

INTERNATIONAL TRENDS

The Future Missions and Roles of the African Universities

by Geremie Sawadogo

African universities are at a crossroads in their development. The worldwide economic recession of the 1980s which hit African countries hardest, the institution of new democratic regimes (whether successful or not) and the relative freedom of expression that has resulted, the emergence of global competitive markets, and increasing interdependency in the world economy witnessed by the 1993 General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade/GATT, have all affected and will continue to affect the way African universities have traditionally operated and trained their students.

Indeed, these new economic developments have made it more difficult for African countries to finance needed educational changes, including new infrastructures to meet increased demand



for higher education, better facilities, and staff salary demands.

The resulting dissatisfaction and general disillusionment over the value of university education and the increasing politicization of the universities have often led to unrest and call for a reassessment of the roles and missions of universities in order to better prepare these institutions to meet Africa's development needs for the 21st century.

Universities absorb a proportionally high percentage of national budgets in Africa and it is only economically sound that there be demands for accountability. Unlike the industrialized world, where national research activities are not exclusively carried out

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COUNTRY UPDATES

Africa: Violent Protests Roused by Tough Cuts

As the new academic year begins in West Africa, some Francophone countries are determined to enact unpopular university reforms, repeatedly postponed in the past because of student and staff opposition.

For years, the countries of the region have known that they cannot sustain the model of free higher education, generous academic salaries and student grants introduced after independence. All are trying to cut student numbers.

The region's flagship University of Dakar in Senegal is currently enrolling students on a tough new basis. The university plans to trim its 20,000 student population down to 15,000, part of a World Bank-funded program for a leaner, more selective higher education system.

In Benin, where grant cuts are being bitterly opposed by students, the army patrols the campus of the University of Benin to prevent violent protests against

the new measures. Formerly, students could theoretically spend up to nine years living on grants—three in each main faculty. Now the grants have been cut off and only one repeat year permitted.

The University of Sierra Leone failed to reopen for the new academic year. The government of Captain Valentine Strasser has ordered it to remain closed for renovations until further notice, an excuse that many among the academic staff do not believe.

Furthermore, governments can no longer provide jobs for graduates. In Cameroon, where 20,000 civil service jobs have been axed, graduates are becoming street vendors.

AUPELF, the Francophone Agency for Higher Education and Research, is taking measures to improve standards in universities whose degrees are increasingly spurned abroad. Funded mainly by France and Canada, AUPELF

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by universities but also by industry and business, African universities remain the sole centers for research as well as the principal training centers for skilled civil servants. Thus, African universities play important roles in policy analysis as well as national development and national cultural identity.

Universities' traditional roles

When universities were first established in Africa in the 1960s, (a few had been in existence long before the 1960s, including Fourah Bay College, Makerere College, and university colleges in the Sudan, Nigeria and the Gold Coast), their role and mission was to emulate the universities of the former colonial powers.

More specifically, these universities were to educate a small elite of civil servants according to virtually the same set of standards and curriculum utilized in universities in the colonizing countries, although from the onset there were some differences in purpose. African universities were also perceived as powerful catalysts for social change.

During the 1970s, both African academics and politicians began to question the elitist aspect of access and training at these institutions as well as the relevance of the curriculum.

In the 1980s, with the onset of the world economic crisis, African universities were once again asked to reassess their role and mission with regards to their countries' economic development efforts. Several meetings, sponsored mostly by international donors as well as UNESCO and the Association of African Universities/AAU, were devoted to defining courses of action. These included the design of relevant curricula which would take into account African culture, more accountability and service to the communities, the search for new funding sources and an emphasis on research.

During these two decades (1970-1990), African universities made significant strides towards the attainment of many of their initial objectives. Student enrollment increased by 61 percent between 1980 and 1990, rising from 337,000 to an estimated 542,700. Also, the number of graduates produced by these universities increased from 17,000 in 1970 to 83,000 in 1987. Finally, progress was made in training skilled national staff to replace the expatriates. Thus, the proportion of African teachers rose from 64 percent in 1978-79 to 84 percent in 1986-87. (Sources: William Saint; Lomeck Goma; the World Bank.)

Despite these achievements, African universities still have not met the goals and the expectations of their various constituencies. For example, there has been very little change in the curriculum to meet challenges of a changing socio-economic environment. Also universities are still

very elitist in their admission requirements. As an example, university training in all of Francophone Africa is still almost exclusively reserved for students who passed the *baccalauréat* examination. This lack of progress in making university education available to the majority of Africans has limited the scope of university programs as well as their impact on various aspects of the socio-economic environment.

