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Editorial

Out of Africa: planning and policy

Earlier this year, to be precise on February 9th, the Association of African Universities whose Secretary General, Francois Rajasaon, also Vice President of the International Association of Universities, brought out the Declaration on the African University in the Third Millennium. It is a sober and powerful document which, in some 12 points, sets out the main obligations and tasks which universities in Africa should take up and develop in the service of their communities, of their Nation and of the African continent as a whole. (<http://www.aau.org/releases/declaration.htm>)

As the Declaration makes clear, this is a crucial time for the African University. For, alongside and in addition to the long-term issues of relevance, inadequate resources, quite massive expansion in demand for places and its concomitant growth in the overall volume of student numbers, there stand two other challenges. These are globalisation on the one hand and the rise of the so-called ‘knowledge economy’ on the other. Not only are these two phenomena in addition to the earlier difficulties which have been of singular disadvantage to higher education in Africa almost from the time its different Nations won Independence, they also bid fair to set that Continent’s higher learning in further difficulties first, by tying the often embryonic research and advanced training system in with the international economy and thus weaning it further from local needs. And, second, by amplifying still further that haemorrhage amongst those already highly trained and thus vital for the national wellbeing, known as the ‘brain drain’. If anything, the ‘knowledge economy’ precisely because it places particular weight on the research system both as a vehicle for training future research cadres and as a means of generating ‘knowledge-based capital’, serves to add further urgency to the basic issue of how, in future, research itself is to be managed and how it is to be sustained as the keystone to a sustainable economy. Both these issues will, doubtless, be broached at the Expert Seminar which will meet at the end of this month in Paris under the joint sponsorship of UNESCO and the Swedish International Development Agency.

That globalisation and the knowledge economy have focused attention on what one American sociologist has termed the ‘advanced graduate training system’ which reflects, of course, a certain parallelism to the debate which, in various forms, has been going on in the more advanced economies for the best part of the past 10 years. (Clark, 1995; for Western Europe see Kalleborg et al., 2000). Yet, it in no way detracts from the long-term attention which scholars, administrators and institutional leaders have, each in their own manner, always paid to the fundamental questions of access, through put, rates of qualification, not to mention the no less vexed question of the ‘match’—or

more often, the ‘mismatch’—between the competencies that the economic development requires and what the university puts forth. Indeed, since the viability of any research training system is intimately tied in with the performance of the level preceding it, one can argue with both force and persuasion that any management of research, irrespective of the specific national priorities which government, trade and society call upon it to fulfil and irrespective of the institutional and structural provision into which organised research has to fit, ignores the pattern of undergraduate flows and qualifications at its peril. Both training by research and training for research are the other side of the medal which is to be found in the first degree experience (Bartelse, 1999).

It is for reasons such as these that this issue of *Higher Education Policy*, whilst being aware of the shift in perspective that current debate entails, has chosen to remain within the framework of developments at the first degree level. The opening article by Dabalén et al. deals with a central and enduring topic of that of the labour market prospects of university graduates in Nigeria. Their findings paint a grim picture. For if Nigeria’s higher education system has expanded and taken on a structural complexity not dissimilar to certain systems found in the Northern Hemisphere, expansion has not bettered the lot of those graduating. On the contrary, employment prospects have deteriorated over time. The number of entrants to public service, as it was 20 years ago in Western Europe, which provided the major source of employment, has fallen drastically. At the same time, the skills deemed necessary by the nascent private sector appear to show an equally marked decline. There is, as the authors make abundantly clear, a species of ‘uncoupling’ between what the ‘market’ needs, what the university supplies and what students opt to study.

Whether the situation is wholly within the powers of the university to remedy, however, poses other questions. In part, as the authors suggest, the inability of curricula to ‘mesh’ with market demands is not wholly a matter for the university alone. On the contrary, outdated curricula and materials reflect but another aspect of that well-known phenomenon, familiar to the wordy as ‘resource dependency’, long a structural and debilitating feature of higher education in Africa. And whilst others in this issue, notably Kingsley Banya, argue that one possible solution lies in the benefits of ‘privatising’ higher education, much of the viability of that policy in its turn, depends on whether private resources available within a particular Nation are up to the doughty task of taking over what the State and national governments have shown themselves either unable or reluctant to provide. One of the more indelicate queries that lies behind the issue of privatisation is, should resources not be available within the Nation, who is to supply them, on what conditions and with what *arrière-pensées*, political or religious? Despite all that philanthropists might claim, in policy just as in charity itself, there is no free lunch even though the tariff might not be immediately obvious.

There is, of course, another issue that follows from the dilemma of cost constraint or having the ‘customer pay’. It is no less important in Africa and is certainly of the highest political delicacy. It is whether the rapid reduction in the financial support accorded to the student estate in higher education—a scenario which our Nigerian colleagues hint at—will not add a further element of volatility to a social group whose expectations are high and whose sensitivity to such measures of ‘budgetary compression’ is no less

so. To parody the title of the classic study by Louis Chevalier of the 19th century French working class, one may sometimes doubt that the student estate is unflaggingly and at all times a ‘classe laborieuse’. There are certainly many governments which most assuredly view it as a ‘classe dangereuse’.

As Eckel in his comparison of change in higher education in the United States and South Africa notes, context plays a vitally important part in determining the way similar problems are very differently perceived by the same interests or by comparable social groups in one society as set against another. Yet, contextual sensitivity has not been a notable feature amongst those international bodies on whose advice many African Nations have relied or profess to rely on. Still, there is some indication in certain quarters that the error of previous ways is, if not openly admitted, then at least privately recognised.

This is a comforting thought. But, the basic truth that technical solutions of a similar nature often end up assuming vastly different shapes in different societies, has long been known to constitutional draftsmen even if it has yet fully to dawn upon the consciousness of those technicians of de-contextualised solutions who are in the quest of an educational problem to solve and of a government to pay for their particular brand of orthodoxy and conviction.

That said, there are techniques which may serve to increase institutional efficiency through improving the institution’s knowledge about itself. In an era when both donors and governments are especially cost-conscious, exercises which allow university administration insight into such matters as student cost by discipline, faculty and level of study—undergraduate, graduate or doctoral—cannot but be welcome. With this consideration in mind, Aduol’s contribution on per capita costing of courses in Kenyan universities has a value of a practical order.

Yet, despite all the proposals, commitment and recommendations which those closely involved in Africa’s systems of higher learning and those who observe it from afar, have put forward, one thing is perhaps overlooked. And that is how many and how massive the changes have already been, despite persistent difficulties. Certainly, the old adage that ‘one must keep running just to keep pace’ cannot be ignored. In truth, it has been one of the unswerving concerns of those who, yesterday as today, are engaged in the task of ensuring that opportunity and social justice accompany the modernisation of the society and university. Looking back is not always a recommendable activity, especially when severe challenges loom ahead. But, being aware of what one has achieved sometimes gives further courage to do what remains to be done.

References

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