

# The role and mission of the university in African society

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## 1. Introduction

Over the past decades, both public and private universities in Sub-Saharan Africa have greatly expanded in numbers and have grown into complex organizations with large numbers of students and staff. In many respects, African universities have played a crucial role in the development of their nations, by educating the political and professional elites and by contributing to the creation of a new national identity in the post-colonial era.

In other respects, the universities' achievements have not been fully satisfactory. They have particularly disappointed politicians in their own societies and donor organizations in other parts of the world. This disappointment largely lies in their not living up to their role as development institutions, by acting as agents in innovation processes and generating or facilitating economic growth in the region. It is also generally acknowledged that the quality of university education in the region has declined significantly over the past decade. Universities are confronted with numerous institutional problems, some with external causes and others resulting from internal factors. The primary external causes of this situation lie in the sharp increase in student numbers resulting from demographic and socio-economic developments, lack of equipment, the loss of well-qualified staff (*brain drain*) and, most of all, the absence of sufficient funding. Internal factors include organization and management, institutional profiles, and general strategy.

## 2. The role and mission of the African university

In addressing the role of the African university it is very important not to forget the broader context of development in Africa and to realize that, despite signs of slow recovery, the African continent continues to struggle with extreme poverty (42% of people have to

live on less than \$ 1 a day). Furthermore, there is inadequate schooling, with more than 80 million African children having no access to primary education. In recent years, school enrolment has declined in at least 14 of 27 countries studied (Bredie & Beeharry, 1998). There is a severe deterioration of health conditions, especially as a result of AIDS, and an ever-increasing debt burden, currently running at 80% of Sub-Saharan Africa's GNP. Africa's seven million refugees account for over half the total number of refugees in the world. And last but not least, the population of Africa is expected to more than double by the year 2025. The urban population is increasing by 6% per year and the population in cities like Nairobi, Lusaka and Kinshasa has increased sevenfold since 1950. It will probably take another two generations to recoup the average living standard of the mid-1970s (UNDP, 1999).

However, positive signs should not be overlooked. In 1998 for example, African universities, together with a plethora of tertiary training institutions in the African, Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) countries, showed an increase of 75% over 1997 to meet the standards of inclusion in the Directory of Advanced Training Opportunities in the ACP countries. In the last decade 27 multi-party elections have been organized for the first time in 21 countries. Thirty-eight of the 43 countries in the region have organized multi-party parliamentary elections. On 31 January 1998, 22 countries from Sub-Saharan Africa drafted National Poverty Reduction Strategies to combat the downward spiral.

Tertiary education in Sub-Saharan Africa, operating within this highly complex environment, will need a multi-faceted strategy to address the question of how African universities can improve their contribution to society and how they can play a more prominent national role. They are potentially the most capable institutions in their countries (ADEA, 1999). During the 1999 Conference of Rectors, Vice Chancellors and Presidents of African universities in Arusha, Tanzania, the main focus of the meeting was how to redefine the role of higher education. It was argued that revitalised universities have a major role to play in bringing about change and development in the region. But this process of renewal within the universities can only begin when they themselves seize the initiative (AAU, 1999).

In spite of the severity and multitude of the problems they are confronted with, many of the issues faced by African universities are not specific to their region. There is a world-wide debate on the role and character of the university in a period of radical and rapid change (Smith & Webster, 1997). It is widely believed that information and communications technology (ICT) will drastically alter the position of the individual university in the field of knowledge production. ICT is also likely to affect learning methodologies, and will have a direct impact upon vastly different groups of students, especially in Africa (ADEA, 1998). Universities are, so to speak, at a crossroads (UNESCO, 1998b). In all countries of the world student numbers are expanding while, at the same time, there is a lack of sufficient resources. Furthermore, partly as a result of the above-mentioned trends, during the past decade many countries with substantially different political systems and levels of economic development have embarked upon remarkably similar reform agendas for higher education institutions (Johnstone, 1998). One of the key issues in these agendas, which especially focus on finance and management, is a call for institutional change which is encouraging the higher education sector to turn to the market and to develop a closer relationship with business and industry.

The purpose of higher education and, consequently, the role played by individual universities and colleges is manifold. Universities and colleges promote the general societal good by providing advanced education and seeking to develop the means to apply existing knowledge for the benefit of society. Research helps to extend the boundaries and the area of application of knowledge. In addition, universities and colleges respond in various ways to specific societal needs in their own countries and regions. Therefore, in addition to *individual* benefits, higher education also produces *social* benefits, which are reflected in economic growth as well as a multitude of non-monetary (non-quantifiable) external effects. Some of the latter include social development, social cohesion and the transfer of cultural values. Achieving all of these benefits cannot be left to private individuals as this would lead to an under-investment in higher education. The public sector, therefore, has to provide the necessary conditions, in terms of legal and financial frameworks, to allow higher education institutions to fulfil their role. This should encourage the supply of a sufficient number of graduates with a variety of degrees. However, it is not just the scale of the supply that is important; the *quality* of the supply also

has to be monitored continuously by those involved, especially the government.

