0009 The crisis in Kenya's public universities: disjuncture and fracture in mission

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ABSTRACT

This article addresses the crisis facing Kenya's public universities today as a critique of Public and Development Management scholarship and practice in the last seventy years as experienced in Kenya. For many Africans born in the 20th Century, their individual autobiographies may also be argued to match that of economic development generally. The aim of economic development has been mainly to tackle the trio of poverty, inequality and job creation. Human rights as well as gender issues have also risen to the fore in the past forty years. In Kenya, it is much more common to talk of poverty, ignorance and disease as the main concern of government within an ideology of law and order. The central question of this article is therefore normative: What ought to be the mission of a government-owned university in Kenya today? Employing an analytical framework based on the extant literature and empirical evidence, the paper argues strongly for the entrenchment of engaged scholarship in Kenyan higher education system as part and parcel of transformative learning. The paper concludes that a deeper engagement with innovative ways of transformative education holds a better promise in the quest to make public universities more relevant to the needs of a developmental state.

Keywords: Higher Education; Engaged Scholarship; Transformative Learning; Public Management; Education for Development; Kenya

INTRODUCTION

The paper tackles the present crisis in Kenya's public universities that makes many stakeholders wonder the mushrooming public universities are really worth the

enormous amounts of public funds budgeted annually for their running. As conceptualized in this paper, the crisis in Kenya's public universities entails a disjuncture in vision (between the managers of universities and the statespersons as well as industry) and fractures (or discontinuities) in thinking in both student and lecturer as well as manager due to uncertainties borne out of being 'owned by government.' There is also the issue of different expectations among different stakeholders of the public universities leading to tension and friction in the wheels of the higher education institutions. These developments demand that we re-assess cross-institutional missions for fitness of purpose. This article presents my humble contribution to the task.

On the face of it, one would assume that the more African countries advance economically, the easier it becomes to establish and efficiently run public universities the way it would be with say hospitals or roads and so on. But this is not so for a number of reasons. For one, universities have historically evolved lock-in-step with civilization. What we mean by this is the fact that human societies are synonymous with knowledge. That is, societies produce knowledge that in turn spur more learning to advance even greater knowledge. Traditionally, universities have been at the centre of this knowledge creation. Indeed, other than some very old religious orders, the university is one of the oldest bureaucratic organisations known to man (Davidson, 1995; Scoth, 2016). So while economic development might allow a country to build and sustain a growing number of universities, it is equally true that a well-functioning university could also be an instrument of economic growth as well as a source of good governance ideas and practices.

A deepening crisis in public universities therefore needs to be taken seriously by just about everyone with a stake in the future of humanity and not only by students, lecturers and education stakeholders. We start by looking at the present crisis before moving on to explain the need for reforms and how to go about setting a new agenda.

THE KENYAN HIGHER EDUCATION LANDSCAPE

By November 2015, the Commission for University Education (CUE), was overseeing thirty-three public chartered universities; ten public university constituent

colleges; seventeen private chartered universities; five private university constituent colleges; fourteen institutions with letters of interim authority; and one registered private institution (Chege, 2015). Of these, we are only concerned with the thirty-three public chartered universities and their ten constituent colleges because they are government-owned.

University education in Kenya, like in most other places on the continent, is part and parcel of the colonial story. In short, with the establishment of colonial government and economy, there arose the need for specialised skills some of which could only be attained at a university. In the literature we have read so far, we have not come across any specific reason for the university per se rather than technical colleges if administrative and technical skills were the sole reasons for the establishment of higher educational institutions (HEIs). Indeed, until after political independence, the colonial government seems to have been satisfied with technical colleges offering diplomas locally and once in a while sending exceptional students (who were in the most part sons of collaborating chiefs and other native rulers) for degree courses in the United Kingdom (Frankema, 2011).

