African Higher Education: The Rise and Fall in the 20th Century

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Centers of higher learning had existed in Africa several centuries ago, well before the arrival of Europeans. Examples of these are the University of al-Karawiyyin in Fez, Morocco; Al-Azhar University in Cairo, Egypt; and the University of Timbuktu in Mali. However, modern higher education in Africa has its roots in university colleges that were created and affiliated to universities in Europe, during the European colonial period. Right from the start, these institutions were patterned on the European higher education system. They were staffed by Europeans or Africans trained in Europe, and their major objective was training manpower for the public sector to replace the colonial staff as well as teachers for the rapidly expanding secondary education sector. After independence of the colonies in the 1960s, the university colleges became autonomous universities and, again, their academic structure, governance mode, course curricula, and

methods of instruction were modeled on European universities. All the institutions used a European language for instruction, giving hardly any attention to local languages. They were all created in the suburbs of the major cities, meant for the elite of African society, and alienated from the rural areas where the majority of the population lived and where the development challenges were greatest. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that the relevance of such higher education institutions to Africa's postindependence development has often been questioned.

For a couple of decades after independence, African universities thrived as they received the generous support from Europe and their own governments and continued their close affiliations with universities in the Western world, mostly the United Kingdom and France. They soon developed into centers of excellence, as judged by European university norms. This was true for Makerere University in Uganda, University of Ibadan in Nigeria, Univerity Cheikh Anta Diop in Senegal, and University of Khartoum in Sudan, to name a few. Once created, new universities were essentially patterned on existing ones.

ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL TURMOIL

The late 1970s and 1980s became the difficult years of economic turmoil. The severe deterioration in African economies made it difficult for governments to invest in higher education. Also, budget cuts resulted as externally imposed structural adjustment programs, and financing of higher education suffered. Around the same period major political crises, often of ethnic or tribal origin and at times caused by African states getting embroiled in the Cold War between the East and the West, started to occur in many African countries. This resulted in

poor governance and even dictatorship in some countries, leading to political repression. African universities, having inherited the concept of academic freedom from the West, did not hesitate to criticize their governments, and they soon came to be regarded as hotbeds for political opposition. This inevitably led to increased involvement of governments in university affairs. As a result, many African universities witnessed the flight of their academics, often persecuted, to countries in the North. One example is Makerere University in Uganda where several leading academics disappeared, allegedly killed by President Idi Amin, while others fled the country, bringing the famous institution to its knees.

RATE OF RETURN ON INVESTMENT

At the same time, the output from the primary and secondary education sectors started to increase dramatically as a result of positive measures taken earlier to improve access to primary education. This created huge pressures on African universities to increase their student enrollment. In the 1990s, as the era of peace was dawning on many African countries, their universities started to respond to the huge demand for higher education and turned to their governments for much-needed support.

Around the same time came another blow. Some economists came to the conclusion, which later proved to be erroneous, that the rate of social return on investments in higher education was lower than in basic and primary education. These findings guided donor and development agencies in their support to African governments. The effect of this policy can be gauged from the fact that the World Bank's worldwide education-sector spending on higher education, which was 17 percent between 1985 to 1989, dwindled to just 7 percent from 1995

to 1999. Hence, throughout the 1980s and 1990s, higher education institutions in sub-Saharan Africa suffered from abandon and underfunding.

DEPLORABLE STATE

In the 1990s, most universities in sub-Saharan Africa stood in a deplorable state. Their physical infrastructure—lecture halls, libraries, laboratories, and student residences—badly needed expansion and renovation to serve the huge influx of students, far more than they could accommodate. Having suffered from brain drain, these institutions were equally desperately short of qualified faculty to teach and undertake research. Their curricula were out of date and not responsive to the needs of their communities, including the burgeoning industrial and business sectors, which resulted in large unemployment of graduates. Access to information and communications technology was so low level that they could not benefit from the technological revolution taking place in other parts of the world.

However, despite being neglected by their own governments and in spite of numerous hurdles, African universities demonstrated their resilience and survived, learning to do more with the same, or even fewer, conditions.

TURNING POINT

The turning point in the African universities' fate came with the UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization) World Conference on Higher Education held in 1998. The declaration from the conference emphasized that higher education carried an important role to play in finding solutions to the development problems faced by developing countries.

The conference called on universities in industrialized countries to assist their sister institutions in developing and poor countries. This created a framework for renewed support to higher education and led to a revitalization of African universities, which effectively started a few years later at the beginning of the 21st century. It is significant to note that development assistance to postsecondary education in Africa, which averaged US$110 million per year during the decade 1990–1999, increased to US$515 million per year during the period 2000–2005.