

# Building the African Infrastructure for Development: The Role of the African University

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## **1. INTRODUCTION**

In volume 3 Issue 1 of this journal, I wrote part I of “Building the African ICT Infrastructure for Development: The Role of the African University”. After receiving many emails requesting me to make this broader, I am returning to the same theme but I am making it broader by removing the ICT component and considering all university education disciplines in national building. In addition to this and making it more relevant for the rest of the African population and beyond, I will also discuss the general population’s expectations of their universities in contributing to and advancing the forces of national development.

I have pointed out in various articles how the African university had a late – almost the last spot in the race for anything universities do for national development. The reasons for this are many including the fact that most of these universities are very recent with less than 50 years in business except a few. Even these few that have relatively a long history of educating Africa’s young minds, their missions were not genuinely, at least at the start, for developing African nations other than educating low level and half-baked Africans to help reduce the labor costs of the colonial masters who were finding it increasingly expensive to ship Europeans to Africa to do mere clerical jobs. To solve this problem, they started training “workshops” calling them technical or business colleges. Upon independence, most of these “workshops” were turned into national “universities”, but with no clear role in national development. These national “universities” were catering for children of the new African political elites. Cast into new roles of national administrators with little to no preparations, the new African elites did not formulate development agendas for these universities. So many of the universities continue to float with no development agenda only teaching students for personal prosperity, thus leading to the mass migration of the educated Africans to Europe and North America.

Through the seventies and eighties, most African universities were still without development agendas and were still doing business as usual. Meanwhile, governments strapped with lack of money saw no need of putting more scarce resources into big white elephants. By mid-eighties, even the UN and IMF were calling for a limit on funding African universities. But as I have pointed out in my previous writings, the wind of change has started blowing across the continent, especially for African universities. There is a new African quest, mostly fueled by an unprecedented indigenous interest, for relevant education, development driven based on technological acquisition.

To take advantage of this new African quest, African leading universities and institutions should set themselves new development agendas, based on the new technological advances and the an unprecedented interest in these technologies by young people; these agendas may include:

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- building research and development capabilities and capacity that will create environments necessary for the development of infrastructures capable of solving local problems and challenges;
- developing curricula that put emphasis on:
  - educating graduates who are creators, not necessarily seekers, of jobs that meet national development needs,
  - identifying local problems and challenges that contribute to development and urgently need solutions,
  - identifying or developing relevant solutions and best practices, to solve these local problems and deal with the challenges,
  - finding local and global resources to build the needed research and development capacity,
  - building the tools needed to solve the identified problems where such tools are needed,
  - building the culture needed to promote the use of these tools and best practices to solve emerging local problems and challenges,
  - strengthening the newly developed research capacity through continuous improvement like the setting up of African Research Centers and Academies, and
  - Establishing a reward system to nationally recognize those people who excel in finding solutions and building tools that can be used to solve national and international problems and challenges.
- Encouraging researchers to put research interests before any other interests; that means sacrificing personal financial gains to academic pursuit.

However, none of these can be achieved without the governments showing interest and leadership through founding scientists and national research projects. Several African countries are already creating National Research Councils and Foundations and most important founding them. Some countries have also started funding graduate programs that are of national interests so that students doing graduate work can get scholarship funding. This is seed money for future research scientists.

All these activities, if implemented, will highlight the efforts African universities must make to advance basic and applied research agendas essential for building the critical mass of required capacity for national building in particular and for the development of Africa in general.