European and American religious missionaries also chipped in from time to time selecting students to be sent back home for further education under various funding arrangements. Few other Africans in the period before independence also used personal relationships with various people from abroad that saw some of them secure opportunities to study in universities abroad. Today, one of the most famous of such cases would probably be Barrack Obama senior, the father to the present US president, who used such personal connections to enrol at the University of Hawaii at Manoa in Honolulu as the first African foreign student there in 1959. Around this time in Kenya, the cold war rivalry between the USSR and the US also saw a number of Africans join institutions of higher learning abroad for degree courses.

Given this background, one can therefore say with confidence that the roots of university education in Kenya was driven mostly by the demand for skills to enhance employability especially in such areas as Engineering, Medicine, Law, Management, Public Administration and so on. Of course, with the departure of many skilled people of colonial extraction, the demand for these skills became even more acute and the

need for their local production, one would assume, led to the establishment of, first, the University of Nairobi in 1970 to the present thirty-three government-owned universities.

So, the university was established in the firm belief that it had to produce employable graduates that were often mostly absorbed by the public sector with a few joining the then nascent private sector. This seems to have worked fairly well until the late 1980's and early 1990's when the Bretton Woods Institutions came calling with Structural Adjustment Programs that included proposals for user charges for public services and more especially for provisions that were not deemed to be 'primary' (Zeleza, 2002). Public provisioning was henceforth to be geared towards primary health, primary education and so on. University education seems to have been transformed into a luxury good overnight albeit one that had been elitist from the beginning.

A common example one frequently met in the literature at this time to emphasise the importance of focusing on primary rather than tertiary education was the comparison between Botswana and Nigeria. As it is often told, Botswana decided after attaining independence in 1968 to concentrate on primary education and only focused on one public university whereas Nigeria developed over fifty higher educational institutions soon after independence (Daniel, 2014; Niño-Zarazúa, 2016). Yet, the protagonists contend, today Botswana has a higher literacy rate than Nigeria. This argument of course peppers over many other differences between the two nations not to mention other perspectives on the purpose and role of university education in economic development.

While funding for higher education was drying up, the demand for the same was growing unabated across the board. Other than the policy makers, the general public never seems to have bought into the idea that university education was a luxury. The shortage was also made worse by explosive population growth that at one point in the seventies was among the highest growth rates in the world. Indeed, the irony here that is easily apparent to development practitioners is the fact that the public was being denied the very education that in other parts of the world had resulted in low birth rates due to an ever increasing population. For example, it is a standard posit in

development studies that longer stays in school results in low fertility rates for girls and young women.

Kenyan universities seem to have surrendered thought leadership on public management and development issues around this time to Non-governmental organisations and government agencies. We use HIV/Aids campaign as an example to illustrate our point here. Once the tragedy of HIV/Aids was accepted as a public health issue, it seems that almost all attention was given to containing the disease and the once vibrant birth control message was forgotten along the way (Dodoo, Zulu, & Ezeh, 2007; Fiorella, Camlin, Salmen, & Omondi, 2015). The result is that today; Kenya is having a burgeoning young population that at one time saw a population increment of fifteen million people in less than twenty years. To put this in perspective, imagine the entire population of The Netherlands moving to Kenya in fifteen years only that in this case, it will be comprised only of the young! Our contention here is that the well-funded and ebullient HIV/Aids campaign seems to have monopolised population and health concerns to the detriment of equally-deserving issues that did not have intellectual champions.

A recent development that makes a situational analysis of the higher education landscape in Kenya urgent is the implementation of the new universities law. The Universities Act of 2012 was enacted to transform higher education. At present, we are not aware of any serious scholarly examination of the potential ripple effects of this tumultuous law that took around three years to be processed by Parliament due to lack of agreement on it by Kenya's education stakeholders. On the face of it, the new Act is expected to push up the cost of education and potentially raising the quality of learning. We are worried about the impact of the new laws on household income even though the reforms were meant to boost Kenya's competitiveness in the global human capital market.

