African Universities: The Way Forward

Though relatively young, universities in Sub-Saharan Africa have accomplished much. They have grown from just six institutions in 1960 to more than 100 in 1993, with a corresponding rise in enrollments. In some cases, they have developed relevant curricula and revised their content to reflect African priorities, legitimized research and established specialized university research units. They have also largely replaced expatriate faculty with indigenous staff, and fostered intellectual communities. A major achievement has been to produce the skilled human resources required to staff and manage public and private institutions in the newly independent states.

In the course of their brief history, thinking about the role of universities has also evolved. In Francophone Africa, the early classical academic approach is giving way to a more utilitarian orientation. As regards Anglophone universities, governments have tended to encourage a technocratic definition of their role, which has been reinforced by the current economic crisis on the continent. Also, a growing number of African observers see a potential for universities to build upon the strengths of traditional culture so as to modernize in a positive,indigenous fashion.

There is much to suggest that African universities are nearing the end of their initial phase of development. Their mandates at the time of independence now require reassessment as a result of changes in the world, in Africa, and in the universities themselves. Internationally, the emergence of global markets has created a competitive world economic system characterized by rapid knowledge generation and technological innovation. These changes affect local labor markets and the types of skills they require. Within Africa, high population growth rates and increased access to education have boosted the social demand for higher education, leading to rising university enrollments and a proliferation of tertiary institutions. Universities have also changed, becoming mass-based and diversified institutions operating under severe financial constraints. In many countries, conditions which engender these second generation issues have deteriorated to the point where the need for action is now urgent.

This study, **Universities in Africa: Strategies for Stabilization and Revitalization**, seeks to provide guidance to persons committed to renewing and expanding the capacity for human resource development within Africa's institutions of higher learning.

The Scope of the Problem

To varying degrees, the universities of Sub-Saharan Africa face the following problems.

- Enrollments are often increasing faster than the capacity to plan for and finance this growth. The university student population on the continent grew by 61 percent between 1980 and 1990, rising from 337,000 to an estimated 542,700.

- Current patterns of higher education expenditure are unsustainable in many cases. The model of publicly supported residential universities is inequitable and financially inefficient. During the 1980s, the capacity of African governments to finance public services fell sharply. Higher education suffered in consequence, with its share of overall education sector budgets sliding from 19.1 percent (1980-84) to 17.6 percent (1985-88). Recurrent budget expenditures per student, measured in constant terms, also fell by about two-thirds during this period. This was not due to efficiency gains through improved management, but was the negative result of cutbacks in research, staff development, library acquisitions, and maintenance prompted by rising enrollments.

- There is general agreement that educational quality is declining as the result of increased enrollments and/or reduced funding. This decline is manifested in falling student examination scores, reduced rigor in staff recruitment and promotion criteria, diminished research output, and complaints by employers regarding the ability of university graduates to perform.

- Rising graduate unemployment, inadequate performance on the job, and weak research production combine to bring the relevance of universities to national needs under growing public scrutiny. Relevance is understood to include educational choices within the university that are in tune with the national economy and responsive to the prevailing labor market; appropriate curricula; capacity for critical and innovative thinking on issues of national importance; the transmission of essential professional and cultural values;

institutional processes and behavior that equip graduates for leadership in society; and adequate regional, gender, and ethnic representation in the composition of staff and students.

- The costs of university training are high and often unsustainable.
- University management is weak and needs considerable strengthening.
- The working relationship between government and university is ineffective.
- Access to university raises a number of equity issues.

Initiating Reform

To address these concerns, African nations must first answer three questions.

- What kind of university do we have?
- What kind of university do we need?

What kind of university can we afford?

The answers will differ from country to country in accordance with national circumstances, culture, and priorities. With varying emphases, a general consensus in Africa holds that its principal higher education issues are quality, relevance, finances, efficiency, equity, and governance. What is not clear is how these issues should be addressed and where one should start. This study offers alternatives, tested and untested, for policy makers and institutional managers to consider as they tackle the complex challenges of higher education reform. It is based on the experiences of Africans who are committed to this undertaking, and who are beginning to generate innovative responses to the extraordinary difficulties they confront.

