

# **The Role of African Universities in Development: Perspectives and Prospects**

## **Introduction**

In this presentation I want to cover the following:-  
Firstly a brief outline of the evolution of African Universities  
Secondly some of the implications of the role of universities in economic growth and development –particularly the respective roles of the African ruling/managerial elite and the WB/IMF in development and higher education<sup>1</sup>;  
Thirdly the impact of globalisation on African economies and higher education and the prospect for the future. I will focus on this third part.

### **A. Evolution of African Universities**

**\*Colonial period – Post WW I:**

**Higher education i.e. post Secondary, limited to a few regional institutions – Makerere, Free Town, South Africa – during the 1930s.**

**Mainly to produce lower level civil servants**

**\*Post-WW II: A few students sent to Metropolitan countries by colonial government and even fewer went privately. A few new Universities created in some of the larger countries.**

**\*Most African Universities started in post independence period – mainly in the 1960s. Three phases:**

**First phase – the 60s one major national Public University;**

**Second phase –70s and 80s – more public Universities created, expansion of tertiary institutions – vocational, technological and agricultural institutions at various levels.**

**Third phase – 90s to the present expansion of private universities – a few based on private indigenous capital, but many financed by religious organisations mainly from the US.**

**From the 1960s many students went to study abroad – Europe, North America and Eastern Europe (Socialist countries) some on Fellowship but the majority on their own. The number of students going abroad increased in each decade.**

**After the collapse of the Soviet Union many students began to go to Asia – mainly to India, Pakistan, Malaysia.**

**Since 9/11, the number of students going to Asia has increased enormously and concomitantly those going to Europe and North America has decreased by as much as 30%. And the trend is deepening.**

**As the global information and communication (ICT) spreads widely and deepens, higher education became commoditised and began to be exported through distance-learning by Australia, North America and European countries (mainly UK and France). Higher education of the future is going to be increasingly dominated by the exporting countries. Will discuss this issue further.**

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<sup>1</sup> African Development Vol. XIX No. 1 1994 PP119-116/ Whether social science Institutions in Africa: A Prognoses

**Issues which arise from this very brief outline of the expansion of higher education in Africa are the following:-**

- 1. African Government invested heavily in education – at all levels – between 1960 and 1980. From 1980 onwards to the present, SAP stopped this trend of heavy investment in education and drastically cut government support for the educational sector.**
- 2. The universities produced enough people to fill the needs of the governments and the public sector. This was a success but only one side of the coin. The other side, those produced by the universities mismanaged both government and public sectors. Some argue that this was due to the education they received at the Universities and colleges.**
- 3. If Universities were expected to contribute to economic growth, here again they fared very badly at two levels (a) they did not produce effective and well trained entrepreneurs for the private sector and (b) they did not produce people nor research capacity which led to the innovation and adaptation of technologies for development. African economies have fared very badly since the late 70s and all industries at all levels are run with imported technologies. There has been no technological innovation and adaptation throughout the continent. Even the technologies whose patent period has expired long ago are used as if their patents were still valid. It is argued that both Universities and governments have serious misconception on the role of technology in development – placing more emphases on elementary science rather than on technology. This misconception is inherited from and is deliberately strengthened by the industrialised countries of the north.**
- 4. Throughout the period since independence, relations between governments and universities have been tense because of the potential political role of universities as producers of administrators, politicians, and intellectuals most of whom are often very critical of governments and demand political changes. This tension cannot be resolved as long ruling political elites in power want to monopolise power and exclude others often of younger generation coming out universities.**
- 5. Almost all African universities began to deteriorate in the late 70s. But from the 80s onwards to the present they deteriorated almost to the point of collapse. This was largely due to the SAP forcing governments to cut down to a minimum financial support to universities. This policy still continues.**
- 6. During this period of deterioration, a large number of students went to study abroad. It also was the period of extensive brain drain – especially from the universities. There was thus a steep fall in the quality of education at the universities and research came to a halt.**
- 7. During this period the public universities had this tense relationship with governments only. The private sector played no role whatsoever in public universities.**

The private provision of higher education is on the increase worldwide but it is Africa that has seen the fastest growth. The growth in the number of private higher education institutions in Africa follows this worldwide

trend. In Nigeria, Ethiopia, Kenya, to name a few, the number of private providers of higher education has risen in the past 10 years. Entrepreneurs are setting up private tertiary institutions, in some cases motivated by the ideals of education as emancipatory and enlightening, in others, as speculative ventures. Religious and charitable organizations such as the Catholic Church, the Seventh Day Adventists, the Methodist church are most active. And European, North American and Australian universities - education exporting countries - are setting up off-shore campuses aimed at serving fee-paying students in their country of residence, converting education into a modern export industry.