The situation may be further compounded by the fact that public universities are sometimes established purely for political considerations rather than economic reasons (Chege, 2015). Clientelism, the electoral strategy whereby goods and services are exchanged for political support - often involving an implicit or explicit quid-pro-quo – is rife in Kenya. Thus, incumbent politicians with the power to establish

universities are not averse to creating new colleges or upgrading existing ones in certain areas to university status either as a campaign strategy to attract votes or as a reward to followers. Once so established, again the new institutions may be staffed at the upper echelons with people who are likely to be perceived supporters of the power barons or natives of the same location where the university is situated in order to appease local politicians. Nevertheless, these are the institutions we have and the challenge is to transform them so that they impact positively on public and development management.

TRANSFORMING PUBLIC UNIVERSITIES

We have to rejig the mission of publicly funded universities in order to be better able to meet the challenges of development management and quell the growing discontent that has now festered into a crisis of no limited proportion if we are to avoid manufacturing a new version of an Arab spring in Kenya. Some Kenyan youth are already vulnerable to indoctrination by terrorist groups as well as controversial religious groupings that seek to use them for diverse ends.

The silver lining on this dark prognosis is the emergence or re-emergence of the knowledge economy. The new knowledge economy offers developing economies a better chance at catch-up than the previous industrial age. For business school professors, management fads are common place and for the older ones, it is not uncommon for one to have lived through three of four buzzwords in their career, such as, business process re-engineering, total quality management, delayering, empowerment, and knowledge management. The intention here is not to use the word 'fad' pejoratively. The purpose is to show that perhaps more than many other disciplines, management theories tend to have short shelf lives.

In the quest to re-discover the mission of Kenya's public universities, the researcher finds the notion of 'knowledge management' quite interesting. Nonaka and Takeuchi popularised the notion of knowledge management with the publication their book entitled 'The knowledge-creating company: how Japanese companies create the dynamics of innovation' in 1995. As a measure of their success, today, many business schools offer Knowledge Management as a module. The developments helped to spur

interests in what was later to be widely referred to as the knowledge economy (see, for instance, Youtie & Shapira, 2008; Yusuf, 2008) . In a way, the discussion now moved from what we had earlier called a fad to traditional economic theory, which, we suppose, has a longer shelf-life than a management theory and is closer to Public and Development Management and is thus more helpful to our Kenyan story.

Regarding the development of a knowledge economy, the government has to intervene in the market to enhance societal welfare. Of course the argument for government intervention in ensuring economic development is an old sow in the theory (Shiel, Leal Filho, do Paço, & Brandli, 2016; Wright, Clarysse, Lockett, & Knockaert, 2008). In other words, the crises in Kenya's public universities today may very well offer opportunities for policy makers to reconfigure them substantively as tools of economic development. This reconfiguration must take into account the type of knowledge to be gained in the new institutions. The resultant institutions must be geared to discover and disseminate the kind of knowledge that advances a learning society.

The reconfigured university will also have to come up with strategies of dealing with the emergence of new world players. Whereas in the past Kenyans looked to the West for technological advances and directions in higher education, the emergence of China and the successes of the so-called Asian Tigers – South Korea, Taiwan, Singapore and Hong Kong calls for new strategies in designing external partnerships in search of economic development. Domestically, we expect Kenyan universities to not only aggressively pursue greater collaboration with industry, but also to be actively involved in entrepreneurship even as they train innovators and entrepreneurs rather than merely producing employable graduates.

There are other challenges out there that universities all over the world have to deal with at this present time. These challenges include the Information Technology revolution, pressure to generate new sources of revenue and opening up of access in an environment bogged down with worrying levels of inequality. Similarly, universities are now expected to lead the way not only in traditional research but also in the development of greener technologies. There is also the risk of radicalisation of students in campus by terrorist groups. However, our main task in this article has

more to do with organisational strategies rather than operational issues. As with any other management scenario, we know that distinct cultures yield specific perspectives with regard to academic administration.

