

# 32 *Enhancing Access and Equity in Higher Education among the Rural Folks*

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## 1 Abstract

*The expansion of educational opportunity in Sub-Saharan Africa is not a new phenomenon. For example, Africans have ventured far and wide worldwide in search of education in a period stretching as far as a half a century ago. The demand for higher education has been, and still is, rife in the region hence the high rate of the growth of universities. Great investments in education have greatly increased and has resulted in improved school attendance, capacity to learn, promotion of life-long education and skills for life.*

*People of employable ages have greatly increased their employability, bargaining power and competence by accessing higher education. Due to lack of adequate opportunities in higher education, the rural population has not fared well. Some of the rural population possess even better qualifications compared to their urban peers. Without the availability of the facilities for higher education; the rural populations are indefinitely compromised and limited, while their counterparts in the urban areas remain on a higher rate of social mobility associated with access to higher education. This paper seeks to identify and explore strategies for enhancing access and equity in higher education by mature students in the rural society. The implementation of the identified strategies will boost access and equity in higher education among rural populations who are interested, able and qualified to pursue higher education.*

## 2 Introduction

As a matter of fact, the issue of access and equity in higher education is a topic of great urgency to many stakeholders who include the Government, general public, NGOs, students and even political representation (World Bank 2008). Higher education is associated with the university; However, a few decades ago, the rural population has often tended to view the university as an “ivory tower” thus dubbing universities as irrelevant, out touch with the people’s needs and out of step with the reality beyond the universities’ walls (Karani, 1991). This not to say that the university does not have a role to play in helping the rural population access higher education and thus stimulate development. The cry is the little efforts by the university to effectively work towards being effective, responsive and relevant to the society’s needs and realities (Nzioka, 1991).

Even though expansion of higher education in the recent years is high in the developing countries, the reality in the Sub-Saharan Africa shows that qualified human capital has overwhelmingly remained rare and scarce compared to the developmental needs of the vast continent. In this regard, the expansion of higher education is still high on the agenda. Knowledge is critical for the growth and development of a country. World Bank (2009:44) aptly states:

Knowledge has become a key driver of growth and development. Countries with higher skill level are better equipped to face new challenges and master technological discoveries.

Qualified personnel in medicine, teaching and technology are in great demand. There is no shortcut to development; increase in skill level must therefore be enhanced in order to stimulate sustainable growth and development. The complex social problems that continue to trouble Sub-Saharan Africa will only be conquered if all the people in the region can have access and equity in higher education (Human Development Report, 2008).

We applaud the growth of both the private and public universities in Kenya. But the reality in the said growth is that the development of the higher institutions of learning is skewed, with most of them being concentrated in the urban areas. This leaves the rural population behind with very little, if any, to show. Mythologically, the rural population continues to see the university as a distant place; a place of empty rhetoric by some proud and hot-headed intellectuals who have nothing to offer in the practical world. Until very recently, the pursuit of higher education was seen as unimportant in that the highly educated became abstract, transcended from the society and unconnected with the real people (Karani, 1995). To change this picture, the university will need to get closer to the rural people and increase their sensitivity to the communal and societal needs. Commenting on this, Ashby (1964:3) is of the view that:

An institution is the embodiment of an ideal. In order to survive, an institution must fulfil two conditions: it must be sufficiently stable to sustain the idea which gave to its birth, and the medieval institution which fulfils both these conditions.

The university therefore must know the ideal, and consequently develop effective strategies for fulfilling the conditions surrounding that ideal. Thus then the university will occupy its rightful position in the mind of the rural population. It is commonly believed that properly tapped, access and equity in higher education can be a great stimulant and powerful engines for global development.

### 3 Definition of Higher Education and University

Higher education refers to the level of education provided by universities and other institutions that are offering post-secondary school education. Among some of the developed countries, about 50 percent of their populations at a given moment in their lives do access higher education. Some activities in higher education include:

1. Admission of students
2. Examination
3. Recruitment of teachers
4. Teaching
5. Research
6. Social services and activities of universities related to learning.

In this regard, the university's main task is to teach, train, and enable students to contribute to knowledge by engaging in research. *The University of Nairobi Act* (1985, Sect. 7 B), effectively summarises well the activities of a university as “to participate in the discovery, transmission and preservation of knowledge, and to stimulate the intellectual life and cultural development of Kenya.”

The intended end of all academic participation is equitable development of a country. If higher education has that long term desire for equitable development, then the goal will not be realised until a fair access and equity to higher education for all the population whether urban or rural is deliberately pursued. In his message during the 6<sup>th</sup> Exhibition by Kenyan Universities, the Chairman of CHE, Prof. Thairu, underscored the same thought when he said:

Universities must view themselves as laboratories for innovation and renovation of the educational system and subsequently the society. In a world where socio-economic development is becoming more knowledge intensive, the role of universities imparting higher education is crucial. Higher education has to become dynamic constantly entering unchartered areas. (CHE, 2008)

The university therefore cannot escape the responsibility of enabling all people whether in the rural or urban to access higher education, for without knowledge the pursuit of development becomes elusive and impossible. Higher education is crucial in our world.