- 8. The rise of private universities has not brought about improvement in the quality of education nor have they contribute to economic growth. This is because most of them were either instruments for making money or were religious based universities concerned mainly with conversion and influence in the countries concerned.**
- 9. Since the early 1980s, African economies have been effectively and undemocratically managed by the WB and IMF and have gone through painful restructuring and so called “reforms”. The reason for the takeover was because Africans have mismanaged their economies which had deteriorated to a point of collapse. However, after almost 25 years of this external management and imposition of their economic and political strategies and policies for economic growth, African economies have yet to recover. In fact they are doing very badly, marginalised by the global economy and their prospects are not very good. Poverty has increased steeply even in wealthy countries such as South Africa, Nigeria, Angola etc. Clearly African economies are doing badly not only because they were mismanaged by Africans but even when they are managed by the WB/IMF, they are still doing badly. And just as clearly, the negative impact of globalisation is largely responsible for this situation.**
- 10. It is this impact of globalisation and development in general and higher education in particular that I now want to focus on.**

## **B. Globalisation and Africa<sup>2</sup>**

**The initial conditions which gave rise to globalisation and its development in the industrialised countries of the north, did not exist in Africa. If we take an important and generally accepted distinction between *World Economy* and a *Globalised Economy*, then the latter emerged (and manifested itself clearly) from the former in the industrialised countries of the north sometime around the early 1980s. Africa as a region did not have the initial conditions for integrating into the globalised economy. Its economic, political and social conditions were in fact deteriorating even during the era of the *World Economy* – i.e. from the 1960s to the coming of the globalised economy in the early 1980s. According to the World Bank, “Unlike other developing regions,**

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<sup>2</sup> This Section until the end of the paper is taken from a paper I wrote for UNESCO conference on "The University of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: The Impact of Globalization on Higher Education in Africa" Conference held in Oman, 2001.

**Africa's average output per capita in constant prices was lower at the end of the 1990s than 30 years before - and in some countries had fallen by more than 50 percent . In real terms fiscal resources per capita were smaller for many countries than in the late 1960s. Africa's share of world trade has plummeted since the 1960s: it now accounts for less than 2 percent of world trade. Three decades ago, African countries were specialized in primary products and highly trade dependent. But Africa missed out on industrial expansion and now risks being excluded from the global information revolution. In contrast to other regions that have diversified, most countries in Africa are still largely primary exporters”<sup>3</sup>.**

**The UNECA(UN Economic Commission for Africa) has divided the periods of economic decline into three periods – 1973to 1984, 1984 to 1994, and 1994 to the present. While the 1973-1984 years can be considered as a pre-globalisation period for Africa, 1984 to the present would fall within the globalisation era.**

**The effect of the economic decline of the pre-globalisation period 1973-1984) on the political and social systems of countries in sub-Saharan Africa manifested itself in terms of political instability during which many coup d'etat took place; at the same time the inherited democratic institutions fostered during the early years of independence (1960s) crumbled and were replaced with oppressive system of one party rule, civil wars, and serious economic distortion and declining growth. The one major and significant success of African countries between independence(early 1960s) to the mid 1970s, was in the expansion of education at all levels. Even this remarkable success was halted and began to decline. The social sector – education, health, housing etc – declined steeply with the introduction of the Structural Adjustment Programms of the WB/IMF in the early 1980s.**

**From mid 1984 to the present, globalization has had serious and negative economic effects on African countries. This was also the period in which the international community, through the WB/IMF began to take charge of African economies through the introduction the Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs), which included specific conditionalities to remove subsidies on consumer good, and public spending on education, health and housing. In the 1990s, the WB/IMF conditionalities expanded to include democratization and good governance. “Most African countries found themselves ... heavily in debt and faced by rapidly degenerating terms of trade. Their economies suffered capital drains and negative rates of economic growth in the 1980s, and governments were generally not well organized to improve infrastructure, to support private-sector efforts to export and develop new products and processes, or to attract foreign investment on reasonable terms”<sup>4</sup>.**

**Finally and despite these reform programs poverty increased throughout the continent. “According to UNECA, 43.5 per cent of the African population were living below a real poverty line, measured in terms of purchasing power parity prices (PPP), of \$39 per person per month.**

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<sup>3</sup> .Can Africa Claim the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, 2000:8

<sup>4</sup> .Martin Carnoy, 1999:49.

