Towards the renewal of African universities

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Over the course of the last decade, particularly since the turn of the century, there has been widespread concern about the condition of Africa and its people. The concern arises principally from the realisation that most parts of Africa are missing out very seriously on the steady economic and social progress that has, by and large, characterised contemporary global development. As expressed in a discussion paper put out by the Commission for Africa:

Africa is the only continent in the world where, in the past two decades, income per capita has been in decline. At a time when the rest of the world – including the rest of the developing world – has experienced rapid economic growth, most of the people of Africa have been left behind, with nearly half its people living on less than US$1 a day.

Initiatives aimed at improving conditions in Africa

Attempts have been made by the United Nations system and other international multilateral organisations to understand the nature of the problems and propose measures for their resolution. One might mention here the Millennium Development Goals, the G8 Africa Action Plan, and the Africa Commission Report.

Of particular significance have been recent attempts by African countries, individually and collectively, to seize the initiative, come to grips with their problems and to design and implement appropriate solutions. These include the formation of the African Union (AU), with its renewed mandate and vigour and the New Partnership for Africa’s Development (NEPAD), which, in addition to firm undertakings by Africa’s leadership in relation to governance and social, economic and security developments, seeks to engage the commitment of Africa’s development partners in joint action in support of their efforts.

In spite of these measures, there still remains serious uncertainty about the prospect of moving Africa onto a path of self-sustaining development. Many of the material and policy issues have been diagnosed and a range of corrective measures suggested and attempted.

Strengthening Africa’s knowledge institutions

Rather than go over these important but familiar grounds, two aspects of the problem will be isolated as a basis for building up the case for a renewed effort to strengthen Africa’s knowledge institutions. The first is the widely acknowledged centrality of the generation, management and application of knowledge in the current global dispensation and what this implies for African development. The second, and less widely discussed, is the special role of leadership, especially intellectual leadership, at the present conjuncture in the development of Africa.

What these considerations have in common is the central role they ascribe to Africa’s universities in any attempt to reverse the declining fortunes of Africa.

Centrality of knowledge generation, management and application

The current situation is part of a change process, with a past shaped by many factors, a complex and evolving present and a future that can go a number of different ways, depending on factors, some of which are within our control. Recognising this should help establish the main factors behind change, the likely trends and the scope for intervention. Otherwise, we run the risk of reacting ‘blindly’ to aspects only of what is seen at any particular time as ‘the current crisis’.

At the global level, the knowledge and information explosion is acknowledged to be one of the main drivers of change in relation to higher education in Africa. Put at its simplest, there is more information about more things than ever before and this stream of information is building up at an ever-increasing pace. That said, I find it useful to distinguish between information and access to it, on the one hand and on the other, the acquisition of knowledge, which is a more deliberate, more purposive activity. On this view, information is transformed into knowledge when it comes to be ‘owned’, through absorption and understanding, synthesis with prior knowledge and experience, location in context, so that it is capable of forming the basis for judgement, decision and action.
In addition:

- this information is more readily accessible than ever before, not least through the internet - though only to those with the means to access it
- the transformation of information into new knowledge and the application of the latter to production and management have become central to social and economic development and the international competitiveness of countries, imposing particular obligations on national knowledge institutions – universities, polytechnics, etc.
- the communication technology revolution has led, not only to greater accessibility to information, but also to increased mobility and movement - of ideas, of people, of resources - resulting in increased competition amongst, and for all of these.

While these developments have increased the global potential for closing the development gap between developed and developing countries and, within countries, between the haves and the have-nots, major imbalances persist and, in key respects are, indeed, increasing. One consequence is that the specific impact of these developments on higher education varies from region to region, depending upon initial conditions in each region.

The special role of intellectual leadership

The second issue we would emphasise is the crucial importance of vision and leadership in the development effort. While it is the case that many of Africa's problems reflect its material conditions and are rooted in its recent history, its geography and its dependent position within the global economy, a further factor that is easy to ignore in understanding the continuing malaise of the continent is the loss of confidence and self-belief, without which moves to revitalise any society are doomed to failure. Africa's drive for self-development, self-management and international competitiveness cannot succeed without a good measure of self-belief. The continuing crisis must therefore be seen as involving a combination of material deprivation and the loss of a vision for self-development, each reinforcing the other in a downward spiral.

In the circumstances, it is difficult to overstate the pivotal role of leadership at all levels and in all spheres – political, cultural, scientific and economic. Clearly, intellectual leadership cannot alone guarantee the identification and successful implementation of the range of policies and actions required to secure sustainable development. But without it the prospects remain desperately dim. This is particularly the case, given the central place of knowledge – its generation and application to all spheres of life – in modern social and economic development. Thus, from considerations both of the particular contemporary salience of knowledge and its deployment and the indispensable leadership role of the intelligentsia, the state of health and the contribution of Africa's institutions of higher learning must occupy a central place in any discussion about the revitalisation of Africa and its people.

