REFORMING HIGHER EDUCATION IN KENYA

CHALLENGES, LESSONS AND OPPORTUNITIES

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1.0 Introduction

Higher education institutions the world over are facing new challenges which require reforms in their management and governance styles. The rise of new stakeholders, internal factors, together with globalization and the rapid pace at which new knowledge is created and utilized are among the recent developments which challenge higher education institutions. While they have responded rather slowly in the past, to changing circumstances, there is now an urgent need for them to adjust rapidly in order to fulfil their missions and the needs of other stakeholders (Jowi, 2003).

2.0 History of Higher Education in Kenya

Higher education in Kenya can be traced back to 1922 when the then Makerere College in Uganda was established as a small technical college which was then expanded to meet the needs of the three East African countries i.e. Kenya, Uganda and Tanganyika and Zanzibar, as well as Zambia and Malawi. In the 1940s and early 50s it is only this college that was providing university education in East Africa. This lasted until 1956 when the Royal Technical College was established in Nairobi. In 1963, the Royal Technical College became the University College, Nairobi, following the establishment of the University of East Africa with three constituent colleges in Nairobi, Dar es Salaam and Kampala (Makerere). The University of East Africa offered programmes and degrees of the University of London till 1966. In 1970, the University of East Africa was dissolved to create three autonomous universities of Nairobi, Dar es Salaam and Makerere. The University of Nairobi was thus established as the first university in Kenya.

3.0 Expansion of University Education

Kenya placed considerable importance on the role of education in promoting economic and social development after the achievement of independence in 1963 (Sifuna, 1998). This resulted in the rapid expansion of the education system to provide qualified persons for the growing economic and administrative institutions, and to undertake some reforms to reflect the aspirations of an independent state (Court and Ghai, 1974).

Throughout the 1970s the government strengthened and expanded the University of Nairobi, the only one then, as a conscious effort to provide university education to all qualified Kenyans and as a move to develop the necessary human resource for the private and public sectors. As years went by, the number of Kenyans seeking university education exceeded the capacity of the University of Nairobi. This led to the establishment of Moi University in 1984 as the second university in Kenya following the recommendations of the Presidential Working Commission – the Mackay Report – which collected views from many people and found an overwhelming support by Kenyans for the establishment of a second and technologically oriented university in the country. From then, university education in Kenya has expanded with a rise in student enrolments, expansion of universities, diversity of programmes and setting up of new universities and campuses. Kenyatta University which had operated as a constituent college of the University of Nairobi since 1972, became a full-fledged university in 1985. A previous agricultural college also gave way to Egerton University in 1988.
Over the last four decades, the social demands with respect to higher education in Kenya have clearly intensified. This has been exemplified by the rise in enrolments in public and private universities, the proliferation of more private universities and the establishment of private wings (self sponsored programmes) in the public universities. Student enrolment in public universities in Kenya increased very rapidly between 1964 to date, with the current student enrolment in Kenya’s universities standing roughly at 55,200 (Sifuna, 1998). With the additional students in the parallel degree programmes, the numbers are now much higher.

3.1 Two Double Intakes

The first double intake occurred in 1987/88 academic year. Following the 1982 attempted coup, the government ordered an indefinite closure of the university, which lasted for about one year. This meant that about 8000 applicants who qualified for university admission by end of 1982 could not be selected for admission in the 1983/84 academic year. This prolonged closure, coupled with other shorter duration closures, contributed to a backlog of qualified students due for admission. To clear the backlog, universities were directed to embark on a double intake of students starting with 1987/88 academic year. According to a study by Sifuna (1998), the rapid expansion of university education starting from mid 1980s was never planned. Sifuna (1998) continues to observe as follows:

"There has been no planning in university education for a considerable length of time. The last planning effort in university education was before rapid expansion started. Since then, planning was thrown in a state of confusion. University development seems to be guided by directives from sections of the ministries of Education or Finance and Economic Development and the Chancellors of the public universities."