It will suffice to mention the fact that all people are entitled to access higher education as a right. According to UN International Convention on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights of 1966, and Article 13 (Human Development Report, 2001), "Higher Education shall be made equally accessible to all, on the basis of capacity, by appropriate means, and in particular by the progressive introduction of free education."

The point of departure here is equal access, equity and gradual build up of the promotion of higher education. Therefore it is the right for each and every person to access higher education. It is indeed a matter of fact that efforts must be put in place to ensure that the rural population enjoys an access and equity in higher education since it is their right.

The word university comes from the Medieval Latin *Universitas*, which means a "group of scholars" (Nzioka, 1995). There is a popular theory that the first university was founded in Europe in the twelfth century. Nzioka (1995:7) goes on to state that Christians were behind such institutions which were headed by chancellors or rectors mainly bishops appointed by the Pope. The university exercise critical thinking, integrity, and is free from any interference by the society as pillar of the truth. The general public looks up to the university to describe felt problems and consequently solve them. IESS (1968:192, in Nzioka 1995:8) rightly asserts, "the Medieval University was the organization for embodying the public recognition of the corporate autonomy of specialised intellectuals who performed important social functions."

In conclusion, Nzioka (1995) points out that in regard to the purpose, character and structure, today's university is exactly built on the same foundation as that of the Medieval University: public recognition, autonomous, and staffed with specialised intellectuals. Further, on the foundation of Medieval University, today's university finds its purpose of existence, "the disinterested pursuit of learning repository of universal values." Such statement has remained to be the lighthouse for any university that is worth of its salt. For example, the university will be steadfast in pursuing national development build on the principle of merits, critical decisions and rather not being parochial, and a regionalist. Once, a former president of Nigeria, Yakub Gowon, quipped (Schuetze and Slowey, 2002) that:

...it is a matter of regret that the University of Ibadan, made up of eminent scholars, has not been able to set the right example for the whole country by containing the more glaring manifestations of tribal chauvinism. Far too many individuals have tried in this institution to use tribalism as an instrument for attaining personal ends.

A university cannot be said to maintain the ideal if it does not promote nationalism in place of ethnicity of regionalism. To this end, Dike who was the Vice Chancellor in Ibadan University had this to say (Schuetze and Slowey, 2002):

It must be said to our shame that the Nigerian intellectual, far from being an influence for national integration, is the greatest exploiter of parochial and clanist sentiment... As you leave us, you are going to a Nigeria torn by tribal strife, a country in which deep suspicion exist between different sections. You will be no credit to this university if you leave us to join the bunch of educated advocate, of tribal divisions and strife and worshippers of tribal gods.

Thus, the university community must then join hands with the people in order to build a stronger nation that will guarantee its citizenry the following goods:

1. Cultural authentication
2. National unity and identity
3. Critical decision making
4. Admission and evaluation of students
5. Designation and promotion of the staff
6. Values of higher education
7. Universalism

8. National engagement
9. Developmentalism
10. Academic freedom.

When the university stands out unfettered by the society, it is easier to pursue the classical goal that was midwifed by the Medieval University.

## 4 Growth of University in Kenya

Enrolment reports in Sub-Saharan Africa show a remarkable growth of at least 20 percent in the last three decades. However, such statistics do not assume any uniformity in the growth; rather it has been variant and uneven across the countries. For example, enrolment in the last twenty to twenty five years ago show different results in two Sub-Saharan African countries: Burkina Faso recorded 1.5 percent only, while Guinea recorded 9.5 percent (Dowd 2003, World Bank 2008, and World Development Report 2001).

About three decades ago, Kenya had just a handful of universities; the first was the University of Nairobi, established in 1956, Moi University 1984, Kenyatta University 1985, Egerton University 1987, and consequently Jomo Kenyatta University of Agriculture and Technology early 1990s. Today, Kenya boasts of about seven public universities. Time will not be spent on the rest of the universities but they are alive and doing well in regard to their contribution as institutions of higher learning (CHE, 2008).

## 5 Expansion of Higher Education and its Implications

The expansion of higher education in Sub-Saharan Africa as stated earlier in this paper is not a new trend. However, it was slow in the beginning. Expansion should not be expected to be problem free; multiple challenges must be on the way (Smith and Kohen, 2001). All the same, the process was initially slow. For example, Banya and Elu (1999) observe that in 1879, the Fourah Bay College in Freetown, (Sierra Leone) graduated the first African in Higher Education. The slow phase is seen that by 1879 to 1960, (a span of eight decades), there were only five institutions of higher education in the Sub-Saharan countries. After just three decades, the rapid growth of the expansion in higher education was conspicuously noticeable; for example, in 1990 there were eight five institutions of higher education in Sub-Saharan Africa (World Bank, 1995, 1998).