According to the World Bank “Africa’s development challenges go deeper than low income, falling trade shares, low savings, and slow growth. They also include high inequality, uneven access to resources, social exclusion, and insecurity. Income inequality is as high as in Latin America, making Africa’s poor the poorest of the poor”.

Many people lack the capabilities-including health status, education, and access to basic infrastructure-needed to benefit from and contribute to economic growth. On education for example,

“. Education spending in poor African countries averages less than \$50 a year-compared with more than \$11,000 in France and the United States. Many Africans are excluded from basic services-and from the power to influence the allocation of resources”<sup>5</sup>.

Consensus has emerged on the failures of past policies (and the negative impact of globalisation), though there is still debate on how best to move forward and a sense that the region still needs to find its place in the world economy<sup>6</sup>.

### **Impact of Globalisation on Higher Education**

It may be useful at this point to make a very simple contrast, based on a few examples, between what is happening in the US and UK on the one hand, and Africa on the other. This contrast will reveal a startling and depressing picture.

#### **(i) The US and the UK.**

Let us briefly look at what one distinguished educationist has said about globalisation and higher education in the US and the UK. According to Professor Howard Newby,<sup>7</sup> the forces of globalisation, which are most obvious in business and commerce, are seriously affecting various aspects of higher education.

Globalisation has affected the research side of most universities. Top quality researchers have long had their own international network of peers who are both rivals and collaborators. In the area of big science this has been a necessity because of the high cost of equipment and infrastructure.

The globalisation of research has been both a cause and consequence of two major innovations:-

- (i) growth of information and communication technologies (ICT).** This has allowed fast, cheap and user-friendly means of communication between research groups – eg. the joint academic network in the UK (JANET); and now the possibility of digital broadcasting promises to feed into the teaching and not just research.
- (ii) The growth of English as the de facto global language.**

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<sup>5</sup> Can Africa Claim the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, 2000:10,11

<sup>6</sup> .Ibid., 2000:14

<sup>7</sup> Vice-Chancellor of the University of Southampton in New Report, Vol 16, No.14 –22/03/99

**The global spread of ICT and the English language are now providing the conditions for the development of a truly global market in teaching and learning in higher education. For example it is now possible to take an MBA course at MIT from any terminal anywhere in the UK. The global market for higher education through distance learning is estimated at US\$300 billion world-wide. And the market is growing.**

**In the US some of these tendencies are already well advanced.**

- (a) the University of Phoenix provide coursework over the Internet and its students can get the support of course assistants in their local study centers. The course are in the area of professional qualification – mainly MBA, higher qualification for school teachers etc.**
- (b) The Western Governors University (a consortium of public Universities) was formed to provide a major distance-learning courses which included credit accumulation and transfer agreements and joint investment. Western Governors is a partner of the OU-US (Open University of the US) which will offer American degrees by distance learning across the United States as well as to overseas students.**
- (c) A number of the major American research-led universities, such as the UC Berkeley, Michigan, and Columbia, have linked up with major knowledge providers in the private sector, such as Time Warner, Disney Corporation, Microsoft and Cisco, to form partnerships which will develop appropriate courseware and support needed to attack the global market in higher education in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.**

**Professor Newby observes that “In the UK there are few signs that these kinds of partnerships are being formed, despite the high quality of British higher education and the wealth of creative talent in the UK media sector”.<sup>8</sup> He further laments that “At present we (the British higher education establishment) seem to be rather like the British motor industry in the 1960s – on the brink of participating in a global market, but poorly organised to take advantage of the opportunities available”.<sup>9</sup>**

**Higher education is both a social as well as a cognitive experience. Continuing professional development is now becoming an important part of the education system in the industrialised countries, because it is essential in the global economy. Globalisation is and will continue to affect and change different parts of higher education:**

**⇒the mission of higher education is shifting from an elite to a mass system of education; more students from the lower socio-economic groups necessitates changes in delivery and learning ;thus higher education institutions have become vulnerable to distance-learning operations such as that of the University of Phoenix;**

**⇒the higher education sector is growing in size and is becoming more diverse both institutionally and in terms of function; hence the necessity of public funding of higher education;**

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<sup>8</sup> .Ibid,99:3

<sup>9</sup> .Ibid, 99:3

⇒changes in the structure and organisation of higher education will necessarily affect the academic profession; there will be a need for a more flexible and professional academic profession which means that professional academic development in the academic world will be a continuing process across a lifetime;

Globalisation – driven by the information technology and the change to a knowledge based economy - is clearly bringing about major changes in higher education of the USA . Undoubtedly such changes will also soon take place in Europe and Japan. The essential elements in this process of change in higher education in the industrial countries are :-

- ⇒ the availability of the ICT and its infrastructural base,
- ⇒the existence of a well organised internal market,
- ⇒ highly organised institutions of higher learning (universities) which can adapt to the changing environment;
- ⇒strong government policies which provide direction to change;
- ⇒enormous resources which must be provided by either the private sector, Governments, or both;
- ⇒and a stable and well organised civil society.

