The Turbulence in University Education in Africa: Challenges and Prospects

By

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Introduction

There is no doubt that, higher education drives development. Indeed this fact has for long been recognized in the so called developed countries, as a consequence of which they have invested heavily in tertiary educational institutions; an investment that has yielded remarkable results, as demonstrated by the quality of their TEIs in teaching and research, and the profound impact these have had on their development processes, especially in this age of knowledge driven economies. In these countries presently, there is the constant striving to widen access to tertiary education and increase the scope, as well as the quality of research and development in these institutions, for value addition in the wider economic development processes. In contrast, it is only of recent that many developing countries are beginning to wake up to the reality of how investment in higher education can increase competitiveness in the global political economy in addition to its remarkable role in transforming national economies.

In spite of this global re-awakening however, higher education in Sub-Saharan Africa still leaves much to be desired. Confusion, commotion, turmoil, disorder, unrest, instability; in short turbulence, does aptly describe the situation. Challenges are all pervasive, from enrolment and access, to quality, to relevance, to the even more fundamental issues of funding and inadequacy of learning infrastructure and staff shortages for teaching and research. In west Africa in particular, more serious effort backed by strong political will is required for wide ranging reforms to reposition higher education and make it play its appropriate role in the transformation of our national economies.

To a considerable extent, policy flip-flop has been responsible for the turbulence in our tertiary education sector. From the immediate post-independence zeal by emergent post-colonial regimes in the 1960's to invest in tertiary education to provide manpower requirements of "national development", we saw from the mid-1980's to the late 1990's almost a complete reversal and de-prioritization; driven by the World Bank's argument that Africa did not need tertiary education and its emphasis on "rolling back the state" under the structural adjustment programmes. Under SAPs, our tertiary institutions in general, and universities in particular were thrown into turmoil; characterized by gross under funding, erosion of university autonomy, constricted access, declining quality, brain-drain and perpetual instability fueled by incessant staff strikes.

Since the mid-2000, we seem to have come full circle, with the World Bank's commissioned reports urging that higher education needs to

be given priority to enhance Africa's "technological catch-up" (Bloom, Canning, and Chan 2006). With the mantra of increasing access, the doors have been thrown wide open for the role of private sector in tertiary education provisioning, and to distance learning and internationalization. The field of higher education is now de-regulated and is literally crowded with all sorts of providers: the good, the bad and the ugly. Given prevailing systemic and institutional weaknesses, and the absence of demonstrable political will for effective regulatory frameworks in most of our countries, the crowded terrain of higher education provisioning has thrown up its own additional challenges.

Presently, University system in Africa in general, and in West Africa in particular, is yet to recover from the crisis, which has engulfed it since the late 1980's. Colonial education policies laid the foundation for crisis in the system; but post-colonial state policies, prodded by the World Bank, catalyzed, perpetrated and perpetuated the crisis. Meanwhile, the World Bank continues to do too little too late. The challenges of recovery from this crisis are enormous; but they have to be confronted and overcome to enable Africa not only make giant strides in "technological catch-up", but especially to expand opportunities for economic growth and strengthen the foundation for sustainable development.

Tertiary Education in Africa: Overview
Nowhere in the world is the need for good quality tertiary education as desirable as it is in Africa. It has long been established that, "countries with higher skills levels are better equipped to face new

challenges and master technological discoveries". In Africa, however, there is a profound deficit of these. In deed, it has been observed that, "in Sub-Saharan Africa, qualified human capital remains scarce compared to the continent's needs. This situation hinders growth and undermines the foundation for sustainable development" (UIS 2010). Hence, as Friesenhahn has observed, "Africa needs more PhDs and more industry-ready graduates" (2014) and therefore, more higher education institutions which produce these.

However, while Africa's needs are great, trends in tertiary education reflect an abysmal failure to cope with the demands. For example, Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) is the lowest in the world, representing only 6% while the global average is 26% (UIS 2010). The neglect of higher education is also illustrated by the World Bank's funding commitments: from 1985-89, 17% of its education sector spending was on higher education; this reduced to only 7% in the period 1995-99.

Tertiary education institutions lack the capacity to absorb increasing demand. Hence, many who complete secondary education and are eligible for higher education cannot get access. This is illustrated in the case of Nigeria by the large number of eligible students who sit for and pass JAMB, and the small percentage of these who eventually get admitted into the universities. For example, in 2011, of the1.45 million sat for the exam, only about 190,000 (13.15%) were enrolled.

Pressure to expand access has resulted in proliferation of private higher education institutions, especially universities. While a few of

these institutions are doing commendably well in quality provisioning, many are just struggling and their contribution to widening access to higher education, as the Nigerian case illustrates, is meager.