Policy makers and implementers need to interrogate the obvious expansion in higher education and find out how the urban and rural areas have fared since then, establish if there are any imbalances in regard to the rich and poor citizens, male and female, regional and ethnic. In other words, is there a holistic equity in the expansion of the higher education? Evidently the statistics tell us a very encouraging story this far, but what is the face of the reality concealed behind the statistics? Is the expansion skewed in any way?

Karani (1991: 21 – 24) gives a summary of the expansion of university education in Kenya and its implications therein. He notes, among the many things, that:

1. Besides a low percentage of those who had received university education, just 1 percent, many these educated elites were leaving the rural areas in search of salaried jobs; thus triggering high brain drainage.
2. The exodus of the elite deny the university an opportunity to fulfil its ideals of being a mentor for development and thus transform the society as a whole. This happens because the educated take with them their skills, knowledge, attitudes and the values developed through the academic ladder; such qualitative characteristics would have been the catalysts to change their societies as they respond to all opportunities and social problems that act as barriers to development.

From the onset, it has to be in record that the expansion of the higher education especially to the rural areas is very critical; we have about 80 percent of the population living in the rural areas.

There is logic and urgency therefore to focus on the rural areas afresh. Again Karani (1991) aptly captures this when he states:

University expansion has implications for rural development. It is stipulated in the policy ... that increased output of university graduates will bring about increased impact of the university on the society as a whole ... the university in Kenya is expected to provide thorough research, knowledge, skills and services that would help solve problems facing the society.

It is in the rural areas where most social problems are very severe and troubling. Such problems include:

3. Poverty
4. Endemic and pandemic diseases
5. Environmental devastation

Evidently, expanding higher education to rural areas will result in an increase of educated people with specialised skills, capacity, talent, and experience to tackle those problems which have found a home in the rural areas. Another advantage will be that these educated people may continue to live and work in the rural communities thus checking the brain drain that is rampant in the rural areas.

Perhaps what is at stake at the moment is to revisit our development plans in regard to the expansion of higher education and take audit of what has happened to the rural areas since the advent of planning and up to date. This is because the Kenya Development Plan is not just right but very coherent, systematic and articulate. A summary below can help to illustrate this (Karani 1991: 20).

1. **First and Second Development Plan (1966 – 1970 and 1970 – 1974)** had the aim of expanding education to reach more and more Kenyans, to reduce the visible gap in the demand and supply of manpower. By so doing, the society would solve problems like hunger, disease, exploitation and ignorance possibly through transformation of lives ushered in by and through education.
2. **Third Development Plan ... 1974 – 1978:** Through establishment of technical institutions the school-leavers would have their skills and abilities boosted to measure up with the demands of the then economy. The element of extension workers was also emphasised.
3. **The Fourth Development Plan 1978 – 1983:** The talk in this period was geared towards the alleviation of poverty. The kind of education to be provided here was to be diversified, functional and qualitative: all was aimed at improving the economy in the rural society.
4. **The Fifth Development Plan ... 1983 -1988.** This was geared to the provision of practical education to meet the economic needs of all the Kenyans in the entirety of the society.
5. **The last Development Plan 1983 – 1993** solely focused on the expansion of quality education to all Kenyans and thus equip them to participate in the economic development of their Nation.

The Development Plan only suffered from inability to stimulate retention of the graduates in the rural areas. The graduates acquired the needed skills, knowledge, attitudes, values and capacities, but took them elsewhere; some to the urban areas and others beyond the boundaries of the country all in search of greener pastures. The rural areas have been worse than before, the current expansion of higher education should therefore address issues of access and equity in higher education if the rural society is going to realise the change and development in the Kenya we want.

Put together, OECD (1998) and UNESCO (1998) show that expansion in higher education is dramatically on the increase. The mature students who were once under-represented are now making debut in higher education. The participation has shown a changing trend in that there is an obvious shift from elite to mass system in regard to the access; the trend has also affected higher education in relation to its:

1. Nature
2. Structure
3. Purpose
4. Socio-economy
5. Role

Globally, more and more adult students are participating in higher education. However, much of the change was not anticipated for by many nations; it occurred with little or no strategic planning (UNESCO, 1998; World Bank, 2007). Even as the expansion of the adult students participation is celebrated, there are few concerns in regard to the strategies being employed by the universities. Schuetze and Slowey (2000) point out these concerns as:

1. High competition for students among universities, this raises concern that standards in higher education maybe compromised.
2. Increase in marketisation of higher education systems, this raises doubts if the universities are being objective and ethical in fulfilling what they are promising the prospective students.
3. Overloading of the teachers, this makes their delivery hard and of low standards as they cannot give quality teacher attention and supervision to all of the students. Actually, at university level, teachers are mentors. However, in the current situation, one cannot mentor over one hundred students in a given class. This has led many critics to moot that currently education is just being commercialised and made available to those who are willing to buy. By this they attribute to the possibility of producing half-baked graduates due to the big numbers in a class against one tired, demotivated and overwhelmed teacher.