The increasing demand for higher education is also seen to have contributed to the lack of planning. Sifuna’s study (1998) reveals as follows:

"The rapid expansion of university education was a spontaneous response to the high demand. With the increasing large flows of students from schools, popular demand for higher education increased. People seem to have put a lot of hope in higher education and this appears unique in the countries of this region."

The second double intake of students occurred in 1990/91. This was prompted by the shift in the country’s education cycle from 7-4-2-3 cycle to the 8-4-4 cycle. The main changes that occasioned this shift were the primary school cycle, which was extended to eight years after the advanced (A) level certificate of secondary education had been abolished, reducing the number of secondary education from six to four years and increasing the university undergraduate cycle from three to four years.

By abolishing the A-level segment of the education system, a situation had been created where over 170,000 applicants for university entry were available as opposed to no more than 20,000 potential applicants in the A-level system. The 1990/91 admission process had, however, to accommodate both O- and A-level applicants for entry into university. This further stretched the meagre facilities that these institutions had in place.
3.2 The Demise of Middle-Level Colleges in Favour of Universities

The large enrolment of university students was a key corollary to the establishment of more public universities (Sifuna, 1998). In 1984 Moi University Act established that institution as a second national university. In late 1988, parliament made Jomo Kenyatta College of Agriculture and Technology a constituent college of Kenyatta University. It became an independent university through the Jomo Kenyatta University of Agriculture and Technology Act of 1994. Egerton, which offered diploma programmes in agriculture, became a full-fledged university in 1988. Siriba Teachers’ College became Maseno University College, a constituent college of Moi University, and later a full-fledged Maseno University. Sergoit Teachers’ College was transformed into Chepkoilel campus, which is a constituent college of Moi University. Laikipia and Kisii Teachers’ Colleges both became campuses of Egerton University. This meant that many tertiary-level colleges were abolished in favour of university education. The contribution of the few remaining middle-level colleges – including the national polytechnics, teachers’ colleges, nursing schools and technical institutes – have not been recognized as they should be.

4.0 Financing Higher Education

Like most African countries, higher education in Kenya was historically free, with the public purse covering both tuition and living allowances (Weidman, 1995). The rationale for free higher education in Kenya was based, among other things, on the country’s desire to create highly trained manpower that could replace the departing colonial administrators. In return, graduates were bound to work in the public sector for a minimum of three years.

By 1974, provision of education in general had expanded dramatically and the number of students seeking university education had grown to an extent that it was becoming increasingly difficult to adequately finance university education by providing full scholarships and grants by the Government. The Government therefore introduced the University Students Loans Scheme (USLS), which was managed by the Ministry of Education. Under the scheme, Kenyan students pursuing higher education at Makerere, Nairobi and Dar es Salaam universities received loans to cover their tuition and personal needs, which they would repay on completion of their education.

However, the USLS was plagued with a number of problems right from the onset. It lacked the legal basis to recover matured loans from loanees. In addition, the general public and university students wrongly perceived that the loan was a grant from the government, which was not to be repaid.

In order to address this problem, in July 1995 the Government through an act of Parliament established the Higher Education Loans Board to administer the Student Loans Scheme. In addition, the Board is also empowered to recover all outstanding loans given to former university students by the Government of Kenya since 1952 and to establish a revolving fund from which funds can be drawn to lend out to needy Kenyan students pursuing higher education. The establishment of a revolving fund was also
expected to ease pressure on the exchequer in financing education, which currently stands at 40% of the annual national budget.

5.0 Private Universities

The 1980s and 90s saw the emergence of some private institutions. With the exception of some institutions, such as the United States International University (USIU), most private universities in Kenya are religiously controlled. The majority of these institutions are also limited in capacity with a total student enrolment ranging between 500 in the smallest institutions to 2000 in the largest. The curriculum of most of these institutions is also largely geared towards the arts and commercial courses. Most of them lack the resource capacity to adequately address the needs of courses in ICT and other sciences. They also lack adequately trained manpower to deliver the courses that they provide, thereby making the quality of some of their graduates questionable.