The problems created by the increased number of students is an interesting issue in itself. While Africa needs skilled labor and while 90 percent of school-aged children still do not have access to higher education, both the universities and the countries' economies appear to have reached a saturation level which suggests that an increase in student enrollment (which is desirable) will worsen the current crisis.

This contradiction points to the inability of the local economies to absorb newly-trained citizens and suggests that African governments' poor economic policies have contributed to pushing the universities deeper into the current state of crisis.

The most frustrating and demeaning aspect of being African has to be the fact that an educated African learns about him or herself through the West's subjective experience of what it is to be African.

Relevance of training & employment

The relevance of university training to national needs, and in particular to the job market, is perhaps the most widely used criterion to assess African universities. One of the consequences of the increasing number of unemployed graduates has been their growing impatience and willingness to take to the streets to express their dissatisfaction regarding a system which they believe to have failed them.

Parents nostalgically talk about the early university days when all graduates were guaranteed a comfortable paying job. Added to this is the fact that most parents, unlike those in industrialized countries, rely on their children for financial support. The lack of jobs and the financial strains it puts on families who traditionally relied on their children's financial support (either from scholarships or employment), have led most parents to take a more active interest, if not a critical look, at the current state of education in Africa.

Continuous politicization of the campus

There is also evidence that university campuses are increasingly involved in the political conflicts that have become common in Africa this last decade. The economic recession, students' dissatisfaction with education, their fears of an uncertain future after graduation, and the new democratic movements have all contributed to politicizing student bodies.

For example, unrest took place in over 90 percent of

universities in Sub-Saharan Africa in the 1980s. In recent years, as was the case in Kenya, Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Niger and Mali, many students have teamed with political groups to voice concerns and displeasure over state affairs.

In Mali, for instance, students played a major role in bringing down the regime of Moussa Traoré in 1991; in the Côte d'Ivoire, they joined the opposition party of Laurent Gbagbo in 1992-1993 to voice their opposition to the lack of democratic progress.

Student involvement in political protests as well as the coalition between students and political groups have increased the politicization of student movements and have moved some of the protest marches, which usually were organized by trade unions and took place in the main arteries of African cities, onto university campuses.

Thus in Zaire, at the height of the political crisis in 1992, the military invaded the university to quell student protests and in the process, raped and killed several students. Similar incidents happened in Burkina Faso in 1987, Niger in 1989, and the Côte d'Ivoire and Kenya in 1992. Overall, student unrest disrupted teaching and university operations and resulted in the suppression of independent thinking within the universities.

The pursuit of elusive "concepts"

A final reason for the educational crisis is the Sisyphus-type pursuit of ever-changing concepts. Consider the concept of "development." From the time of independence, African countries (under pressure from outside forces coupled with inside cooperation) chose to follow Western models of economic development.

"Development" mainly consisted of developing import substitution industries, exporting bulk raw materials and cash crops, while ignoring food production. This resulted in the continent going from being self-sufficient in agriculture to importing food in the early seventies.

Overall, the real impact of this pursuit of concepts is that since countries don't have much control over the frequency and timing of these new definitions, they end up squandering resources and reorienting their training goals to focus on prescriptions that most likely will be changed before they have been tried.

The Roles and Missions of the Universities

Throughout this crisis, researchers, other forums and expert bodies such as UNESCO, the World Bank and the AAU have sought to propose possible solutions to revitalize the universities in ways that would make them more relevant to their respective environment. These studies, however, have failed to present a global vision of the African university for the 21st century.

A typology of African universities

In defining the role of the universities, one should be attentive to a country's special needs. As Asavia Wandira

cautions, Africa is a vast diverse continent and one cannot attempt the same treatment for Anglophone, Francophone, Arab, Former Spanish, Former Portuguese or Southern African universities.

It is the belief of this writer that African universities must engage in improving the well being of Africans. For this, African universities must respond to their socio-economic environment instead of waiting for social changes to dictate what their missions should be.

According to United Nations data, Africa contains the world's 45 least developed countries. The average per capita income is the world's lowest. Infant mortality is 140 per 1,000; 45% of the population is under age 15; only 3% of the population reaches 64 years while average life expectancy remains at 49. While the population increases by nearly 3% a year, food production is up only by 2%.

Yet, Africa possesses great natural resources. The disparity is that while the continent possesses 30% of known resources, including 97% of chrome, 85% of platinum, 70% of cocoa, 50% of palm oil, and 33% of coffee, it only accounts for 2% of total world industrial output.