The Kenyan context of expansion of higher education has a duality; on one side, the expansion of higher education in Kenya has had a vision to pursue; but on the other, the expansion is sudden, dramatic, and gigantic thus marring the vision all together. The expansion dwarfs the facilities as the universities continue being overcrowded by learners, who badly outnumber the facilitators. If statistics were to be available today, the ratio would be pathetic. One of the adult students confessed to have been in a class of one hundred and thirty students against one teacher. The Kenyan situation is properly articulated in the Development Plan (Republic of Kenya, 1989:219), which partly states:

There is need for expansion of university education in the country which arises from the following factors. First, this level of education is necessary in generating a pool of highly qualified personnel in various specialised skills. Greater numbers of graduates will generate a pool of highly qualified personnel in various specialised skills. Greater numbers of graduates will generate the potential for promoting higher productivity of capital and other resources in their individual capacities as farmers, engineers, doctors, industrialists, scientists, and others professions. The need to expand university places should not, therefore, be related exclusively to public sector employment. Second, the ratio of university graduates to the population is relatively low in Kenya as compared to other countries with similar levels of development and in relation to the level of technological and sophistication.

The vision very clearly shows the need to expand higher education with clear targets to be achieved, for example to improve the quality of our graduates, enhance higher productivity in all professions, increase the ratio of university graduates to the population in general. Also, the vision attempts to make strides in access and equity in higher education comparatively like in other countries within the level of development like Kenya. At this level, questions can then be posed, was the vision of expanding higher education to be realised only by the increase in the numbers of universities? What measures, if any, would ensure peoples' ability to access and equity in higher education, for every person interested and qualified to access higher education, whether from urban or rural?

Expansion of higher education in our country has taken into consideration some criteria for accessing higher education, for example, entry qualifications to higher educational institutions,

qualification and competence of the facilitators, resources and proper methodologies of teaching. However, there are doubts on whether there is anything like fair access and equity policies to ensure equitable access for all interested and qualified citizens wherever they maybe found, whether in the rural and urban areas. Questions are raised whether higher education is for grabs for the rich and the well to do, especially the people from the urban. It is doubted if the rural societies who are ideally poorer compared to their urban counterparts are accessing higher education with the same speed and ratio. This forces us to take reexamine of our ability and performance in reaching out to people in isolated country sides, offering support to those with dream of accessing higher education. This will be critical for there are many who may not know universities have other courses to offer other than degree programmes. To realise such realities, our universities must admit the seemingly obvious barriers in access and equity in higher education; this will be the first step needed in order to identify the factors and structures to be put in place to enhance strategies to maximise:

1. access,
2. equity,
3. participation,
4. success, and
5. retention of the learners from rural backgrounds.

Until recently, various literature limited the issues of access and equity to socio-economic factors, ethnic backgrounds, and language and gender. However, the social landscape has changed since then, for example, today, there are more women represented in the higher education (UNESCO, 2006). There are other emergent factors that affect the decision to enroll in higher education as tabulated by the Commonwealth of Australia (1998:4-6):

1. Future employability.
2. Immediate family members.
3. The location of the university.
4. Access to facilities like computers.
5. Difficulties to studying full time especially adult learners who are employed and have families.
6. Inability to orient oneself in a new setting especially from rural to urban.
7. Poor access to students loan due to ignorance or age barrier.
8. Lack of ongoing support for enrolled students.
9. Bottleneck outreach programmes that fail to reach the rural isolated potential students.
10. Haphazard distance education that requires new technology which is inaccessible to the rural populations. For example, computers and internet; there is a lot of politicizing to the effect of making people believe that the majority in the rural setting are computer literate, this is not the case.

Another discrepancy that has been raised and a lot has been barely addressed in the current literature in regard to the expansion of higher education by the universities is the compromising of the middle-level colleges. The trend being referred to here is the continuing take-over of the middle level colleges by the already established public universities which turn these colleges into their constituent colleges. However, the universities have good reasons for the takeover, for example:

1. Their strategic locations, some being at the centre of towns make them very viable for the takeover by public universities.
2. Their physical realities like ready hostels, libraries, cafes and lecture halls add impetus towards their pull towards the public universities.

It is anticipated that the number of people seeking places in higher education will increase dramatically based on the offer of free subsidised education in the country in primary and secondary schools respectively by the Government; hence the scrambling for places to expand access to higher education.