This is recognised in a World Bank paper published in 2002, which observed that

Sustainable transformation and growth throughout the economy are not possible without the capacity-building contributions of an innovative tertiary education system, especially in low-income countries with weak institutional capacity and limited human capital.

More recently the Commission for Africa has argued that

The shortage of skilled professionals in Africa is a critical issue. It has its roots in a tertiary education system that is in a state of crisis. The emphasis in Africa in recent years has rightly been on the need for primary education. An unfortunate side-effect of this has been the neglect of secondary and tertiary education from which are produced the doctors, nurses, teachers, police officers, lawyers and government workers of tomorrow. Africa's universities ought to be the breeding ground for the skilled individuals whom the continent needs. There is a particular shortage in the science skills that are fundamental to addressing Africa's problems. Africa needs higher education and research institutes that attract students, researchers and teachers to study and work in Africa.

In a speech at the University of Cape Town in 2004, President Thabo Mbeki of South Africa emphasised the leadership and visioning role of higher education in the following terms:

I would suggest that our entire continent remains at risk until the African university, in the context of a continental reawakening, regains its soul. Among other things, a successful continental reawakening requires multiple sources of creativity.

The collective mind that produces our proverbs should enable the greatest numbers of the citizens of Africa to participate in productive activity driven by their creative genius. Undoubtedly, it is the historic responsibility of the African university to harness this genius.

A crucial new focus

This highlighting of the importance of higher education to Africa's development is a welcome change from the posture adopted by many policy leaders (including the World Bank and leading donors) during the late 1980s and 1990s. Then, in the understandable drive for 'education for all', post-basic education tended to be played down. This policy bias, combined with the economic difficulties of most African countries at the time, led to a weakening of public funding for higher education at a time when demographic pressure was leading to an enrolment explosion in Africa's higher education institutions. The upshot was a serious compromise of the quality of the learning environment and learning outcomes in Africa's universities. Thus, at the very time that the demands of the knowledge society were pushing for ever-rising quality in higher education, most African universities took the opposite trajectory.
Covenant University: 
the birthplace of Kings and Queens

Our Vision
To be a leading world-class University, committed to raising a new generation of leaders in all fields of human endeavour.

Our Mission
To create knowledge and restore man's dignity through a Human Development concept of the Total Man, employing innovative, leading edge, teaching and learning methods, the application of research that promotes integrated, life-transforming values through Science, Technology and Human Capacity Building.

On October 21, 2002, the African educational landscape was radically altered by the formal entry of Covenant University (CU) into the Higher Education context. The University is located in Canaan Land, Ota, Ogun State Nigeria. Covenant University is a growing, dynamic vision-birthed and vision-driven University, founded on a Christian mission ethos and committed to pioneering excellence at the cutting edge of learning.

Our core values of Spirituality, Positive Mentality, Capacity Building, Integrity, Responsibility, Diligence and Sacrifice define our commitment to excellence. Covenant University is committed to transforming students into expert thinkers, innovative managers and resourceful technocrats in all fields of learning.

Total student population for the 2005/2006 academic session is 5,729, with 226 academic staff and 491 non-academic staff. The University operates with a specific mandate to revolutionise the educational context of Africa and is best described as an education learning centre. The context of Covenant University is morally and spiritually-holding, with a stable academic calendar, a well-stocked library, state-of-the-art laboratories and an excellent road network. Our Mandate is to pioneer excellence along the parameters of teaching, research, performance, community impact and scholarship.

The University campus is an ultra modern new generation campus. Its luscious lawns, beautifully planted gardens and architectural masterpiece buildings, provide a unique, stimulating and empowering context for inspiring research and creative activities. Covenant University is fully residential for both staff and students. At Covenant University there are ample opportunities for informal interaction between faculty and students thereby creating a special ambience of living and learning together. As a fully Residential Institution, it has 10 fully furnished Halls of Residence.

The University is equipped with a computer base in excess of 600 networked computer systems and 24/7 Internet access. Indeed, the University is set on the cutting edge of Technology. It is expected that in the near future, the over 560 acre facility would be one wireless campus that would bring about seamless integration of divergent mobile user groups. A myriad of lecture halls, theatres and laboratories provide adequate facilities for Teaching and Research along the lines of the current 16 accredited programmes in Business, Human Development and Science & Technology.
Roles and challenges facing Africa’s universities

In analysing the role of Africa’s universities in the new millennium, and how they are positioned to discharge the huge tasks assigned to them by analysts and policy-makers alike, a brief background note would be helpful (see Sawyerr, 2004a,b for fuller discussion).

Despite the long history of higher learning in parts of the continent, the modern university is a relatively recent phenomenon in most parts of Africa.

The number of universities increased rapidly following political independence, from a total of less than 50 in 1960, to almost 300 in 2000, and is still climbing steeply; yet, there are African countries with only one or two universities, some very young and small, and undeveloped.