An important aspect of educational quality lies in the variety of programmes and diplomas on offer and the contents of the programmes, i.e. the subjects taught and the methods of instruction used. The higher education sector awards a wide variety of degrees, including traditional Arts and Science degrees, professional degrees, general degrees and highly specialised degrees, degrees obtained through full-time study and degrees pursued through part-time study. Those who obtain degrees are capable of making a variety of contributions to society. Consequently every degree programme has a claim on the public purse, although the justification for the claim will not be the same for every one. Where quality is concerned, it is possible to detect an increasing degree of attention, especially in Western higher education institutions, for market-oriented elements and 'entrepreneurial skills' in educational programmes, and for the implementation of policies that encourage students and staff in taking forward business ideas. In fact, the concept (or 'idea') of the 'entrepreneurial university' is a manifestation of the attention paid to skills such as entrepreneurship (management, finance, a basic knowledge of law, etc.) in educational programmes. These skills prepare future graduates better to play a role in society. For their part, institutions are seeking to interact more closely with business and industry, and are expected to set up a proper interface with their environment. The trends sketched here are increasingly viewed as essential to proving the relevance of higher education institutions and defending their claim on the public purse.

Apart from equipping students with ideas, knowledge and skills, another important task for higher education institutions is to create new knowledge through research and to disseminate the results to society. A difficult question is to decide whether research is best carried out within universities or within specialised research and development organisations. Some maintain that in Western society research has assumed too great a place in universities, dominating the reward system and displacing teaching as the recognised function of the institutions. Ultimately the question is to achieve the right balance between teaching and research, a balance in which synergy between the two will exist. In this context it is possible to distinguish three kinds of research: (i) teaching-oriented research, (ii) research that is

not undertaken with a specific course or programme in mind, but that nevertheless informs and enriches teaching, and (iii) research which is unrelated to the teaching function. Carnoy (1994, p. 50-53), however, states that research is very rarely linked coherently to industrial development and just as rarely to training. Especially in an era characterised simultaneously by the massification of higher education and tight budgets, higher education institutions themselves may question whether the model of the 'research university' is still the best way of achieving their mission and aims. Alternatives to the research university, such as higher vocational institutions which are more oriented towards teaching may well offer in many instances a better alternative. Nevertheless, for developing economies too, one may argue that the existence of a research infrastructure in universities is absolutely necessary for the longer-term development and sustainability of the university sector. The question is rather one of the appropriate level and type of research. Perhaps not all institutions would have to have the same facilities (if at all). Again, the debate on research and its place in African universities is closely related to that on the entrepreneurial or development university.

Apart from their national role, universities and colleges play an important local and *regional* role. Higher education institutions are a major source of direct and indirect employment opportunities and can offer technological expertise (not just manpower!) to local businesses. In the Western world, there is a growing recognition of the need to mobilise higher education in the creation of *learning regions* through, *inter alia*, the continued professional development of the regional workforce and greater collaboration between universities and small and medium-sized enterprises in the field of research and development. It is not just *economic* development motives that are relevant here. The university can also have an impact on the cultural life in its region and, through that, play a role in strengthening the social fabric and fostering a sense of community. Thus, universities are adding value in terms of *social capital* (Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 1993; and, more recently, OECD, 1997). While labour needs must certainly influence higher education, the frequent inaccuracy of labour market predictions and the dangers of allowing society to have dictatorial powers over universities must be noted. To tie funding to the moving target of social opinion may be a frustrating as well as an expensive proposition. Equally, institutions which benefit significantly

from public funds must be open to and responsive to society's legitimate interests and concerns without embracing every passing fad.

In short, the university is potentially an important player in the local network consisting of business and industry, educational organizations (primary, secondary, post-secondary education), local government, hospitals and non-profit organizations (professional and voluntary bodies, charities). The general belief is that, in order to fulfil the needs of the region, universities can exploit their expertise and infrastructure to a much greater extent than is presently the case. African universities are not just in the 'business' of initial education, but increasingly will be asked to engage in activities aimed at people already having degrees and jobs (recurrent education, lifelong learning). They cannot sit back passively and wait for businesses or other organizations to come to them for the required expertise, but instead have to actively engage in (and invest in) relationships with the outside world, especially the immediate region. They can offer their expertise (legal, financial, etc.) and infrastructure (space, laboratories, computers) especially to graduates and those seeking to start up their own enterprises.

It is of crucial importance that universities' missions are more directed towards the incorporation of an entrepreneurial spirit in their graduates and in their national, regional and local environment. If universities, as potential generators and disseminators of knowledge, are to contribute in a more effective way to the development process, they should be encouraged to establish strategic alliances with local business, the local community, non-governmental organizations and alumni, as well as with governmental organizations, international donors and higher education institutions from abroad. Therefore, the mechanisms through which African universities are receiving their public allocations and international subsidies should preferably be geared towards fulfilment of this new role. This could mean that funds (either existing or additional ones) are tied to performance or are awarded to selected projects and experiments that satisfy developmental criteria. The provision of matching funds (either in financial terms or in kind) is another instrument for encouraging public-private partnerships. In any case, the mobilization of new, additional (private) funds, especially from the local (business) community will have to be promoted.