Thousands of students still seek higher education from other countries like India, USA, China, Singapore and Britain, among others. Therefore, offering the same higher education here will save a lot of foreign currencies.

The researcher, however, find that there are worrying questions that all educational experts and the public must genuinely face without being casual and biased. For example, are we able to ignore the current demand for education being shown by the thousands of students enrolling in the middle level colleges? As a matter of fact, these middle level colleges produce good quality technicians who serve the noble task of supporting engineers and other higher trained personnel from the higher institutions of learning, so, where will these needed technicians going to be coming from if these colleges are compromised? Are we setting a trend that will compromise the country's quality of education in the name of expansion of higher education? Warning of the same, Edebe (Daily Nation, 22<sup>nd</sup> March 2009) writes:

The rush by public universities to create more campuses needs to be controlled in order not to compromise quality of education.

In researcher's field interviews, one of the local experts said:

Just as doctors must have nurses and clinical officers to boost their work; these middle level colleges produce people who are very critical to other professionals in their fields. So, engineers, for example, will be unable to do their work effectively unless technicians are available to assist in technical matters. It then goes without saying that for the technicians to be available, the middle level institutions must be available too to avail the highly needed technicians.

The policy makers in the education sector must take this earliest concern very seriously and advise the people behind the takeover of the middle level colleges by the universities. One may wonder loudly, is the takeover a must? Why don't the universities use the idle land within their environs and their other resources and expand their facilities? If the universities are going to boast of enhancing access and equity, there is an urgent need to confront and overcome all the barriers of designing and friendly deliveries of curriculum with an "understood purpose and proven effectiveness."

Education has a transforming power, changing the participant from one form of mental reality and capacity to another. The behaviour of the individual is changed as he/she acquires new knowledge, skills, attitudes and values. To this, Nzioka (1995: 22) adds that the individual is able to respond to new opportunities and make adjustments in social realities like adjusting to socio-economic and socio-cultural changes.

With the regrettable nosedive witnessed in the agricultural sector due to factors like drought, land scarcity, lack of capital, lack of support in rural development, the society is currently turning to wage employment; hence the growing demand for higher education.

## **6 Increasing Need for Higher Education Expansion among the Adult Learners**

The world has seen rapid changes in our time, which initially has made the adults feel outclassed if not lost in their socio-environment. To be relevant, there is an urgent feeling that each adult must be in touch and in step with his/her world through access and equity in higher education. Decenco (2003) and Armstrong (2005) list the reasons that effectively propel the adults to seek access and equity in higher education as:

1. Increasing professionalisation.
2. Change in occupational structures.
3. Rising qualification for many employment opportunities.
4. Increase in technological innovations.
5. Motivation for horizontal mobility.
6. Globalisation.

7. Demands in today's leadership.
8. Competitive socio-environment.
9. Pressure by employer.
10. Desire for better performance.
11. Socio-economic reasons such as higher pay.

World Bank (2000) raises the issue of expansion of university enrolments throughout the developing countries. It observes that the expansion is still largely by far restricted to the wealthy urban elites. Careful examination will show that the rich households and the dominant ethnic groups are over-represented in the institutions of higher learning. The poor households in the rural areas are under represented by far.

Besides the issues that push and pull towards increase in access and equity in higher education, three elements stand out as the lighthouse of the process and progress. These are: access and equity, quality and relevance, and the cost of education. Overlooking either of these dimensions will result in compromising the entire process and endeavour. Therefore, even if the numbers of the enrolment will go the highest it could, we must raise concerns on the quality and relevance of the education being accessed. The cost too must concern us so as not to condemn higher education as the monopoly of the wealthy only. Finally, each and every person should be encouraged to enroll; by thus doing, we will be increasing the access and equity in a fair and equitable way.

Access and equity cannot be enhanced just like that; there are mountains and valleys to cross. The following are but a few problems that must be addressed: finance, family, career, lack of social networking in the urban by the rural people and lack of support for the enhancement of retention.

## 7 Strategies Employed in Enhancing Accessibility and Equity among the Rural Societies as Adopted by Universities

### 7.1 Introduction

This part offers insights from relevant literature dealing with access and equity in higher education among the rural population. Rural societies are those societies that are isolated from the main urban centres and their environs. They tend to be poor, backward, traditional and highly religious. The society is integrated mostly on kinship and clan, change is highly resisted even modern scientific innovations and education are resisted at the expense of traditions. The communities are either agricultural or pastoralists and their economy is generally subsistence in most cases. At any rate, no one should take the rural areas to be homogeneous units. Even though they may be in the same country, rural societies differ on three common dynamics and factors. According to Mbithi (1974), these factors are:

### 7.2 Economic Background

The kind of economic life being cherished by the local people has a lot of bearing and implications in their lives. For example, the pastoralists' and nomads' economic background says a lot about the them. Their access and equity in higher education is affected by their economic background. Education to them does not feature high in their priority; therefore, their access and equity to higher education may need a totally different approach compared to other rural settings. Often, the climatic conditions seem to be unfavourable to education. The incessant droughts and famine that necessitate their mobility to newer and friendlier areas far and beyond.