THE LEADERSHIP REVOLUTION AS A FAILURE STRATEGY IN THE KENYAN ACADEMY

As we noted earlier, there are surely to be found some unique features in the twenty-two or so Kenya's public universities. However, the institutions are not exempt from global typologies that make analysis of higher education management feasible. For our purposes here, we need only concern ourselves with the collegial culture in the Kenyan universities. This seems to be the predominant culture in Kenya's public universities. As originally postulated, university administrators pursuing this strategy often believe that their institutions are best sustained through rational planning (see, for instance, Kodama, 2008). This is often further reinforced by a strong focus on educational quality with a redoubtable reliance on strong management and teaching staff interaction. At least this is the rhetoric if not the practice. The dangers inherent in this seemingly benign posture are legion.

In teaching and research, the collegial posture has manifested itself in Kenyan institutions of higher learning by promoting rigorous analytical feats in what is believed to be a true model of a scientist. In the time of one of the authors of this article, at the university, as a civil engineering student, he remembers designing (as a class exercise) grade-separated interchanges that he (the author) had never seen in real life. Indeed, we could mathematically prove at what height the famed tower of Babel would have collapsed given different construction materials and dimensions even without the recorded divine intervention.

While these kinds of feats made the students feel very clever and world class, they often sought being smart for smartness sake and not for any deeper societal meaning while based in an environment which demanded that the university itself be a tool of national development as much as the institution was of itself a sign of development. As any educationist would tell you, there is need for learners to understand

assumptions behind computations in order to make their knowledge meaningful to their society.

Today, strategic workshops encouraging more visioning and goal-setting are held almost on a yearly basis with various departments coming up with their own missions to be aligned with the overall purpose of the organisation. The rampant availability of strategy templates on the Internet only adds to this confusion. Increasingly, university administrators are being called upon to focus on the academic enterprise narrowly defined as the generation, interpretation, and dissemination of knowledge in a market environment. This is often interspersed with some income–generating activities as well as limited forms of community engagement for compliance purposes.

The disjuncture and fracture in mission is not limited to university governance but is pervasive in many public agencies as well. Professor Thomas Odhiambo, giving the 8th Inaugural Lecture at the University of Nairobi in 1975 was already weary of this trend. Odhiambo wondered why biological control has not been taken as seriously as chemical control is. He then turned to an eminent pest management authority who gives two explanations as follows:

> [F]irst is that there seems to be almost a primitive gratification in taking some positive action against an organism that is viewed as an enemy or simply a nuisance. Certainly, there is a strong inclination to choose an expedient, immediate, and very visible tactic. For this reason, the use of the powerfully toxic pesticide provides enormous satisfaction because it involves physical action and the expenditure of capital that is immediately rewarded by a highly visible chemical coverage and the comfortable imagination of enormous arthropod body counts..... There is a second reason why biological control is not being as widely and intensely practised as its merits justify. Casual attempts to undertake biological control are not likely to be successful.

It used to be said of South Korean university students that some earned more money practicing their trades as students than as graduate professionals. The explanation for this was that students charged less than qualified professionals but were able to offer the same quality of service hence obtained more commissions. This is in marked

contrast to my experience with university students studying applied sciences in Kenyan universities who often seem to be, in the best case scenario, more steeped in theory than practical applications.

This mismatch between what universities sometimes offer and what their countries really need did not escape the attention of Singapore's first premier who offers some interesting vignettes in this regard. In one instance, while on a sabbatical in a university in the US, Premier Lee Kuan Yew marvelled at the difference then between American and British professors. Whereas the latter were often engaged in historical studies to understand what happened, their American counterparts were preoccupied with futuristic studies trying to predict what will happen.

Premier Yew (2000) also writes disparagingly of his visit to Ghana where he made acquaintance with Kwapong, the first African Vice Chancellor of the University of Ghana. He was dismayed that this intelligent man had chosen to study Ancient Languages rather than some practical skills to help his people. He similarly disparages attempts by then government of Ceylon (present day Sri Lanka) to establish an airline with their most experienced executive as a former pilot of Singapore airlines justifiably wondering what piloting skills had to do with the business demands of managing an airline.