Private institutions in Kenya depend for their revenue on the tuition fees they generate from their students. Such heavy dependence on tuition coupled with lack of alternative income sources have made these institutions expensive and thus unaffordable for most Kenyans, in effect, limiting their services to the children of high socio economic status.

As elsewhere in Africa, private expansion sprang forth largely due to the public system’s failure to meet the demand for higher education. Private higher education has registered steady increases in enrolment. Some universities in Kenya – such as the United States International University (USIU), the largest of the private ones – have waiting lists of applicants.

The private sector’s accelerated expansion, rising status, and official recognition from the late 1980s led to concern and reaction from the public sector. Private universities in Kenya grew in number, going from 3 to 17 in just two decades.

6.0 Commission for Higher Education (CHE)

In 1995, the Commission for Higher Education (CHE) was established under the provisions of the Universities Act, with some of the following major functions:

i) To promote the objectives of university education namely the development, processing, storage and dissemination of knowledge for the benefit of mankind;

ii) To advise the minister on the establishment of public universities;

iii) To accredit universities;

iv) To coordinate the long term planning, staff development, scholarship and physical development of university education;

v) To promote national unity and identity in universities;

vi) To liaise with government departments and public and private sectors of the economy in matters relating to overall national manpower development and requirements;

vii) To cooperate with government in the planned development of university education;

viii) To examine and approve proposals for courses of study and course regulations submitted to it by private universities;
ix) To receive and consider applications from persons seeking to establish private universities in Kenya and make recommendations thereon to the minister.

Although these functions gave considerable statutory powers to CHE to run university education, a number of criticisms have been levelled on the opretaions of the organization. According to Sifuna (1998):

• Only one of CHE’s statutory functions, the accreditation of private universities, has been its main preoccupation since its secretariat became operational in 1986. The mushrooming of private universities has focussed the Commission’s energies in developing accreditation instruments to regulate and permit the award of charters.

• According to its statutory powers, CHE was expected to play an active role in the planning, development, budgetary matters and maintaining quality education. The politicisation of planning and development of university education seems to have effectively denied the Commission this particular role.

• Government action in decision making also made it difficult for CHE to play an active role in public university budgetary matters. In practice, after the establishment of CHE, public universities continued to argue their individual budgetary submissions with the treasury, liasing with each other and collectively through the committee of vice-chancellors. Interestingly, vice-chancellors who are normally represented on CHE and praise its work on accreditation of private universities, effectively bypass the CHE when it comes to their own plans and budgets. They defend their institutional autonomy which each university enjoys by virtue of its own statute, and clearly resisting the notion of ceding part of it to CHE. They believe that rationalisation of departments and related planning issues are best handled by freely negotiating them among themselves.

• CHE statutory requirement to make regulations in respect of admission of persons seeking to enrol in universities and provide central admissions service to public universities, as well as the maintenance of standards for courses and examinations, were rendered inoperative through the creation by the vice-chancellors of the Joint Admissions Board (JAB).

7.0 Parallel Degree Programmes

There has been continuous demand for education in Kenya, and the university system has been forced to be more innovative to meet this increasing demand. Among other ways, public universities responded to this development by mounting privately sponsored Module II programs – commonly referred to as parallel degree programs – whereby, apart from the regular students sponsored by the government, universities are also admitting students who are self-sponsored. These students take their lectures separately in the evening and weekends or together with the regular students.

Apart from the parallel degree programs, some universities are also encouraging the development of non-teaching income generating units (IGUs). In Moi University, the non-teaching income generating activities are classified in four main groups. These are
Production Units, Service Units, Business Units as well as Consultancy, Research and Development. The university of Nairobi has a limited company, the University of Nairobi Enterprise Service Ltd, to handle her income generating activities.