### 7.3 Socio-Political Issues

In the developing countries, all forms of development go the way people vote. The areas that do not vote with the ruling parties or coalitions will usually be noticeable; backwardness and being

discriminated when resources are being shared, lacking extension services and open political persecution. There are some rural areas that are marginalised because of their voting patterns.

#### **7.4 Socio-Cultural Set-up**

While cultural diversity is highly encouraged and acceptable, there are some ugly cultural practices that act as barriers to access and equity in higher education. Some communities still encourage early marriages, a practice that compromises access and equity in higher education. While some parents remain loyal and obedient to their cultural values and practices. By so doing they condemn their children to abject poverty by denying them access in higher education when they force them into early marriage. Therefore it is clear that the rural society is not homogeneous. The rural society remains divergent due to different economic backgrounds, socio-political structures, socio-cultural set up and many more other factors. Therefore, different strategies will work in different settings of the rural societies.

Universities have adopted different strategies to enhance access and equity in higher education in higher education for the rural society. Common strategies adopted by the universities will be described. Put together Vella (2001), Bereday (1973), Eddebe (2009), Brookfield (2006) Ferris (1990), and CHE, (2008) examine the universities' attempts to enhance the expansion of higher education in the following ways:

#### **7.5 Outreach by the Universities**

To ordinary people, universities are mysterious places. With this kind of mentality, the common people are hardly aware of the programmes the universities offer. For example, those who only sought to do a degree programme, whenever they do not score high enough to qualify for admissions, many just fold their hands. They do not know one can apply for other programmes like certificates and diplomas. Throughout reach, the universities can make the people be aware of what is available at their level.

The second level of outreach will entail creation of effective centres where the universities will be able to do quality teaching and research. The vacuum of quality educational centres currently has been filled by quack institutions which pretend to be offering higher education. Some of these institutions are foreign-based while others are local. Their common problem is their inability to offer quality higher education even though they pretend to be doing so. The local citizenry are manipulated and robbed. There has been a remarkable loss of money through the offering of bogus training.

The third level of collaboration will entail working in partnership with some good middle level colleges which can serve as feeder paths to the universities. Examples of such colleges are like KSPS, KMTC, VISION and many more. Since these colleges serve well in bridging the rural societies with the university. It is upon the university to work well with these colleges and guarantee quality education. This means they will influence the assurance of qualified students to be admitted by setting the standards, quality teachers and academic performance that deliberately maintains high quality of education.

Finally, in outreach, the universities will strive to increase the provision of sustainable quality higher education, training, coordination, resource mobilisation and enhancement of access in higher education. With the right focus to the areas unreached by the universities, the envisioned actions mentioned above will have a transformational impact in the rural society as a strategy to enhance accessibility and equity in higher education.

#### **7.6 Collaboration with Other Stakeholders**

It is unthinkable that a single institution can be able to do much alone. There is therefore a need for partnership. Again, the Chairman of CHE (CHE, 2008) asserts:

... to be effected, among the things that need to be done is for universities and stakeholders to forge a partnership in order to develop a knowledge-based orientation that is suited to the situational realities of Kenya.

Universities must collaborate with other stakeholders in their bid to foster accessibility and equity in higher education. For example, recently, it was evident that some high scoring high schools in the country ended up dominating in the number of candidates they sent to the universities. At the same time, some schools performed very poorly especially in the rural areas. In the long run, the poorly performing high schools will be a barrier to access of higher education and thus drag their regions behind. The university can collaborate with the actors in those schools say the principals and examination masters on how to improve their performances. To this, Bereday (1973: 34) concludes:

...there is a steady and stable relationship between the output of the secondary schools and the intake of the university. The size of the terminal class in the former seems directly correlated with the changing growth rates of higher education enrolments. The secondary-school system in the real selective mechanism for higher education admissions.

There are also the education offices in the district, head-teachers associations, PTAs, NGOs and strong old students' movements. These can be avenues for the universities to market their new packages and also to deliver tips on how to improve performance.

### ***7.7 Effective Distance Learning***

In the last few decades, Distance Learning has continued to be popularised. Now, it has been accepted as part of the planning agenda in most re-known centres of higher learning. Its acceptability mostly was speeded by improvement of learning methodologies, the availability of innovative technologies for learners and the instructors, identification of accredited schools that offer distance learning and acceptance of the graduates in the market. All these have given distance learning a plus and thumbs high (Jones and Ratcliff, 1991; Smith and Kohen, 2001). Commonwealth of Australia (1998) examines very carefully the issues to consider when mounting a strategy in the higher education; the same can be used as means of inventory when mounting distance learning:

- i. Need for investigating the trends to verify institutional access and equity policies in the context of a mass higher education.
- ii. Identifying factors and structures that will help in maximising access and equity for all; for example the programmes that will reach isolated rural students.
- iii. Addressing the factors that are key in influencing students' decision to enroll to a university, for example the location of the university, access to students loans, access to facilities like computers and ability to network in the environs of the university.