Nigeria: Students enrolment 2010/2011

S/no.	Universities	Undergraduate	Masters	Ph.D.	Total
1.	Federal (40)	506,358	52,869	8,890	568,117 (64.0%)
2.	State (39)	235,145	7,252	1,205	243,602 (27.8%)
3.	Private (39)	61,908	577	288	62,773 (7.2%)
Total	129	803,411	60,698	10,383	874,492

Source: National Universities Commission (NUC)

All across Africa, the drive to widen access has accelerated the process of internationalization of education, as well as increasing use of Distance education and Virtual learning (See Altbach and Knight 2007; Mohamedbhai 2008). Other countries in Europe and Asia have put these to good use in expanding opportunities for higher education. In our own context, however, paradoxically, these trends may not only result in commodification and commercialization of education, but may also affect quality, especially where there is no serious oversight and regulation. How to rein in these trends and curtail their potential negative consequences, while tapping into the opportunities that they may provide is a major challenge.

In particular, quality assurance (QA) is a constant challenge in all aspects of higher education in Africa. It has been observed that, "chasing the political goal of expanded higher education has created a

situation where 'quality' has not thrived" Friesenhahn 2014). Indeed, political expediency has compromised quality. In many of our countries, we experience systemic challenges of weak institutions, which are lacking capacity for effective oversight and regulation. For example, only one-third of higher education institutions in sub-Saharan Africa are said to have structured quality assurance mechanisms (Materu 2007). And, having such QA mechanisms in place is one thing; their working effectively to assure quality and maintain standards is another.

Addressing Key Challenges

There is no doubt that it is absolutely necessary to reform higher education in Africa and restore it to its rightful place in the continent's socioeconomic transformation. However, repositioning higher education in Africa, to lift it out of turmoil and have it play the desired role in our continents sustainable development processes would require addressing the following key challenges:

1. Inadequacy of effective learning infrastructure (congested, outdated,
2. Declining capacity to attract, train and retain staff, indeed, we see growing enrolment while acute staff shortages are being experienced (Tettey 2010), which in turn affect quality and undermines research capacity and mentorship. It has been reported that only a very small percentage of the over 1500 public and private universities in Africa offer graduate programmes. Of course, funding constraints are largely responsible for this.

3. Persistent inequities in access. Gender disparities are acute. In many instances, access for women is still restricted, be it in students enrolment or in staff recruitment, or university administration and management.

4. Heavy burden of "cost-sharing" on parents and students; which also constraints access; and enhance inequities (inadequacy or ineffectiveness of access to resources for study in form of scholarships or bursaries, loans etc.)

5. Gross funding constraints. Stagnant or declining public expenditure on education generally, and tertiary education in particular. (Whether measured in terms of expenditure per student or as a percentage of GDP) This affects virtually everything

Conclusion

There is no doubt that, universities in Africa in general and West Africa in particular are facing turbulent times. An endemic crisis has constrained, if not emasculated the potential role of higher education in the sustainable development of African countries. Unless decisive reform measures are taken, not only would universities continue to lag behind in playing the desirable developmental roles expected of them, Africa's overall competitiveness in the global knowledge economy would continue to be undermined. However, all hope is not lost. As citizens, we must continue to explore opportunities of democratic avenues and platforms to persuade, prod, cajole, pressure and encourage our leaders to deploy the political will to rescue our universities from these turbulent times. The state has a role, and not just regulatory, to uplift and expand the scope of the role of

universities in knowledge production, reproduction and utilization for sustainable national development.

I wish to conclude with a quotation from Friesenhahn (2014), the content of which I subscribe to:

> Africa's education systems and economic development go hand in hand. Efforts to align them more closely require political will, strategic investments, and a solid higher education system that provides opportunities for developing new technology-driven businesses. To achieve this, many higher education institutions will need to modify their profiles, curricula, teaching methods and research activities. This will involve making critical thinking and employability skills an integral part of learning and teaching, providing courses linked to industry needs and introducing quality assurance schemes. If they can do this, universities will be at the forefront of Africa's transformation.

We must do everything possible, as soon as is possible, to make our universities become in the forefront of Africa's transformation. While we would expect policy makers to address the systemic and structural challenges giving rise to turbulence in higher education in Africa, internally, we must expect university Vice-Chancellors and others in management positions to remain resolute and focused in addressing the daily manifestations of the turmoil on their campuses. They should not despair but, rather, they should increase policy dialogue and engagement with national policy makers and other critical stakeholders to forge a consensus on how to contain the

turbulence in our universities. Above all, university administrators must not add to the turmoil through despotic and undemocratic modes of governance and corruption. They should strive to be shining examples of good, democratic governance and drivers of institutional reforms.

Thank you.

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