

## **Reforms in Higher Education in Africa: Revitalising Africa's Higher Education Systems Through Research**

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In this paper, I am particularly interested in interrogating how Africa's higher education institutions can ensure that higher education responds to the growing demands and needs of the continent.<sup>1</sup>As a starting point, this paper poses two key questions; firstly, what do we educate our people for? Secondly, what should our universities be educating our citizens for? These questions are important since it is my conviction that African universities continue to teach for the same reasons that our universities taught, half a century ago - the pursuit of diplomas and degrees. Such type of education has outlived its usefulness. This education gives our citizen the ill-perceived impression that the more diplomas and degrees you have the more educated you are. To begin with, our educational programmes continue very largely to be unrelated to the issues of development, human health, alleviation of poverty, transformation of the environment, and such other issues that should help our continent to drift away from perennial poverty and movetowards self-emancipation, production and the ability to survive. African universities seem not to have realised that our nations cannot continue to invest huge resources into teaching the same things that we taught fifty years ago in the same way that we taught then. There is need for a total paradigm shift. There is need for curriculum reform, new methods of teaching and new programmes need to be designed in tandem with the 21<sup>st</sup> century demands.

Implementation of programmes remains problematic in Africa, for a number of reasons. For instance, most African Governments have surprisingly begun to reduce spending in higher education at a time when funding is required to address problems such as climate change and health. So those of our universities that should be teaching programmes that relate directly to development in the sciences, agriculture and climate change, find that theyhave inadequate

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<sup>1</sup>This paper is influenced by an interview I had with Kwesi Sam at the Association of African Universities (AAU) Studios' AAU talks on AAU TV, discussing reforms for revitalizing African Higher Education.

funding. Lack of funding hinders the affected universities' pursuits in such programmes. This could be the reason why they fall back on the traditional programmes which bring in more students but without addressing Africa's real challenges. Such universities have become so reliant on the fees students pay that their programmes and recruitment have become more driven by the need for funding from students than the need to transform society and relate university programmes to the continent's development needs.

Lack of adequate funding and resources is the real problem. If you consider what is happening in the Far East and in Europe, you realise that it pays for Governments to invest huge amounts in higher education and in transforming the methodologies of teaching. In particular, they link the programmes in their higher education institutions to the specific needs of their countries (Weiler 2000 & Jongbloed 2008; 2010). Similarly, in the United States of America, a large number of universities now focus on research, productivity and community services with the aim of coming up with tangible products which impact on human survival. In Africa, we have not reached such levels yet. We still need to convince ourselves that we must walk away from the traditional programmes towards programmes that answer the questions:

- How do we get to tomorrow on a full stomach?
- How do we cross not just the next village but how do we fly into the skies metaphorically and also in real terms?

We cannot continue to dig the ground in order to get crickets. Rather, we must search our environment and search our skies for bigger things that matter more. We should search our surroundings and identify needs which require attention. Countries such as Malaysia have sent their own satellites into space in order to deepen their understanding on the issues of the environment and climate (Wood & Weigel, 2012). As African universities, we also need to look more closely at how we prepare ourselves not just for today but for the future. It is only those universities that can relate what they teach to the needs of their people that will remain relevant in future, thus, in sync with education for sustainable development. Our students are very good at identifying what is relevant in their countries and beyond their borders and they will enroll in those universities which challenge them to pursue programmes which hold the future in terms of creativity, job creation and employment.

Our Education system in Africa has failed to address what is important to the developing world. With a view to addressing this challenge, in 2016, Vice Chancellors from Zimbabwe's universities travelled around the world, particularly Latin America, the Far East and some African universities in order to establish how they operated <sup>2</sup>. We found at one Brazilian university, that students were developing hypertension tablets, testing them in the laboratory, manufacturing them and sending them out into industry and market. This is a clear demonstration that universities serve the needs of the community. We took a leaf from this experience. We realised that universities are not simply institutions that award certificates. Universities are institutions that should really address issues of poverty alleviation, agricultural growth, health, climate change and peace and security. An appreciation of the above-stated issues could enable African universities to drive their curriculum towards the things that matter most such as those encapsulated in Education 5.0 (teaching, research, community service, innovation and industrialisation).