8.0 Challenges Facing Higher Education

The rapid expansion of university education has led to a number of challenges. According to UNESCO World Conference on Higher Education (1998), low funding from the exchequer, increased enrolment, limited access compared to the population level, increased enrolment without commensurate improvement in available facilities, gender inequality, and a low research capacity, are some of the problems facing universities in the region. These problems have led to fears that quality of education is in a downward trend in most of these universities.

8.1 Research and Publications

Research is one of the core pillars of the university system. Publication of research findings in reputable journals is one of the ways in which these findings are widely disseminated to stakeholders. Studies show that research and publishing by faculty has sharply dropped over the last few years. Due to heavy teaching responsibilities – brought about by the rising student numbers, plus the need to moonlight so as to make some extra money to supplement the meagre pay – faculty are not keen on undertaking meaningful research and publishing their work.

8.2 Leadership and Management

Globally, the environment of higher education is facing relentless and rapid change. These circumstances underscore the crucial role of leadership and management in maintaining morale, enhancing productivity, and helping staff at all institutional levels cope with momentous and rapid change. Those in higher education management and leadership positions are finding it essential that they understand shifting demographics, new technologies, the commercialization of higher education, the changing relationships between institutions and governments and the move from an industrial to an information society. Particularly in the developing world, higher education institutions must be poised to create the human capital necessary to keep pace with the knowledge revolution. Current leaders must be trained, new leaders prepared, and students identified who will both lead and study higher education for the future.

8.3 Remuneration of Staff

Universities, especially public ones, have almost exclusively depended on the government for remunerating their staff. This has led to a situation where staff are not paid as well as their counterparts in the more developed societies. Many professors have therefore decamped to other countries in search of better pay, affecting the teaching needs of Kenyan universities. Demand for better pay has often led to standoffs between the government and the university academic staff union (UASU).
8.4 Financing

Public universities in Kenya have traditionally relied on Government funding to carry out their activities. Due to the harsh economic situations witnessed by the region over the recent past, Government support to these institutions has seen a steady decline, and the universities have been forced to operate under very tight budgets. The situation has not been made any better by the structural adjustment programmes prescribed by our bilateral partners. The universities have therefore been forced to rethink their strategy, and possibly look for extra sources of financing including establishing income-generating activities.

8.5 ICT Capacity and Utilization

The swiftness of ICT developments, their increasing spread and availability, the nature of their content and their declining prices, are having major implications for learning. There is need to tap the potential of ICT to enhance data collection and analysis, and to strengthen management systems in educational institutions; to improve access to education by remote and disadvantaged communities; to support initial and continuing professional development of teachers; and to provide opportunities to communicate across classrooms and cultures. Most universities in Kenya have very limited access to modern computing and communications technology, so it is increasingly difficult for teachers and students to keep abreast of current developments in their academic areas.

8.6 Quality and standards

Universities worldwide are in a fix, caught between severe budget cuts and a flood of students in search of useful degrees. In Kenya, overcrowding, low budgets and staff retention problems have contributed to inefficiency and falling academic standards.

8.7 Jobs

Students lucky enough to get a university degree have no guarantee of finding employment. Whereas in the 1970s, university graduates were able to step into managerial-level civil service posts, today's job prospects are less obvious, due to tough structural adjustment programmes and recruitment restrictions.

8.8 Further Training

Staff recruitment is another area which lags behind and impacts negatively on teaching and research. Up to two-thirds of university teachers have had no initial pedagogical training. Most of these institutions are relying on individuals who have not acquired their highest level of academic training as lecturers. To improve their efficiency and effectiveness in delivering their services, staff, and especially the academic staff, must be trained continually in relevant areas. Universities must have a clear training policy, outlining their strategy for human resource development, instead of the ad hoc procedures currently followed in most of these institutions.
8.9 Student Welfare

A crucially important component of any university system – and which is often ignored in most university decisions – is the student welfare. National and institutional decision-makers must place students and their needs at the centre of their concerns, and must consider them as major partners and responsible stakeholders in the renewal of higher education. This must include student involvement in issues that affect that level of education, in evaluation, the renovation of teaching methods and curricula, and in the framework of policy formulation and institutional management. As students have the right to organize and represent themselves, their involvement in these issues must be guaranteed.