Currently, both the training and the curriculum in African universities are not designed to address these problems. Until universities rethink and redesign their training to emphasize problem-solving skills, particularly in agronomy, medicine, engineering, chemistry and computer sciences, countries will lack the technical expertise to successfully confront Africa's development problems. It is urgent that an economic role be included in universities' missions statements and strategic planning goals.

Below is a discussion of some suggested roles that universities, as organized in the following typology, could assume.

Francophone Sahelian Universities (Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger)

The three Sahelian countries have a combined illiteracy rate of 72%, the highest on the continent. These universities should design literacy programs to provide functional reading and problem-solving skills in both the national and official languages.

Because the combined life expectancy rate at birth is about 47 years, there is an obvious need for social workers, medical doctors, nurses and midwives specialized in preventive care.

Furthermore, these universities are located in landlocked countries with very little export potential and considerable reliance on customs for revenues. The universities could assist in creating new business programs to train graduates in entrepreneurial and import-export management skills. Agricultural science departments could research ways to make cattle raising a more productive activity.

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Coastal Francophone Universities (Benin, Togo, Guinea, Côte d'Ivoire, Senegal)

As a group, these universities are located in countries that are highly indebted and whose economies have faltered after the boom period of the 1970s. According to the World Bank's data, the average annual growth of industry from 1980 to 1991 decreased by more than 60 percent, except for Senegal and Benin. These coastal Francophone universities could strive to equip graduates with skills to locally transform their countries' huge natural resources, which combined constitute more than a third of the continent's cocoa, coffee, palm, and peanut production.

Central African Francophone Universities (Burundi, Rwanda, Zaire, Chad, Central African Republic, Congo, Cameroon)

These countries have in common political chaos as well as vast natural resources that have been squandered by corrupt leaders and poor management. The most important task is to create a trustworthy environment for both intellectual and economic activities. Universities could introduce ethnic and sociological studies in order to educate students as well as non-traditional learners about the importance and benefits of social stability through peaceful ethnic cohabitation. As a group, the Francophone universities should cease paying full scholarships to students, and should gradually phase out existing scholarships.

West African Anglophone Universities (Liberia, Gambia, Ghana, Nigeria, Sierra Leone)

Officials in these countries should strive to enlist the contribution of universities in designing appropriate programs to train graduates with skills and know-how to locally transform the natural resources, including cocoa and coffee in Ghana, oil in Nigeria, and diamond and rubber production in Liberia.

With the exception of Ghana, these countries have had the unfortunate experience of a civil war. One way that universities can rebuild national unity and sustained peace is to offer courses in ethnic studies.

East African Anglophone Universities (Malawi, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia, Zimbabwe, Kenya, Lesotho, Botswana)

The socio-economic roles of the East African Anglophone universities could be to provide training and technical know-how to students to allow them to be competent in activities related to vital sectors, such as the mining industry and tourism.

Universities also must be enlisted in the battle against the AIDS epidemic, which is much more prevalent in these countries than elsewhere on the continent.

Portuguese Universities (Mozambique, Angola, Cape Verde, Guinea Bissau)

Institutions of higher learning in these countries have

been in a state of crisis, primarily as a result of many years of civil war. One immediate task is to rebuild the university infrastructure and to create safe and peaceful environments to encourage and stimulate research and learning needed to solve some problems, including very low life expectancy (47 years for Mozambique and 30 for Guinea Bissau) and high adult illiteracy, which averages 65 percent of the total population.

Universities in the Horn of Africa (Sudan, Somalia and Ethiopia)

These universities are located in low-income, severely indebted economies ravaged by war and famine. Universities should strive to revitalize a once thriving agricultural sector. They could also help create a politically stable environment where ethnic diversity and differences are accepted and understood. Universities also could try to develop crops that will succeed in the poor soil and rain-deprived climates of these countries.

The Universities as Centers for Functional Cultural Emancipation

The second major role and mission of African universities is to serve as centers for cultural emancipation. The idea of engaging universities in the study and teaching of African culture stems mainly from concerns over the foreign nature of the current curriculum as well as the cultural dependency it creates and fosters.

Attempts at teaching African cultures have failed to produce the expected results, primarily because countries did not provide the needed political commitment and failed to treat experts in national cultures in the same manner as graduates who possess skills in western cultures. For example, in most countries one still has a much better chance of finding a job on the basis of one's mastery of French or English as opposed to mastery of local languages such as Senufo or Ewe.