African governments should therefore begin by committing themselves to the fact that institutions of higher learning must transform the focus of their educational programmes (Ivy, 2001; Teferra, Damtew & Altbachl, 2004). Once our universities have realised the importance of reform, we can come back to our educators and our university leaders. A university is as good as its Vice Chancellor. Our Vice Chancellors and leaders of higher education institutions must also become convinced that they cannot continue to lead institutions that have no direction. They should soon realise that they need to design programmes of teaching and learning which will answer the critical questions:

1. Why do we exist?
2. How are we able to transform?
3. How far have we travelled from universities of the 50s to universities of today?
4. How can we make the best out of the existing resources?

As a Vice Chancellor of a university in Zimbabwe, I am advocating a consistent change, albeit with a real focus on why we exist as universities. The celebrated Mwalimu Julius Nyerere

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<sup>2</sup><https://www.chronicle.co.zw/tertiary-institutions-had-fruitful-tour-of-international-varsities/>

once said our universities and schools and the education system as a whole continue to teach our students how to get to the moon before we are able to reach the next village (Nyerere, 1967a;1967b; Mohiddin, 1971). I concur with Nyerere. Let us feed our people first. Higher education research programmes should come up with those crops that are resistant to drought, crops that will feed and nourish the continent. Only then will people realise the importance of higher education institutions hence need to change direction. You cannot tell an empty stomach that it is not important to feed. You must feed your people first in order to attract their attention towards a new kind of curriculum.

A key component for the success of higher education in Africa is collaboration (Blight, Davis & Oslen, 1999). As leaders of higher education in Africa, we are neighbors living together apart, almost divorced. We share the same continent and challenges, and yet we refuse to sit together and find ways of addressing key developmental issues. This is not to suggest that Africa is a homogeneous entity. All states have their own peculiarities. I want to propose that we ask about those things that draw Africa backwards as a block, not just as individual countries. Or as a region, how could we address such problems with a common vision for development and transformation? I suggest too that we sit down as universities and negotiate on how we might share the knowledge that we have for a common purpose and common goal. It appears we are not finding ourselves. We are like people walking in the dark with arms spread out but hardly touching the problems that are so close to them. We must share our experiences. We must continuously ask the question; despite the number of students that pass through our universities, why are we failing to address the issues of development? Our ideas may fail to address those issues if we continue not to share.

In Africa, we do research mostly in order to be paid and be promoted. You must research, publish or perish. We care little about what we research on. One might as well be researching on the relationship between the amount of rainfall and the amount of hair that grows on one's head or the roles of angels in heaven and that kind of thing. We have not learned to say, look, sure, we may have large quantities of hair on our heads but they cannot feed the continent. African scholars have to consider how their researches could contribute meaningfully to their societies.

There is an urgent need for higher education to package research so that it responds well to the demands or the needs of industry. For example, the way we package and communicate our research findings should benefit industry and other stakeholders. There is also need to commercialise Africa's research output. At the moment, industry is not fully sharing our research proposals and efforts and universities are therefore not benefiting from industry. It is because universities rarely consult with industry on the main areas that require the attention of scholars. Universities and industry need to share their areas of concern in order to ensure success. Industries have the capacity, money and ability to sponsor and translate research results into goods and services. This means that universities and industry must work closely together. We must get into a marriage relationship which says I survive because you survive not I survive because you sponsor my survival. Our relationship must be based on what we both need in order to survive and in order for our people to survive. We also need to make our education system relevant so that students know areas that are important such as science and technology, Information technology, mathematics, medicine and engineering.

Most of the research that African universities undertake is funded or sponsored by The Commonwealth, by all kinds of organisations and these determine, to a very large extent, what you research on. And sometimes these may not have a direct impact on us as a nation or continent whereas others will be published without our knowledge and approval. As universities we should ensure that the results of our research are quickly patented. Most of our governments have not put in place a funding system that will make it possible for our scholars to research into critical areas.