## (ii) African Countries

The development of human capital is one of the most important and strategic activity of any country/region if it wants to achieve even the minimum level of economic development. Since independence African countries have recognised this strategic need. During the early period of independence, African countries embarked on very vigorous policies of expanding the poor educational system which they inherited from the colonial powers. Serious efforts and considerable resources were invested in the educational system – especially the expansion of Secondary schools and Universities. Certain important goals were reached during this period and many countries were proud of their achievement in education. Indeed by the mid 1970s, many countries had reached a stage of producing more graduates than they could be absorbed in either the public or private sector.

African higher education was, however, developed essentially as an elite based system – three years coursework for a degree mostly in the humanities/social sciences. The scientific, medical, engineering and agricultural sector of higher education was given less priority compared with the humanities/social science sector. This imbalance was changed slightly in some of the larger countries. But the system as a whole, which was based on that which existed in the metropolitan countries in the 1950s, was never reformed. It has remained the same until now.

Indeed from the mid 1970s onwards, the economic crises in African countries seriously affected higher education. And when in the early 1980s the WB/IMF Structural Adjustment Programmes(SAPs) were introduced forcing African governments to severely cut back subsidies to the educational system as a whole and higher education in particular, the system deteriorated very seriously.

Economic growth in general and competitiveness in the globalised economy in particular, would, as we have seen in the case of the industrialised

countries, necessitate serious reforms of higher education – particularly in the scientific and technological field in the non-industrialised African countries. This has not taken place during the last three decades of SAPs (1980-2005).

If African countries are to achieve any form of economic growth and eventually join the globalised economy, their scientific and technological base must be developed considerably. Its present status is pitiful in comparison to any other region of the world.

According to the UNECA “Africa’s capacity to generate knowledge (participate in the knowledge society) has continued to decline.” And this has widened the gap between the “connected” world and “isolated” Africa.<sup>10</sup> Africa’s expenditure on R&D is the lowest in the world, it has the lowest scientific publication and has the lowest patents in the world. Here are some examples:-

◆ In 1996, only 0.06% of all Ethiopians and 0.08 of all Burkina Faso were enrolled in tertiary education; in contrast 6% of South Koreans and 3% of Chileans attended universities;

◆ In 1960 Ethiopia had 106 university students in the field of natural sciences, 257 in engineering and 46 in medical sciences: the Republic of Korea had between 6 and 8 thousands students in the same fields;

◆ Around 1996 the number of students in natural science, engineering and health related programmes at the tertiary level is as follows: in Ethiopia between 2 and 3 thousands; whereas in South Korea there are between 100 and 500 thousands;

◆ Between 1960 and 1975, about 27,000 highly trained Africans left the continent for Western Europe. Between 1975 and 1984 this number increased to 40,000. And between 1984 and 1990, Africa lost more than 60,000 doctors, university lecturers, engineers and other professionals. The outflow since 1990 has grown to about 20,000 per annum –i.e. between 1990 and 2000, Africa lost 200,000 such highly qualified persons.<sup>11</sup>

To conclude, the impact of globalisation on African countries is now acknowledged to have been seriously disruptive and destructive: economic decline and deep poverty, widespread major killer diseases, widespread conflicts, weakened and collapsing states. And these in turn have had dramatic effect on the educational system as a whole but more so on higher education in African countries. Government subsidies of schools and universities have almost ceased. Expansions of schools and universities has stopped and the conditions of existing schools and universities are pitiful and deplorable. Teachers and lecturers are often not paid for months; libraries do not have journals and books and all equipment have deteriorated very badly and cannot be replaced. Needless to say, no educational reforms have been carried out during the last 20 years. The dramatic increase of the population have not been absorbed by the secondary schools and universities. During the last 20 years, the richer section of the middle class have sent their children to Europe and North America. But as education in these countries has become very expensive and as entry to the countries has become more difficult, a larger proportion of students are now being sent to South Asian Universities and Colleges. Furthermore, many of the students who

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<sup>10</sup> Economic Report, 2000:54

<sup>11</sup> .Ibid, 2000:56-58.



went to Europe and the USA have stayed in those countries. More seriously many highly trained professionals have left African countries for “greener pasture” in Europe, North America and the Gulf States.

