

EDITORIAL

Reforming African Universities for development relevance: what will it take?

Mensah, S. & Egeru, A.

Regional Universities Forum for Capacity Building in Agriculture, Plot 151/155 Garden Hill, Makerere University, P.O. Box Wandegaya, Kampala, Uganda

Corresponding author: a.egeru@ruforum.org

Summary

The outcry for reform in African universities over the last two decades has been epic; and the extent of reforms that have been executed on the continent is varied leaving islands of success in teaching, research and innovation. What has been clear is the fact that many education commentators wish African universities to transition from the current trend of teaching universities to focus on research and innovations that address the ‘common man’s problems’ whilst positioning Africa on the global competitive edge. In this editorial we opine that universities reforms in Africa are critical but it takes more than just a university to reform. Reform is a socio-political context; it requires political commitment and leadership at continental and national level including trust and confidence in the research and innovation outputs from universities in Africa and setting and assigning universities clear development objectives that ought to be delivered and matching this with counterpart funding to facilitate delivery. Further, supporting education value chain that integrate technical vocational education and training (TVET) institutions aids in technology generation, translation and transfer. Importantly, strengthening doctoral training in Africa is urgent and critical for generation of innovations and leadership to support the continent transformation. Clearly, the reform process is complex and as such, it takes a systematic process requiring a major diagnostic and surgery of all processes and practices in the universities and no quick fix will solve the problem.

Résumé

Au cours des deux dernières décennies, l’engouement suscité par les réformes dans les universités en Afrique a été épique; et l’ampleur des réformes mises en œuvre sur le continent a varié, faisant place aux îlots de succès dans l’enseignement, la recherche et l’innovation. Ce qui est toutefois clair, c’est que de nombreux observateurs souhaitent que les universités en Afrique transitent de l’actuelle tendance d’enseigner à la recherche et aux innovations qui répondent aux «problèmes quotidiens des hommes» tout en positionnant l’Afrique dans la compétitivité mondiale. Dans cet éditorial, nous signalons que les réformes universitaires en Afrique sont très importantes, mais il faudra plus qu’une université pour y arriver. La réforme a aussi sa place dans un contexte socio-politique; elle exige un engagement politique et un leadership aux niveaux continental et national, y compris une confiance en les résultats de recherche et d’innovation des universités en Afrique, et la définition et l’attribution d’objectifs de développement clairs pour les universités, objectifs qui devraient être atteints et assortis de fonds de contrepartie pour faciliter leur exécution. De plus, le soutien à la chaîne de valeur de l’enseignement intégrant les institutions d’enseignement

et de formation professionnelle et technique (EFTP) facilite la création, la traduction et le transfert de technologies. De façon importante, il est urgent et essentiel de renforcer la formation doctorale dans les universités en Afrique pour générer des innovations et un leadership qui accompagnent la transformation du continent. De toute évidence, la réforme est un processus complexe et en tant que tel, elle implique un mécanisme systématique nécessitant un diagnostic majeur à tous les niveaux dans les universités, et aucune solution rapide ne résoudra le problème.

Introduction

Africa, a continent of several storylines in the global arena is receiving varied development signals. In the last decade, the continent's global perspective had transitioned to a continent of hope; a rising continent. This development outlook was based on the period of 'super-cycle' characterised by positive global commodity prices and thus extractive of Africa's natural resources (Coulibaly, 2017; Deloitte, 2017). However, in 2016, the continent's economic growth especially in sub-Saharan Africa weakened in over two decades of progressive positive results; this was attributed to a tumble in the commodity prices affecting mainly economies reliant on mining and production and export of raw materials. These patterns have since then resurrected discourse on the development trajectories Africa should have and the role of Africa's education. The urge for Africa to diversify its economies, improve productivity, build value chains for agriculture and improve both domestic and export markets has been recognised hence with. Regional think tanks, policy and development actors subsequently have recognised the fundamental role education and knowledge play in translating development goals, objectives and priorities into reality. Accordingly, it is now recognised that knowledge is a key driver of productivity and economic growth, and for Africa to transition and build robust economies. Investment in human capital through more accessible, equitable and better quality education and training systems is not an option to ponder about (Darvas *et al.*, 2017).

Over the last two decades, education became an important and tradable commodity. Whether unconsciously or driven by the labour market dynamics, Africans had recognised the fundamental opportunities education provided to its young generation. Accordingly, there was a general rush into the university education space (Friesenhahn, 2014). Six important trajectories arose with this haste for degrees in the continent. Firstly, rapid expansion of universities to accommodate more students including development of different study patterns and entry pathways. For example, Open Distance Learning (ODL), double shift study arrangements with some students studying during the normal working day time while others studied in the evening and in some cases trans night, duplication of degree programmes, and creation of satellite university campuses in various parts of the country(ies) were initiated (Mweni and Simatwa, 2013; Reisberg and Rumbley, 2015). Secondly, rapid transition of once technical colleges including the Technical and Vocational Education Training (TVET) institutions into universities. This included merger of some institutions into a single university, bringing in a period of difficult transitions in both management and staffing and therefore quality of training delivered. It also started undermining the value of vocational skills based education on the continent as degree based

training became the focus of many institutions and as such, technical, vocation education and training was therefore not a priority policy option in the continent (Atchoarena and Delluc, 2002; The Africa-America Institute, 2015; Mokwena, 2015).