What we have established so far is that the university has not pulled its weight on public and development management yet it is a justifiable expectation that the academy should have offered thought leadership in this undertaking. In the next section, we show how managers of Kenya's public universities can avoid pit-falls of bad strategy development in order to come up with Mission Statements that have the potential to foster not only state capacity but also enhances nation building efforts.

MISSION AND CHANGE: TOWARDS A NEW AGENDA FOR KENYA'S PUBLIC UNIVERSITIES

We suggestions on how to reformulate cross-institutional missions of Kenya's public universities to deal with the present crisis. This is a dangerous territory as it involves formulation of new strategies as well. Formulation of a successful public and development management strategy is one of the most difficult assignments practitioners face. As Rumelt (2013), one of the most successful and influential

thinkers on strategy and management, laments: The gap between good strategy and the jumble of things people label "strategy" has grown over the years.

We have to get our strategy right for we know that Mission Statements matter. Amongst many other studies that highlight the importance of well-thought out corporate mission statements, Weiss and Piderit (1999) demonstrate empirically their effect on the performance of public agencies. In their study of public schools in the US with data about school characteristics and performance before and after the adoption of Mission Statements, they show that missions vary substantially and that choices that managers make in the content and rhetorical style of their mission statements do have consequences that either hamper or spur subsequent performance.

Before we get into the details of our proposed approach, let us familiarise ourselves once again with what good strategy development entails. Rumelt (2013) summarises the kernel of a good strategy thus:

1. A *diagnosis* that defines or explains the nature of the challenge. A good diagnosis simplifies the often overwhelming complexity of reality by identifying certain aspects of the situation as critical.
2. A *guiding policy* for dealing with the challenge. This is an overall approach chosen to cope with or overcome the obstacles identified in the diagnosis.
3. A set of *coherent actions* that are designed to carry out the guiding policy. These are the steps that are coordinated with one another to work together in accomplishing the guiding policy.

The 17th century English poet, John Milton, describes with great elegance the strategic brilliance of Satan in his epic poem, *Paradise Lost,* published in 1667. The researcher is especially fascinated by the retelling of the same story by Freedman (2013). Back to *Paradise Lost*, once Satan, as bellicose as ever, was cast out of heaven and thrown down to earth,[1] he found himself with only a third of the angels and there arose need to regroup and consider their next move. Satan's fury was raised by the elevation of God's son, Jesus, to be equal to God. Previously, we are told, Satan (then known as

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1 Luke 10:18; 2 peter 2:4; Jude 6; Revelation 12:4; and Genesis 3:1-7

Lucifer) was one of the great angels amongst the heavenly host. A strategic debate then took place in Pandemonium among the senior leadership team led by Satan with Molloch, Belial, Mammon and Beelzebub in attendance.

Molloch advocated for open war to get over with it while Belial suggested they wait until God relented. When Mammon's turn came, he ridiculed both the suggestions of Molloch and Belial and instead urged his colleagues to persevere, work hard, and over time build Pandemonium as an empire to rival God's heaven. This did not go down well with the others in attendance hence Beelzebub came up with a different suggestion that pleased Satan very much and was adopted by the assembly. The plan was, he argued, since men were created in the image of angels; why not convince them to join Satan's army. Since they were bound to increase in population, over time, Satan's team would be in a position to tackle God and his angels....

It is against this background that the researcher suggests a re-think of the purpose of Kenya's public universities to give them a role in the fight against these social evils. We need government-owned universities to help in the twin efforts of state and nation building. State building and nation building are conceptualized here as distinct notions. As used here, 'state-building' refers to interventionist strategies to restore and rebuild the institutions and public agencies such as government-owned universities. On the other hand 'nation-building' refers to the creation of a cultural identity of the country (Bandyopadhyay & Green, 2013; Xu & Xu, 2016). From these conceptualisations, it is apparent that a well-functioning state is a requirement of the development of a nation thereby making state-building a necessary component of nation-building. This distinction allows for the incorporation of strategic external partners in state-building while the development of a cultural nation remains the task of internal actors such as public universities.