In reality, distance learning provides the opportunity for studying and taking classes in higher education without attending a classroom environment as it is done in the traditional approaches of pursuing higher education. Learning is therefore facilitated using other methods like the Internet and audio visual aids; by thus, the student enjoys great flexibility and is able to work according to his/her own pace. The wonder of distance learning as described by those in support that one is able to take classes anywhere, and needs very basic tools; a computer and the study guides (Commonwealth of Australia, 1998).

As a matter of fact, the current universities' facilities are over stretched and their elasticity has reached the wall. New strategies to continue new admissions and expansion must now be put in place. It is in such circumstances that effective distance learning is being called for. Distance learning allows the student to do the learning away from the institutions. This automatically solves the problem of overcrowding while still maintaining high numbers of the admissions. True too, distance learning comes as a remedy for the mature students who are busy in their careers and to those who are tied down by family commitments. One is able to continue working and still be in touch with his/her family as he/she pursues higher education through the distance learning.

Often, most of the buildings in our traditional universities were built without special students in mind. As a result, the students with disabilities find the environment very challenging and especially if they will be there for the entire period of their study which may be two to four years. Here again, Distance Learning becomes very conducive as the student is able to study while enjoying the comforts of the home and a familiar environment. It is also easy for such students to elicit assistance when and where needed from other people such as relatives and friends. Such support may be hard to come by in a traditional setup whereby the student exists only as a form of statistics and not a special member in the traditional university community.

Distance Learning is also cheaper in that it excludes some costs like accommodation, transport and meals. The student undertaking Distance Learning can very comfortably sleep and eat at home. If the person is taking a course related to his/her work, the course then becomes very relevant as he/she applies the knowledge and skills immediately. Some concepts that are highly abstract can be grasped through simulations and application in real life situations at the place of work.

Other problems that can be tackled by distance learning are:

- i. Capacity constraint, there are overcrowding in lecture and accommodation facilities.
- ii. Deteriorating facilities; these may include unpainted lecture halls and broken seats, among others.
- iii. Insufficient/outdated library holdings.
- iv. Lack of adequate computing facilities and Internet.
- v. Restive and unhappy faculty.
- vi. Less time and support for research.
- vii. Loss of quality in teaching and learning research activities.

Finally, in Distance Learning one does not have to follow the traditional way of instructions as followed in the institutions of higher learning. But still, learning can be pursued through mentorship or apprenticeship. A qualified and experienced person can be resourceful and thus train the learner through observations and practice. After a given period of time, the learner can be given a certificate to show he/she has learnt from a mentor. Courses like plumbing and electrical engineering can be taught in this creative way.

### ***7.8 Establishment of Quality Regional Centres***

It has become the norm for universities to open some centres for purpose of giving education to the people in need of it. All the universities, whether public or private, have at one time had the experience of initiating a satellite campus. While the move is good and especially the bid to reach the remote and isolated learners in the rural areas, the quality of such satellite campuses maybe wanting. First and foremost, the location of such centres is a matter of concern.

Some of the centres are located in the same proximity with local hotels and other social amenities such as hospitals. Such kind of locations can be a bother to the learners as the association of the educational centre and other social amenities may not be there at all. Therefore, the location of the educational centre defeats the purposes of the educational centre. The researcher is persuaded that if the university is serious in establishing its centre somewhere, there is need to buy off the surrounding facilities and use them for educational purposes only. Another approach is to buy land and then prepare to launch a centre that fits the institution's purpose.

## **8 Suggested Strategies by Learners from the Rural Society in Accessing Higher Education in the Universities**

To complement what the universities were doing as far as expansion of higher education was concerned, some 36 learners who were purposively selected were interviewed for this paper. The respondents were chosen because they were residents of rural areas and again they were accessing higher education; some were accessing higher education from urban centres, while others from

satellite campuses owned by some mother universities in the city. Both categories were interviewed using the same questionnaire. Each individual student was interviewed separately. The data presented below represents the respondents' responses on the question: "What strategies according to you should be adopted by the universities as a way of enhancing access and equity in higher education?"

### ***8.1 Initiate a Plan to Financial Support for Rural Students***

Education is expensive. When this is put into consideration, the universities must be mindful of the university students from the poor backgrounds. There are perpetually poor areas especially those which are prone to famines, droughts and civil unrest. Students from such areas tend to be overly poor and without the universities having alternative schemes to help them finance their education, it might be next to impossible to continue pursuing their education.

