

The Stragglng African University Needs a Critical Partner to Attain Its Place on the World Stage – Its Government

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ABSTRACT

The African university has been hampered in its growth by a multitude of problems. From the continent's late start in the race to setting up and obtaining universities with research quality fundamentals to equipment acquisition, lack of capacity, limited research and development resources and most importantly the increasing absence of the critical partner- the African government. The lack of a strong government funding policy for the African university and the fact that most African universities are new on the academic scene, most of them less than 50 years in business have exberthed the expected academic growth of the African university as it fights to achieve the covered global ranking. With all these problems, two solutions are fundamental: a development of a strong government backed funding policy for the African university and a new research policy from within the African academia to support a culture of both applied and fundamental research to drive the badly needed indigineous innovations and development of a knowledge pool of skills for development. Without these, the African university will continue to be deligated to the tail end of the world class universities and as a result, this will hamp the badly needed national developments. There is need to remedy this situation and that is the focus of this paper

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1. INTRODUCTION

In the last couple of issues, I have been writing about the crucial need for the African university to improve its reputation as a research university and attain its role among world class universities. So far, the African

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university has failed to do that. In ranking after ranking of world universities, year after year, the African university has failed to attain any position in any ranking that is commensurate to the needs and education aspiration of the African peoples. In fact, according to the 2014 World University Rankings by the British firm Quacquarelli Symonds, University of Cape Town in South Africa is the highest ranked university on the continent, in position 141 [African Development Bank Group]. In the 2014-15 *Times Higher Education* World University Rankings, the only international university performance agency to judge world class universities across all of their core missions - teaching, research, knowledge transfer and international outlook, the University of Witwatersrand with a ranking of 275 was the first African university to appear in the ranking [Times Higher Education,]. In the respected *US News and World Report*, the 2015 rankings of global powerhouses in education, the University of Cape Town comes in at number 251 followed by the University of Witwatersrand at number 270 and the University of Cairo, across the continent at number 443 [US News and World Reports].

As I pointed out in my last article, today's African higher institutions and educational landscape are facing problems that are hindering not only high quality research, but also the delivery of education to the masses that need it. The causes are many including (Kizza, IJCIR, Special Issue Vol. 5, No. 2, pp. 6-10):

- Heavy teaching responsibilities leading to - little time for research
- Reluctance of the state to finance broader education and research
- Low pay of teaching staff leading to a list of problems from ineffective teaching to preference of consultancies to improve salaries
- Low and decreasing numbers of senior professors
- Deterioration in the general education standards
- Mushrooming low quality universities
- Low numbers of students with access to higher education

While all these problems are in one way or another preventing the match of the African university to the global stage, there are a few outstanding ones and really critical ones. We will concentrate on these here.

2. CRITICAL PROBLEMS FACING THE AFRICAN UNIVERSITY

There are indeed two major problems currently preventing the advance of the African university to the world stage and these are: the missing critical partner – the African government and the entrenched culture of consultancy in the African academia taken as research.

2.1 The Missing Critical Partner – the African Government

As Mr. Steve Kayizzi-Mugerwa, Acting Chief Economist and Vice-President, AfDB, observed in his presentation, “African universities as agents of innovation and development” [African Development Bank Group] during a panel discussion at the African Economic Conference in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, an annual gathering organized by African Development Bank (AfDB), United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the African governments should tap into the increasing interest in higher learning education by investing in international standards for universities.

According to Dr Sarah Ssali of Makerere University School of Women and Gender Studies [SAMUEL KAMUGISHA], government had invested little in research, leaving it in the hands of development partners. It has been the case that university education has traditionally contributed to social and economic development by forming human capital, through workforce development, building knowledge capital pools and bases primarily through innovation and research and dissemination. Based on this, national governments in developed countries supported higher education to develop that human capital as a key factor for economic growth.

In their paper “The contribution of higher education institutions to the South African economy” [Anastassios Pouris and Roula Inglesi-Lotz], authors Anastassios Pouris and Roula Inglesi-Lotz report that volumes of literature on government investment in higher education indicate that there are strong and positive returns from investing in higher education institutions. KPMG, in its report “ Economic modelling of improved funding and reform arrangements for universities. Canberra: Universities Australia; 2009”, [KPGM], observes that ‘increasing university funding from its current level of 1.6% of GDP to 2% of GDP in Australia and increasing the share of Commonwealth government grants up to 50% from 42%, led to a 5.8% gain in real GDP and a 5.2% gain in living standards in the long term’.

So government support of university education does not only improve the country’s GDP, but human capacity in research, innovation and development is increased. These form the ingredients needed for the African university to match to the world stage.

2.2 Entrenched Culture of Consultancy

As Dr. Ssali pointed out earlier, the African government is increasingly missing in the funding of the African university, leaving it to the development partners [SAMUEL KAMUGISHA]. Many of these development partners are in fact supporting a market-driven model of research dominated by a consultancy culture according to Mamdani (Mamdani, Mail and Guardian Online). This has led to negative consequences for education and research. The consultancy culture is institutionalized through short courses in research methodology, courses that teach students a set of tools to gather and process quantitative information from which to cull answers. In this environment, researchers will become managers whose real work is to supervise data collection (Mamdani, Mail and Guardian Online). Mamdani summarizes the prevailing research culture as intellectual life in universities reduced to bare-bones classroom activity, seminars and workshops have migrated to hotels and workshop attendance going with transport allowances and per diems

Consequently, Dr Godfrey Asiimwe, the head of Makerere’s department of Development Studies, argued that, ‘basic research’ has been neglected.

“Useful research [according to development partners] is applied research because the results are easily quantifiable,” he said, at the dialogue organised by the University Forum on Governance, in conjunction with Konrad Adenauer Stiftung.

In “Scholars In The Market Place: The Dilemmas of Neo-Liberal Reform at Makerere University, 1989-2005”, Prof Mahmood Mamdani argues that the consultancy culture has impacted negatively on both postgraduate education and research.

Dr Ssali also believes that consultancy was highly driven by government’s preference for foreign research think tanks over research done by university academics. As a result, Dr Ssali continues, some of the academics run to such think tanks. Dr Sallie Simba Kayunga, a lecturer at the Department of Political Science and Public Administration, seems to agree with Dr Ssali [.SAMUEL KAMUGISHA].

According to Mamdani (Mahmoud Mamdani, online), many of the problems existing in the African institutions of higher education that are hindering research include:

- Heavy teaching responsibilities leading to - little time for research
- Reluctance of the state to finance research
- Low pay - so would be researchers are often reluctant to use part of their salary for research,
- leading to a preference of consultancies to improve their salaries
- Low and decreasing numbers of senior professors
- Deterioration in the general education standards
- Mushrooming universities

Without major changes in government funding policies for higher education and changes in the university culture of research, the African university will never accend to the global elites of education.

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