Another great problem that we have identified in higher education is the fact that universities hardly respond to the needs of the lower levels of education. There is need for synergies between universities and high schools, primary schools and even early childhood development institutes. For example, universities should have occasions when they invite high schools to come and see what programmes are on offer and the potential there is for the students. Yes, we are part of one system, we are on the same train except some are in one part of the train and the others are in another. In order to pass from one part of the train to the next you must bridge that empty space. Our universities are surprisingly, in the majority of cases, simply waiting

for Advanced level or Grade 12 results to be published and then source students who are ready for university. Most institutions of higher learning do not help secondary schools prepare their O' and A' Level graduates for higher education. However, some universities should be given the credit for programmes where lecturers and Professors, during vacation, go to particular high schools to assist students with their physics lessons, chemistry lessons, biology lessons and, because of that synergy, by the time the students sit for their examinations, they already know in very large measure, the benefits and what universities offer.

In my view, universities should also avoid the temptation to make a complete divorce/separation between the Humanities and sciences. It would be a devastating idea if the hard sciences were not to be 'tamed' by the Arts and the Humanities. The Arts and the Humanities are the spirit that gives stability to the hard sciences. The liberal Arts are the soul that tames the wild beast. Hard sciences and technology is the beast that cannot survive without a tempering from the Humanities. Allowing them to mix and to enrich each other gives an understanding that one branch of knowledge and education is incomplete without the other, hence the need for interdisciplinary research. These two should always guide our education system and so we should not look at those two branches of knowledge as if they were separate.

In American universities, for instance, while one does medicine one will also do African literature. One can still Geography as well, since there is such a strong synergy between the social sciences and hard medicines (Barton and Levstik, 2004). We are the same human body that must understand the natural sciences and the liberal arts and that is why we must never separate ourselves from them. I also recommend a system of education at the secondary level where our universities are already deeply involved in the preparation of those young people for university. It should be known that you are not only preparing them for university, but you are also preparing them for the real life of work. The psychology that when you get your degree, the job is waiting for you has already been disproven. Those of our children who, when they are doffed and capped, think that as soon as they walk outside the door, there will be an employer waiting for them are misled. There are no jobs out there, graduates must create jobs and the spirit of entrepreneurship must be grown and developed right from high schools. They should look forward to create employment and must know the areas where employment can be created. Therefore, education becomes a vibrant method for employment generation. A report by the Foundation for Young Australia indicated that sixty per cent of Australian students are

training for jobs that will not exist in the future or will be transformed by automation (Rachael Brown, 2015) and 2 billion jobs will disappear (roughly 50% of current jobs on the planet) by 2030 (Thomas Frey, 2016). What it means is universities and other institutions of higher learning should prepare learners for education for sustainability.

There have been suggestions to harmonise degrees from African universities so that a degree issued in Kenya is similar to a degree issued elsewhere on the continent. However, challenges in Africa are not uniform to all nations but we should identify commonalities. We must begin to say what is it that we find in East Africa which we also find in Southern Africa and how do we harmonise our programmes in such a way that the teaching of those programmes is similar. It makes sense to begin to spend less on programmes where we can share resources. If you are doing your own thing alone and someone else in another university is doing the same thing alone, it means you are both not being creative in the utilisation of resources. We should harmonise in order to share because we are aware that there are certain areas where knowledge is common and where our experiences will demand common approaches. In order to harmonise, I recommend that we do prior research to find out areas of commonality and also those areas where harmonisation of the curriculum is important. I believe that is critical. After we have done that, we will then begin to harmonise our curriculum because we know that our graduates from East African universities, from Western African universities will be able to address the same challenges in Zimbabwe, in Mozambique, in Namibia and so on. There was a time when we had a Southern Africa Vice Chancellors Association (SARUA). We had a programme funded by the Australians on climate change. I was part of that Committee where we decided deliberately that until we begin to share in common the challenges of climatic change, we have not studied to find safe bases and we are not yet ready to argue for a harmonisation of the curriculum. We simply must understand how the world operates, how climate change will either bring us together or separate us and I think that is terribly important.

This paper has sought to deconstruct the notion of education for education's sake in Africa by repositioning the value of education in Africa. New ways and reasons for education are being put forward with the specific aim of transforming education for the development of societies and industry. Thus, my clarion calls for meaningful researches which impact our lives as a



country, continent and the world at large. I appeal for African governments to reconsider funding models for higher education to ensure the delivery of goods and services.

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