8.10 Gender Equity

The participation of women in higher education is very low in Kenya, in large part because of traditional cultural values that emphasize women's roles as wife and mother. Women in Kenya are underrepresented in HE institutions as students and as workers. While gender disparities in students' enrolment exist at all levels of HE, they are particularly wide at higher degree levels and in science, mathematics and technology oriented subjects. At the same time, women are underrepresented in teaching and in the administration of these institutions. Further, women academics are concentrated in the lower ranks of the hierarchy and in the traditional ‘female' social science and education disciplines while as administrators they are few and far in between in the higher ranks of HE administration.

8.11 Internationalisation

The dawn of a global knowledge society with information-driven economies and expansions in international higher education markets is placing new demands on them to search for more innovative approaches in academic course provisions; revenue generation; uncertain educational quality; institutional governance, and human resource management and to address longstanding difficulties caused by rapid enrolments; financial constraints; frequent labour strife and brain drain.

8.12 Access

Higher education in Kenya has witnessed tremendous expansion in terms of the number of students demanding access. This has led to congestion in the facilities that had initially been designed to accommodate only a few students. Rising student numbers has also led to poor working conditions in universities in the country.

9.0 Higher Education Prospects

In spite of the above challenges, there are a number of prospects for the improvement of higher education in the country. Some of these are outlined as follows:

• Liberal/free political space. The liberalised space created by the current administration in Kenya could be utilized by stakeholders to improve higher education in the country.
• **Regional collaboration.** Regional instruments like the Inter-University Council for East Africa (IUCEA), could be utilized in enhancing cooperation between these institutions, and improving standards at the regional level.

• **Citizen Chancellors for public universities.** In Kenya, like in most all countries in East Africa, the presidents have stopped being chancellors of the public universities, and instead appoint other individuals to perform these duties. Since these individuals are appointed from practicing educationists, business managers and private corporate leadership, it is expected that they will spend more time in looking into ways of addressing, in a more rationalized manner, the challenges facing higher education in the country.

• **New policy on education:** The Kenya government has embarked on a new policy to govern education in the country. One of the major highlights of the policy is the creation of the Directorate of Higher Education, which is expected to address the issues of this important sector.

• **New method of recruitment of university leaders:** There has been a shift in the recruitment of top university managers. Many universities now advertise the posts for the Vice-Chancellors and their deputies, where a rigorous selection process is employed to ensure that the best individuals are appointed to run these institutions. Chancellors, who initially used to be the president, are now ordinary citizens.

• **Enhancement of university financing:** The Higher Education Loans Board (HELB) is currently the only institution supporting students at universities with loans. There is need to explore other sources of funding including bringing in the commercial banks to support students with loans.

• **Role of middle-level training institutions:** These colleges are important and must be supported. There is need to borrow a leaf from India where these colleges work with established universities to offer degrees in certain areas. Some universities in Kenya have tried this with great success. In the U.S. they have Community Colleges which provide a good bridge to universities. Nigerians have succeeded in ensuring that each State has at least a university, over and above the established universities supported by the central government.

### 10.0 Conclusion

Higher education is not cheap. The Kenya government must be prepared to support this sector through good funding to enhance the development of adequate human resources necessary for economic and political prosperity. It is also important to note that:

• Kenya has a very large base in Higher Education capacity
• There are a number of institutions with infrastructural capacity and adequately trained human resource
• Higher Education must be given a central role in national development and social economic transformation of the people
• The existing infrastructural and human resource capacity must, however, be effectively managed and utilized for the benefit of society

• There must be a deliberate policy on financing research and utilizing the research findings

• Universities must be answerable to the people/stakeholders through transparent disclosures, accountability and timely feedback and remedy.
References


