study and research, but they have dropped few old ones, making their operations harder to explain as well as more expensive. Clarity of purpose also is at issue where universities are growing at breakneck pace. Should they imitate the world's most prestigious institutions?

Having graduates who got their university education away from the village may have had its own challenges. One downside was that by the time the graduates returned to their home villages from the West, they felt alienated since they had developed on broader outlook towards life that was sometimes counter to the outlook in the village. Writers like Vassanji have captured this in their literature. The alienation has also been captured very well in other fictional works such as *Song of Lawino* by Okot P' Bitek. It would thus be expected that having the graduates from a university near his home would remove this academically-induced alienation. It would make the degree holder fit and serve better in developing the community at the grassroots.

In immediate post-independence East Africa, there was also the niggling suspicion bred by the East -West divide and the antecedent political directions at the time. This bi-polar political divide was another challenge. The suspicion developed into the 1970s and 1980s in East Africa. Indeed, even in the current university set-up in East Africa, there have been suspicions that security elements form part of what goes as the university student population. In a way therefore, there has been fear for the university and its products from the university, that is, the graduates themselves. Hence, taking the university to the grassroots would also entail spreading some form of suspicion and fear to the village. In 2011, for instance, residents of a fairly laid-back town in Kenya, Nakuru, protested strongly against the location of a university campus in their estate, Milimani Estate. One would wonder why a group of people would not wish to have more learning in the immediate neighbourhood. But in a way, such protest captures the suspicion with which the university is received. It is arguable also whether the concerns that the community surrounding the new Kibabii University College in Bungoma County, Kenya were a reflection of this fear of the university.

3. The East African University and the desire for more knowledge

Even with the fear of the University, by the 1970s and 80s, countries in the East African region had to respond to the need for expanding university education in order to meet the increasing demand for further education at this level. In the words of Nsokika (2009:2), for Africa to unite and consolidate its political independence, it must have, '...two basic, fundamental, absolutely indispensable means, namely, knowledge and capital. Of these, knowledge is of greater importance in the order of things; for we all know that what has given the Whiteman his overwhelming superiority in the world is science, and one of the greatest handicaps that barred the African's road to progress was ignorance. Thus, spreading higher education into the villages in many parts of the East and Central African region is one way of Africans freeing themselves.

In the aftermath of the 1994 genocide in Rwanda, the new Rwandan government embarked on a deliberate effort to develop its human capital through the establishment of many universities in different provinces (formerly known as prefectures). Universities such as The Kigali Institute of Education (KIE), Kigali Institute of Science and Technology (KIST) and ISAE were a product of the push for Rwanda to free itself. Uganda, on its part encouraged the establishment of many private universities, a situation that has seen the explosion of university education in Uganda.

Assié -Lumumba and Lumumba - Kasongo (2011) have argued that the African University is not a mere industrial unit. Rather, it not only processes its graduates but in addition acts as a linchpin in the philosophical cog within the larger community. The universities determine how societies change. Perhaps, partly for this reason, during the clamour for multipartyism in Kenya, the Universities were the main point of focus with Mwakenya leaflets and other documents being said to have been found with university lecturers, professors and students. The Mwakenya leaflets were part of the fight for the second liberation in Kenya. Thus, it can be argued that the university is a central link in nation building both in economic terms and also in political and philosophical terms.

There is a close connection between the university and other political currents outside the university. For instance, Mwiria & Ng'ethe (2007: 63) attribute the era of 'relative tranquillity' in terms of student activism at University in Kenya after 2002 to the '...spirit of dialogue between management and the student organisation'. This contrasts with the earlier long history of university student agitation for greater democracy, governance reforms and human rights, and a concomitant repression of student politics in previous Kenyan regimes.