Thirdly, an astronomical increase in student numbers was realised; universities experienced a boom in revenues, which was exciting to several administrators and academics as bonus could easily be paid and as universities repositioned themselves as the most populous universities in the country or region. But, this period of excitement was short lived as sooner than later, the facilities and infrastructure were choked, the student-teacher ratio went off the margins necessary for delivery of quality training rocking down the quality, and academics became fatigued as the universities became teaching 'shops' (Mohamedbhai, 2008; Havergal, 2015; Akalu, 2016). Fourthly, discontent in among state and non-actors arose; the academics demanded for more pay and equity accompanied with industrial action, university administrators squeezed the politicians for non-provision of requisite budget allocations, the employers and labour market complained of the quality of graduates and developed a detest for university graduates-openly unemployable trained graduates were being released in their thousands into the labour market (Odhiambo, 2011; Maringe and Ojo, 2017). Further, student strikes and agitation became routine; with some universities being closed for several months to a year or so. A disruption in learning either overtly and/or covertly had set in motion at different points of education. Fifth, exclusionism within education arose in the continent with those that can afford to attend private secondary schools became the ones that gain access and entry to competitive universities in their respective countries. With this pattern a consumerism behavior set-in motion among parents, students and a society that feels entitled owing to the fact that they are paying and at the same time delayed graduation fueled increased discontent within the university education system (Varghese, 2006; Degefa, 2011; Amadi and Precious, 2015). Sixth, politicians in the an effort to impress their electorate did two opposing undertakings, among others: facilitate the creation of more universities that are non-specialist universities which in turn led to proliferation of the academic programmes, duplication the already existing ones albeit with limited investments for their full functionality. Whilst promoting new universities, the politicians barrage the universities for producing unskilled and unemployable graduates; this producing a 'cold wave' of relations between governments and university administrators.

It is certainly clear that Africa's universities are under immense pressure to show relevance to society and the development needs and priorities of their respective countries amidst a constrained operational environment. But, how can African universities realign their training and priorities to facilitate Africa's development and what will it take to achieve this?. This editorial provides a few insights into this complex issue as a precursor to the 18 papers presented in this issue of the RUFORUM Working document series. Universities are essentially social-political constructs reflecting the quality of social norms and value systems and political economy and apparatus at play in a given country. If African universities are to undergo successful reform, then the political class (including leaders, rulers and opportunists) within the African space must begin to trust the universities they have created and/or found in existence as axels of needed transformation. By doing this, the first imperative would have been cultivated and subsequent to this will challenge the universities to align with national and regional development priorities. The leaders also

need to match the challenge with the resource investments to ensure sustainable financing including investments in research and infrastructure development. African universities cannot compete on the global knowledge and innovation base through opportunistic research and infrastructure financing based on projects and donor support; the academics become research assistants who cannot take full credit for the advancements and/or cannot lodge a patent filing.

The second imperative is the actual definition of clear development priorities at country level, which should not simply shift with the regimes and/or leaders. Critical in this definition should be a clear resolve for Africa to transition from the production and export of raw materials to developed value chains including processing and manufacturing. Africa should export chocolate to China for example; that is a huge market rather than aching to export cocoa only to import chocolate. In other words, a realization that Africa as a continent is one of the largest donors of jobs and financial resources (through export of raw materials) to the developed countries and the rapidly rising economies is critical. The third imperative should be a focus on its youth that constitute more than half of the continent's population. Within this focus on the youth is the intrinsic realization that Africa's urban transition is being preceded by influx of youth and middle age persons into urban areas; which is a reversal of the pattern that Europe and America underwent. Ideally, the industrial development should have evolved first in order to attract the populations from rural areas to work in various levels and enterprises. This reverse transition process portends African countries with myriad of challenges that will have political and social effects of unknown proportion but that the leaders need to look into the Arab spring for lessons. Fourth imperative relates to the African universities realising that their relevance is hinged on the contribution to society regardless of the focus of the university whether primarily being a research led university and/or a comprehensive university. Finally, dismantling technical and vocational training institutions by transforming them into universities reduces the value contribution that universities will make in the development space. Intermediate skills are requisite in the economy, these are often developed in the vocational institutions and these are critical in translating some of the ideations from universities into meaningful products useable by society. Thus, as African governments seek for reformed universities contributing to development, a holistic education and skills development continuum is a requisite imperative for discussion.

This issue of the RUFORUM Working Document Series, Volume 15, highlights some of the above issues. How do we make African universities innovation hubs? How do we enhance development relevance of university of education, and use the university education for skilling the youth? What sustainable financing mechanisms are needed to enhance performance of African Universities? This Volume also presents case studies of the higher education sector in Kenya, and the effort to launch a Doctoral Degree training programme at the University of Burundi. These are just examples of issues confronting higher education sector in Africa.

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