There has to be agreement on who is responsible for defining the mission of the (Sub-Saharan) African university. Is it the university itself, its national authorities, or international donors and national businesses? What consequences does this have for the selection of its activities and projects funded by national and international sponsors? The university reform agenda for the coming years will concentrate on the question whether and how African universities should redefine their role at local, institutional level as well as at national and regional level.

### **3. Questions related to the reform agenda**

In this reform agenda, the issue of finance is of crucial importance. It is very much a question of increasing the effectiveness of funding flows and increasing efficiency, especially by creating incentives and regulations that contribute to these goals. However, the issue of finance cannot be studied on its own. It must be analysed hand in hand with an investigation of the role and mission of the Sub-Saharan African university (within the context discussed above) and of the management of financial and human resources within the university. We have therefore identified a number of questions that relate to the following three broad strategic issues:

1. The role and place of the university in Sub-Saharan Africa
2. The funding of the university in Sub-Saharan Africa: system level issues
3. The management of financial and human resources in the Sub-Saharan African university: institution level issues

The questions selected for further discussion in the conference/workshop are closely interrelated. We present them according to the three above-mentioned categories:

#### *Re 1: the role and place of the university in Sub-Saharan Africa:*

- What policy objectives at national, regional and local levels will universities have to take into account in order to play their development role in society?
- What are the features of sustainable socio-economic structures in the Sub-Saharan African context, and in what way can universities contribute to the development of such structures?

- In which ways can universities in Sub-Saharan Africa play a greater role in helping their countries to participate more fully in the global information economy? How much should they invest in information and communication technology in doing so?
- What strategy should be followed by international donors, national governments and the administrators of higher education institutions? What priority should be given to the financial support of higher education in the context of other major national needs and problems?

*Re 2: the funding of the university in Sub-Saharan Africa: system level issues*

How can funding mechanisms and accountability procedures, as important elements in the regulatory and incentive framework for higher education institutions, be reshaped in such a way that universities orient themselves more to the following objectives:

- (i) contributing to the national economy, and to their regional development function;
- (ii) establishing an entrepreneurial climate and curriculum;
- What incentives aimed at increasing universities' efficiency and effectiveness will have to be included in national allocation mechanisms and in the financial assistance provided by donor agencies?
- Can a system of student contributions (fees, loans, work-study) be developed that will generate additional private funds for the higher education sector?
- What are the possibilities for universities in Sub-Saharan Africa to increase their revenues (especially from private sources) and to safeguard themselves against over-dependence on governments and international donors for their funding?
- What types of partnerships and alliances are the most promising in terms of resource mobilisation and cost sharing?

*Re 3: the management of financial and human resources in the Sub-Saharan African university: institution level issues*

- \* What types of management structures are best suited for ensuring the efficient and effective use of the resources by universities in Sub-Saharan Africa?
- How can a more effective use of available resources and infrastructure in universities and in other potential training and research facilities (e.g. hospitals, industry) be promoted?

- How can management information systems be developed to generate the information required by university management as well as donors, governments and partner institutions?
- How can the exchange of information between African universities, especially with regard to 'best practices', be encouraged?

We will not answer these questions here. The reader is invited to take a look at the chapters that follow, especially at the last chapter, which includes the results of a series of focused discussions on the three sets of questions.

#### **4. Final remarks**

To end this chapter and to provide a link to the two sections that follow, we present a few comments on an important topic brought up in the final point under heading 1. It relates to the role of donor support. Donor support, either in terms of monetary resources or in terms of technical assistance, is an important element in the development of the African university. However, it takes place within the context of a complex interplay of many factors and organizations. A crucial aspect in creating positive results from donor support is the interaction between government and donor agencies, and the issue of coordinating the actions of the various parties.

There seems to be a high degree of convergence emerging in the thinking of international donor agencies, which is creating global patterns in international aid to education (King & Buchert, 1999). One can discern a shift from project assistance towards a *sectoral approach*, which sees international aid to higher education as part of a series of interconnected reform programmes in different sectors (also outside of education) in the national economy. This means that donor support to higher education institutions is to be embedded in a much wider reform programme closely monitored by national authorities. Drawing up such reform programmes is a major challenge, especially to the national governments who have to take the initiative. It presupposes that governments are capable of developing and implementing such policy plans and that agencies and donors are willing to cooperate under one umbrella. The extent to which an approach like this is in fact donor-induced and whether it is demand-

driven remains a critical issue. The national context and the way in which the various actors adhere to their own agendas despite a rhetoric of joint interests will in practice result in vast differences between the various African countries.

This is a natural outcome of any discussion on the role and mission of the Sub-Saharan African university. In trying to answer the questions identified above, one has to realize that any policy option that is suggested will explicitly have to take into account the specific context (i.e. traditions, culture, economic conditions, demographic structure, etc.) in which it will be applied. Therefore, a key question is whether options that have proved relevant in Western higher education can be translated meaningfully to the Sub-Saharan context. The following chapters will try to shed some light on this issue.

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