4. Prospects and Challenges in Financing Expanded University Education in East Africa

By the 1990s, the State would no longer support university education fully. In Kenya, there were proposals for cost sharing dating back to the 1980s and which were fully implemented in the late 1990s. According to Nduko (2000: 213), many of the students shifted their focus from the core value of the University, research, study, criticism, and free socialisation, to '...where they would act as isolated individuals, with little confidence in themselves, and concerned primarily with their own survival'. Thus, this inward-looking trend among the university students would be a trend that one is likely to find in the new campuses and study centres being established in the villages in Eastern Africa. In any case, the students in these off-shore campuses would seem to know each other and the other members in the villages and are thus unlikely to have much agitation against their relatives. The downside is that they would be lost in theory own

cocoons. This may be a positive point towards improving quality but at the same time, a negative dimension in terms of creating an open mind in the university student mind through research and study.

In Kenya, as in other parts of East Africa, proposals were being made to make education fairly private. Thus, if parents were to pay for their children's education, they needed to find other ways of reducing cost. One of these ways was to have universities closer home. Such thinking went in tandem with suggestions that university admission should not be pegged on bed-space. But there would be other factors such as not bothering about the number of books that university students have access to in these off-shore campuses.

Systems such as the introduction of the pay as you eat system at the university in the Kenyan University were a way of governments trying to cut cost. But the challenge would be that the university becomes a player in the daily chores of looking for food.

Thus, while the spread of university education in East Africa through the creation of more universities was, in part, a historical product, the result would in part also lead to compromising on quality.

5. The political dimension in the expansion of university education

At another level also, politicians have sought to develop the process of spreading university education in order to gain political mileage. The politicians would wish to pull universities closer home so that their people would see that development had come closer home. However, the spread of universities developed this way carry some political baggage and has overtones of identity that would exhibit themselves as ethnic identities, a bane in the East African political context.

Indeed, it can be argued that the nature of the university in the East African region has been shaped by political passions. According to Oanda et. al. (2008:19),

'... in the case of most developing countries that were colonised, nationalist passions contributed immensely to the emergence and character of higher education...as a nationalist institution, the University undertook the responsibility for political socialisation, an ideological endeavour to reconstruct the political thinking of Africans to support the ideals of African socialism as a foundation for nation building. Indeed, both the nationalists and the colonial government collectively pursued the appetites for higher education in the colonies and the decolonisation process, albeit with different aims.

There is a sense in which the university campuses in many parts of Kenya have been founded following the support of the politicians from these specific regions. For instance, the campuses and study centres in Kenya such as Eburnangwe, Bunge Study Centre, Kimathi, Kabianga, Bondo SEUCO and even the constituent college like Kaimosi Friends University College, Bomet University College and Kibabii University in Bungoma have been beneficiaries of these political magnanimity.

The beauty with such a political approach where the leader gets involved in education is that it is easier to inspire people from a region since the people themselves seem to have a sense of belonging. It would create the desire in the children to learn since the university is no longer a far-away citadel of knowledge far removed from the village. In addition, the universities become part of the people. A study centre like Nambale in Busia County, Kenya has benefitted greatly with the church donating its premises to be used for education for free. The land at Eburnangwe in Vihiga County, Kenya has been donated to the parent University with a full title deed being given so that infrastructure would be developed. Such efforts tend to bring more people to work as part of the human capacity in the creation of knowledge in new institutions. In other respects, however, this may be regarded as nepotism, at worst and tribalism, at best. Indeed, in 2012, an audit of staff in the different universities was carried out in Kenya whose results brought out a new label, ethnic imbalance in higher institutions in Kenya.

In these universities such labels are inimical to developing quality in education and free thinking that universities should be famed for. After a long time, such labels develop into attitudes that would be difficult to change.

6. Conclusion

This paper has considered what prospects go with the creation of the university and in the spread of the university to the village in the East African region. It has given illustration and pointed out that while this spread is a historical process, there is away in which is also a political process. It is pointed out that the spread of the university as a global institution may be double edged: one edge having the positive side while the other edge carrying the negative side.

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