One can argue that traditional culture is already being adequately transmitted in African countries. What is really lacking is a study of culture in a way that will help identify and integrate certain cultural values and knowledge into appropriate disciplines in order to develop relevant problem-solving skills. Areas such as medicine, agriculture and vocational training could benefit most.

Thus, universities must take the lead in developing sociological as well as anthropological models to describe how the local people learn best, their needs, values and aspirations, which in turn will guide both socio-economic endeavors and university programs.

The most frustrating and demeaning aspect of being African has to be the fact that an educated African learns about him or herself through the West's subjective experience of what it is to be African. A most recent example of this is provided by the rush to democratize African countries without taking time to reflect on systems or variations that could be better fit for African contexts.

So far, the West has had the monopoly on intellectual production about Africa. Most publications about Africans and Africa are still authored by non-Africans, with all the unavoidable cultural biases that these include.

To remedy this situation, universities should develop conceptual models that will capture the essence of the African experience, and they must study the cultural components of areas in which Africa has had proven successes, such as traditional education and medicine, family values, trade, creativity and the arts in order to design programs to effectively train students. Furthermore, seminars on culture and development should be organized periodically by universities, to identify cultural traits that are conducive to or which could hinder quests to improve individual well being. As H.J. Mosha writes, Africa needs a better understanding of the "multifarious cultural background of society in order to find ways of reducing prejudice, jealousy, fear, hatred and hence pave the way for national unity and regional cooperation."

Until now, we have left to others the important responsibility of telling us who we are and how we feel, how we learn, and what we think is needed for our well being. This is a practice that universities in their role as cultural emancipators should aim at reversing.

Universities as Open Arenas for Learning and Community Service

Universities in Africa should cease serving only a very small percentage of the population. As they are currently conceived, universities cheat Africa out of the participation of 80 percent of all citizens in development efforts. They further ostracize them from the 20 percent who, because of their current Western-based education, have become as foreign to the realities of their countries. An open door policy for adult programs, without lowering the standards, will demystify and improve the image of the universities, which are still widely considered to be off-limits to non-schooled persons.

With regard to education, universities should shift their emphasis from providing abstract knowledge to problem-solving skills. Several cultural traditions in Africa militate in favor of such an approach. Indeed, learning in Africa traditionally took place in very practical settings. One learned by doing, and this cultural approach must be adopted by the universities.

Given the complexity of development issues in Africa, a more integrative, comprehensive approach could be used to train students. Each issue should be looked at from an economic, social, cultural, as well as an ethical point of view. This can only be accomplished if students are allowed to take courses across departments.

There must be a concerted effort at studying and evaluating trends in technology, science, and a host of social issues that are likely to be at the core of development in each country, and to develop relevant curriculum in order to adequately train graduates who will be compe-

tent in these areas. Two such areas include computer sciences and biotechnology and ethnic and government studies.

The lack of competence in these areas will result in the greater dependency of Africa on the West for information technologies and related services, which incidentally have been singled out as the most important scientific development of this century. It is even conceivable that Africa won't be able to benefit from these new technologies for lack of technical expertise.

Still, with regards to curriculum, universities must emphasize training based on African problems. They must teach managerial skills and sciences in order to prepare the graduates to successfully confront Africa's development problems.

Finally, given the increasing politicization of the university campuses and the attempts at building new democracies in Africa and in the face of some of the disillusionments about the rewards of democracy (it does not feed you), universities will need to conduct research and design courses on the democratic process as well as the type of government that best fits the African context.

Historically, African governments have directed university affairs. In most countries, governments appoint senior administrators and designate university presidents mostly based on political rather than professional criteria. In many cases, this practice has resulted in poor management and governance by government-appointed officials who are eager to show loyalty to politicians, and in the imposition of government views on university administration.

Universities must be autonomous and de-linked from governments and be open to all; they must secure diverse funding sources; they must design curriculum, training, as well as a research agenda that will be relevant to country-specific development skill needs.

One cannot stress enough, however, that universities alone cannot accomplish their missions. They need political commitment and financial support from governments. If universities are to have any impact at all, governments must devise and implement sound economic policies that will allow the universities to play an effective role by training needed manpower and conducting research and policy studies needed to solve the current socio-economic crisis. □

Geremie Sawadogo is an Assistant Professor at the School for International Training in Brattleboro, Vermont, and is currently writing A Guide to African Universities, to be published by Westview Press next year. This article is condensed from a presentation Professor Sawadogo will make before the Joint-Colloquy on the University in Africa in the 90's and Beyond in Lesotho in January. This conference is being sponsored by the Association of African Universities, Donors to African Education Working Group on Higher Education, and the World Bank.