Efforts at higher education reform stand little chance of being sustainable unless they are grounded in broad public consensus. Failure to invest in public education and consensus-building prior to the institution of policy changes can have high costs in terms of public reaction, student protest, and damaged working relationships amongst key actors. The benefit of doing so is a more stable and effective reform process.

Several alternative approaches to consensus building have emerged on the African continent. The *self-study* is one of these. It is an institutional review, initiated by management, that uses a process of internal consultation to evaluate the existing mission statement, organizational structure, key policies and installed capacity for consistency and responsiveness to the external environment. The resulting institutional development proposals can then be shared with government, donor, and private sector representatives in the effort to build agreement regarding the university's future role and objectives.

An *inter-institutional steering* committee is a sub-sector review undertaken by government to appraise higher education policy and its financial and organizational implications. Representation often includes key government ministries, university leaders, and relevant professional associations, and a final report is normally presented to government for executive decision.

An *intermediary coordinating agency* with oversight responsibility for the higher education sector would play a mediating role between government and the university system in the effort to establish common ground for policy initiative.

An *external visiting committee* would be comprised of outside experts who periodically review all aspects of a higher education system or institution at the invitation of government.

If Africa's universities are to be stabilized and revitalized, universities themselves must seize the initiative. One way to do this is through the development of an updated university mission statement. This mission statement should focus integrated attention on educational quality, finances, access, curriculum, distribution of students among the various disciplines, staff development, research, governance, and management. A second, less direct path lies through the promotion of higher education research. At present, relatively little analysis of Africa's higher education needs is carried out by Africans. Consequently, much of the current policy discussion in this field is framed and promoted by donor agencies. If needed reforms are to be appropriate and lasting, the talents and experience of African scholars must be brought to bear. More important, the process must begin immediately as the African higher education crisis is already well advanced.

Conclusions

The study's principal messages are as follows.

- Universities must *seize the initiative* in order to achieve their own stabilization and revitalization; this can be done by undertaking an institutional self-study that updates the university's mission statement and can be used to build the internal and external consensus needed to undertake reform.
- In order to increase access, maintain standards of educational quality, and ensure institutional stability, universities must *diversify their financial bases,* particularly through cost-recovery for non-academic services, the introduction of targeted fees, and a calculated expansion of income-generating activities.
- *Greater autonomy from government,* particularly in financial administration, is required by universities if they are to become more entrepreneurial, and if they are to provide the incentives necessary to encourage quality performance and management efficiency.

- *More professional management* at all levels -- through staff training, strategic hiring, and computerized management information systems -- is the best short-term strategy for freeing resources (through improved efficiency) to meet university needs.

- Universities must *invest in themselves* if they are to remain viable centers of higher learning; this means that they must provide yearly budget allocations for education materials, library acquisitions, research, staff development, and the maintenance of buildings and equipment.

- Managing the social demand for higher education is best achieved by expanding access through a *differentiated higher education system,* composed of public and private institutions with diverse missions, that offers students a range of choices and study regimes, and by controlling access to this system through the use of competitive entrance examinations.

- The most useful *role for donors is to support the development of long term institution-building strategies*. Activities consistent with this approach include the preparation of updated university mission statements, efforts to strengthen and professionalize management, institutional linkage arrangements to bolster particular departments, and research on higher education policy and performance. In settings of acute institutional deterioration, donors should consider contributions towards recurrent costs, particularly for educational inputs, library acquisitions, equipment and building maintenance, and efficiency-enhancing operating expenses.

If appropriate economic models and fresh directions for development are to be crafted by Africans, and if tradition and modernity are to be effectively fused, then academically and financially sound universities are an imperative for Sub-Saharan Africa.

William S. Saint. 1992. *Universities in Africa: Strategies for Stabilization and Revitalization* . Technical Paper No. 194. Technical Department, Africa Region. Washington, D.C.: World Bank.