If there are records kept from primary school about the student's family's financial capabilities, it may help the Government to know what to do. Not all seemingly poor students are actually poor. But some really deserve; with good records in place, it would not be difficult then to know the kind of person the university is dealing with.

Students who are ready to work in the rural areas and be willing even to live there, they should be given some preferential treatment. This is because such students can serve as beacons of hope for the universities' pursuits of transforming the society through the usage of knowledge, skills and new values. As mentioned earlier, brain drainage is a real barrier for universities to achieve the desired ends in delivery of knowledge and skills.

### ***8.2 Offering Support to Ensure Retention of Rural Students***

The students interviewed confessed that many of students from rural areas tend to drop out from the educational institutions after sometimes, hence the need for supporting them to ensure that they continue with their studies at their schools. The main issues here are twofold (Commonwealth of Australia, 1998: 4). Supporting the student during the transition to university life both academic and socially, and offering an ongoing support until the student is able to live independently (able to withstand internal and external pressure). Small challenges may look like mountains whenever support is lacking. Some key areas mentioned by the interviewees range from:

- a. Acquiring speed in reading and writing.
- b. Developing the proper style of academic writing.
- c. Introducing students to computers and appropriation of Internet or IT in general.
- d. Enhancing critical thinking in the students as a way of interacting with others in a learning environment whether as individuals or as in groups.
- e. Developing competencies in research methodology as a way of pursuing knowledge and gathering information to enhance learning.

The suggestions given below may sound basic, however, the interviewees mentioned cases in which some students dropped from school due to such deficiencies. Moreover, some students who cleared their theoretical part of their studies did not graduate because they were unable to fulfil the research requirement. It is necessary therefore for students to access that kind of support in order to clear their work in good time and not to opt to drop.

### ***8.3 Mounting of Relevant Courses for Learners***

Urgently, we should ensure that relevant courses are mounted according to the needs of individual learners and the rural society being represented by the learners. This is how one of the interviewees put it:

One is left with the question after graduation, "... so what?" You don't see how your training can immediately and directly be applied to the rural society. Sooner or later one joins the ranks of the people in the urban areas where opportunities are more

readily available. The rural societies never get the cream of the trained personnel. Nothing is deliberately and purposively cut for the rural society.

The interviewees were highly conscious of the irrelevance of the courses being mounted at the universities in regard to fitting practically in the rural societies. Any kind of specialised training saw the learners later being absorbed in the urban setting.

#### ***8.4 Quality Mobile Libraries***

Rural areas notoriously lack quality libraries, and where such facilities exist are characterised by books that are old, irrelevant and inadequate in number. Learners who then live in the rural areas incidentally lack supporting materials for enabling them to carry out library research and carrying out a critical study which requires more than one source of information. The so called constituent colleges must pass this test. The availability of quality libraries is a good backup for the students in those colleges. The researcher brings the idea of mobile library in because there may not be adequate room for keeping the books, or a strong room that guarantees the safe storing of the books in rural areas. Books are expensive thus their loss due to poor storage may mean a big loss.

Finally, by being mobile, the library can reach many of the learners as it will cover a large area. Therefore, instead of going far to access the library, it is the library that will go to the people who are in need of the books. To make the work simple and easy, the mobile library can operate at the locational or may be divisional centres; in such centres there will be security and potentiality of realisation of other realities and dynamics will be boosted.

#### ***8.5 Availability of Internet, Computers and IT facilities***

The traditional mode of distance learning known as correspondence learning has been summarily replaced by web-based studies. While these are more efficient, fast and easy; accessing them requires computer literacy, availability of the website facilities and then the computers. Currently, availability of internet services has only been limited to the urban areas and their environs. Even where such services are offered, they are expensive and unreliable. Therefore, the possibility of Internet being a mode of access and equity in higher education is not a reality today for both universities and rural-based students. The possibility will have to wait for a distant tomorrow. However, the rural population must be in preparation for the distant tomorrow. The rural population should seek to boost their computer literacy today in preparation for that distant tomorrow.

### **9 Conclusion**

Universities have commendable work in expansion of higher education. More and more people continue to access higher education which has improved their technical competencies and enhanced their employability. In the advent of globalisation, access to higher education has promoted the realities of social mobility for all workers, male and female, across the country. On a close scrutiny however, it is evident that the expansion of higher education has been highly skewed with a large chunk of the rural society population left out. It is due to such reality that we are forced to question the fairness in the access and equity in the expansion of higher education in regard to urban and rural populations comparatively. The paper concludes that effective strategies must be put in place to ensure equity in the expansion of higher education with view to putting the two societies (rural and urban) both on board equitably. The current disparity in development in the two societies can be traced in part to the unequal access and equity in the expansion of the higher education. Listening to learners from the rural areas will enable policy makers to craft and implement the relevant strategies that boost relevance, access and equity in the higher education.

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