Yet it is under these very dismal conditions that African countries have entered and are expected to compete in the global market. What kind of higher education do African countries need in order to compete effectively in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?

### **Educational Strategies for a Global Economy**

If African countries are to enter the global economy they must achieve a higher rate of economic development – at least 7% per annum, according to the WB. And in order to achieve this rate of growth they must resolve other problems so that they can achieve political stability to enable them to grow at the above rate. Only under these condition can Africa caountries undertake serious regorms of their higher education system in order to underpin the economic growth and eventually to enable them to be competitive in the global market .

According to the World Bank, African countries must undertake certain critical reforms in order stop the negataive impact of globalisation and to begin the process of postive economic growth. At the core of these reforms is the economic empowerment of four groups:-

- (a) civil society
- (b) the poor and the excluded
- (c) producers
- (d) governments – need to be strenthened.

The eventual result of these reforms is to strengthen civil society, to have a cohesive nation with economic growth led by entrepreneurs, and to have an effective state apparatus as part of a strong government under stable conditions. As pointed out earlier, these are the conditions which are presently lacking in Africa but which, if developed, will enable African countries to become competitive and integrate in the global economy.

The vision and goals of African countries in the 21<sup>st</sup> century are as follows:-

1. To achieve high rate of economic growth, transiting from primary comodity exporters to knowledge-intensive based economy and at the same time becoming competitive in the global economy;
2. To build a strong civil society and a cohesive nation
3. To develop an effective administration and a strong government which will invest in and finance higher education;

African countries must therefore develop strategies for higher education in order to achieve minimal development:-

#### **(a) Curriculum**

To achieve the first goal, higher education must introduce science and technology curriculum which is appropriate to the new knowledge-driven economy and and emphasise research and development in creative areas of the economy. In particular adopttion and adaption of new and old technologies in

both industry and the educational system must be given priority and strong policy and financial backing by the government;

Business management and administration and other professional training must be given emphases in the curriculum of higher educational institutions

For the purpose of the second goal, the curriculum of higher education should give priority to social science/humanities/human rights education and particularly emphases on nation-building

For the purpose of achieving the third goal, specialised institutions of public administration and development management with particular emphases on democracy, good governance, conflict management and effective and efficient administration.

(b) Structure and Organisation of higher education institutions

- the state, whether it be national, regional or local, must be responsible for educational improvement and expansion – finance, regulate, set standards, allocate resources , guide improvement programme etc.
- mass oriented educational system, giving equal access to school and institutes, improve quality of education for the poor etc;
- distance-learning progressively expanded including the use of modern information technology etc
- privatisation of higher educational institution should be balanced with equality of access to higher education;

(c) Relevance of Training

- educational system should be more flexible – accept more adults, develop “worker universities” which help prepare adult to new careers etc;
- because of multi-tasking and workers holding different jobs during their careers, the balance between vocational and general education must be carefully worked out;
- training of academic profession must be continuous and flexible, especially taking into consideration distance learning, training for different tasks, vocations all of which will require educational variations etc;

It is important that when developing strategies and policies for higher education, planners must take into consideration the objective realities of a given country as it confronts the global economy. There are differences in types and levels of economies, strength of civil society and cohesiveness of the nation, strength and weakness of government and administrative apparatus etc. The above strategies would seem to us to be relevant and useful for most African countries.

Concluding Remarks

- 1. There is critical need for Universities to undergo major changes in terms of their curriculum, their teaching staff and their organisation**
- 2. It is also important that there should be emphases on (i) teaching and research in relevant technologies and vocational training for African economies which should be self sufficient as well as competitive (ii) producing entrepreneurs who are competent managers, organisers and risk takers in the context of underdeveloped but growing African economies competing in a globalised world. The present MBA courses as produced and taught in the West and African Universities are mostly irrelevant to the conditions African countries find themselves in.**
- 3. Both Government and Industry have to play their respective role in supporting the transformation needed in the Universities. There ought to be serious coordination between the three partners/stake holders to work out the best way each can play its role and to ensure that the changes (the new role of the Universities) are relevant and will benefit both society/country and industry.**
- 4. Africa has to be innovative and adaptive not only in industrial and agricultural technologies, but in the technology of a relevant higher education. Such technology cannot be obtained in the global market. It is unique to the African situation and must therefore be innovated by African themselves.**