We want to see government-owned higher institutions of learning in Kenya take this challenge seriously. Were we to begin our inspection today, the first port of call would be the Mission Statements of the various institutions. Peek (Bandyopadhyay & Green, 2013; Xu & Xu, 2016) says that development of a mission statement is a key part in the process of establishing institutional mission. Quoting Brown (1984), he says such a statement may be defined as: 'a charter that defines the basic business or business in

which the enterprise will engage, the types of products it will make or the services it will provide, the markets it will serve, and perhaps how the company will conduct its affairs.' In the same manner, Connel & Galasinski (1998) show that analysis of higher education institutions' Mission Statements can help in determining in what ways they position HEIs, represent what they do, and relate them to other participants in the society.

This is a great time in Kenya to think about mission and change in public universities. The Universities Act 2012 is now taking root. Previously, Kenya's public universities were operating under specific acts of parliament. Now they have all been brought under the same law as private institutions. Since the act makes null and void all existing charters and letters of interim authority, which were previously required by institutions before they could operate, the universities have some sort of a clean slate from which to proceed strategically. Now all the HEIs will have to produce Mission Statements.

The universities must reclaim their birth right of thought leadership. The economic and democratic space in Kenya has now been widened sufficiently to cater for this role. What is now required are administrators with the vision and competence to carry out this mandate. This by itself does not require more money per se rather than a new way of looking at things to enable us to do more with less. At its root, an effective and efficient strategy should enable one to get more from a situation than the conditions warrant.

CONCLUSION

Kenya's public universities have a decision to make. We have identified the problem as lackadaisical theory and practice of public and development management. Too large a number of bureaucrats and other public affairs practitioners are not playing their role adequately to enable the country join the ranks of middle income countries in the near future. After sixty years of independence, the men and women on the street are tied of empty promises and self-serving political rhetoric. The public universities have also not demonstrated that they can offer thought leadership in the quest for

inclusive economic development. There is nothing that holds them back save for a decision to start.

If and when the leadership of public universities decide to join in this struggle, then they have to develop guiding policies to this end. We argue here that these policies must originate in strong Mission Statements for each of the public universities. Essentially, public universities will have to carry out a set of coherent actions designed to accomplish the policy objectives. These actions must include new program development as well as intensified collaborations with various actors. The actors to be partnered with aggressively include: industry; other government agencies; other universities both internally and abroad; international development institutions; professional associations; trade guilds; labour unions; as well as independent foundations and institutes.

Community engagement will have to be intensified to be of meaning and value to all involved. Increasingly, public universities will have to embrace what is now referred to in the literature as engaged scholarship. Engaged scholarship is a whole new terrain that involves university-community entrepreneurial partnerships to solve social, environmental and economic problems. Examples include students engaging in disability programs as well as founding technology start-up companies or community newspapers. Programs must be put in place to encourage 'critical reading' amongst students. Critical reading refers to both reading for academic purposes as well as for social engagement.

Regarding research, professors should come up with ways to enable output that is scientifically rigorous but that also addresses the concerns of policy and practice. Equally desirable will be the encouragement of activist scholarship that combine rigour and objectivity of scientific enquiry with direct engagement in social activism. This would allow some scholars to advocate on behalf of communities they study. Equally important will be the development of pathways to enable scholars to incorporate the knowledge and leadership of their informants directly into the formal process of knowledge creation.

The researcher is of the opinion that Kenya's public universities should also design civic engagement programs in great detail to specifically cater for: service-learning classes; community-based research projects; and the creation of community-based service-learning spaces. University management will have to lobby for and develop institutional factors that support and promote civic-engagement over and above corporate social responsibility. As a country that regularly suffers inter and intra community violent conflicts that often lead to needless loss of life, limb and property, engaged scholarship that includes conflict resolution should be introduced into various programs to secure the dividends of progress.

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