University enrolment has exploded since political independence, rising three-fold between 1975 and 1985, and tripling again over the next decade: yet with an average of around 3% of each cohort enrolled in university, the lowest in the world, the pressure for further enrolment increases is relentless.

Given the straitened economic conditions in most countries, and the fact that most of these universities are public institutions, the provision of resources has not kept pace with the explosion in enrolment: yet, given the general poverty of African countries, the expenditure per student as a proportion of the GNP is many times higher than anywhere else in the world.

The African faculty is ‘greying’, as the first and second generations of academics reach retirement and are not being replaced at the rate and at the levels of quality required by the new demographics and knowledge demands.

African universities are thus faced with a dual challenge; on the one hand, the old problems of access and equity, funding, quality, etc., which are generally under control in most other parts of the world; on the other hand, the new demands of the knowledge society, namely, linkage into industry, high-end research and innovation, as well as international networking for the purpose.

Strategies for tackling these challenges

A variety of measures has been proposed, and innovations initiated at all levels – from the institutional, through the national to continental and global levels – to help alleviate the problems of African universities. While the bulk of the necessary corrective measures are properly the responsibility of countries and their institutions, there are measures that need to be taken by others to supplement the efforts currently underway within Africa itself, if those efforts are to have any chance of success. Such measures include not only financial support, but also policy changes and openness to increased collaboration, as outlined briefly below.

Investing in a coherent educational system

Investment and aid policy in relation to African education needs to be adjusted away from what often appears to be an ‘either/or’ approach: either basic or post-basic. The education system is a system; the various parts interact with and reinforce each other, and all contribute to the development process. There are signs of precisely such a change in approach.

Linking with global knowledge networks

Africa’s universities should be assisted to link more fully into the global knowledge networks, which would involve, for instance:

- facilitation of sub-regional and continent-wide interaction and collective work;
- easier access for African researchers to global knowledge through the internet – one of the key action areas will be to tackle the limitations imposed on such access through inadequate bandwidth;
- greater access for African scholars to the laboratories and experimental sites of the best academic and research institutions in the world;
- more South–South, but also North–South collaborative teaching and research projects involving African scholars, in true partnership mode.

Renewal of African university faculties

Targeted support aimed at helping renew the African faculty through, in addition to some of the measures listed above, fellowships, split-site doctoral programs, and greater involvement of the substantial number of scholars in the African Diaspora – both in academia and in other professional spheres.

Conclusion

The recent efforts of Africa’s political leadership at national and continental levels, including the African Union and the NEPAD, towards the process of renewal of African universities are particularly significant. At its Sixth Assembly of Heads of State and Government meeting in Khartoum in January 2006 the AU adopted a decision to launch the Second Decade of Education in Africa (2006–2015), with higher education, for the first time ever, as one of seven focal areas.

The Association of African Universities (AAU), a membership organisation of 199 universities and other higher education institutions in all parts of Africa, has, together with other stakeholders, mounted a major advocacy campaign, highlighting the leadership role of higher education, the link between high-skills and development, the heightened role of knowledge and innovation in the world economy and the importance of systems-wide approaches for sustained development.

At the international level, crucial new perspectives are reflected in the report of the Commission for Africa and the Declaration of the Gleneagles Summit of 2005, which acknowledged the central role of a revitalised higher education system in ensuring the development of Africa and advocated for substantial funding support for it.

As African governments and their institutions wrestle with the many problems that affect their university systems – and there are many positive and encouraging signs – the rate of progress and the prospects for the renewal of the universities of Africa, with direct effects on economic and social development, will be much enhanced if Africa’s friends took a more informed interest and followed through on some of the commitments that have already been made in relation to higher education development in Africa.
With support from the partnership for Higher Education in Africa, International Development Research Centre, and the African Capacity Building Foundation, the Association of African Universities has set up a Research and Education Network Unit to facilitate the many initiatives and projects aimed at strengthening the ICT access and capacity of African higher education institutions. Sub-regional initiatives include the Ubuntunet Alliance of Eastern and Southern African institutions.

References

Biographical notes
Professor Akilagpa Sawyerr, former Vice-Chancellor of the University of Ghana, is Secretary-General of the Association of African Universities, an international non-governmental organisation with a membership of 199 universities and other higher education institutions throughout Africa.

A jurist by training, Akilagpa Sawyerr has held appointments at universities and research institutes in Africa, Europe, the USA and the Far East. A Fellow of the Ghana Academy of Arts and Sciences, he serves on the governing bodies of several national and international agencies, including the United Nations University, the International Association of Universities, the International Association of University Presidents, the Third World Network-Africa Region, and the International Advisory Network of the UK-based Leadership Foundation for Higher Education (LFHE).

Professor Sawyerr’s current research interests include globalisation, higher education, human development and international negotiations.