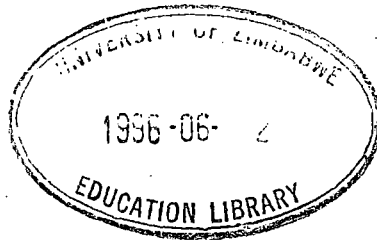


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Initiating University Reform: Experience from Sub-Saharan Africa

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Universities are among the most change-resistant institutions that the world has known. Higher education institutions (particularly research universities) have changed little over the past 500 years.

About eighty-five institutions in the Western world established by 1520 still exist in recognizable forms, with similar functions and with unbroken histories, including the Catholic church, the Parliaments of the Isle of Man, of Iceland and of Great Britain, several Swiss cantons, and seventy universities. Kings that rule, feudal lords with vassals, and guilds with monopolies are all gone. These seventy universities, however, are still in the same locations with some of the same buildings, with professors and students doing much the same things, and with governance carried on in much the same ways. (Kerr, 1982, 152).

This historical experience suggests that any effort to re-structure or reform higher education systems, and particularly institutions of higher learning, should be framed as long-term undertaking which sets its goals modestly and strategically.

Although the institutional life of universities in Sub-Saharan Africa is far briefer, many of these same conclusions can be applied. In 1960, before the main wave of African independence swept the continent, just six universities graced the landscape. Today there are nearly one hundred. Following independence, considerable effort was invested in higher education reform, and much was accomplished. In three decades, the universities of Sub-Saharan Africa have developed relevant curricula and revised content to reflect African priorities, legitimized research and established specialized institutional research units, largely replaced

expatriate faculty with indigenous staff, and fostered fledgling intellectual communities (Court, 1991, 329). Yet in spite of these achievements, the organization of these universities, their management and governance remains largely the same.

The rapid numerical growth of African universities has prompted little evolution in institutional forms. Some universities may embrace a specialized disciplinary focus such as agriculture, education or science and technology, but in structure and process they remain remarkably similar. Little institutional differentiation has occurred within higher education systems, and legacies from the pre-independence era still shape the form and substance of African universities in important ways. These include the high cost model of publicly funded residential instruction, strong curricular emphasis on the humanities and social sciences, and an elitist orientation. As a result, these systems have been hard pressed to meet the rapidly rising social demand for access to university education in a context of significant economic, political and technological change.

The challenge is daunting, but African governments and their universities have begun to respond. What lessons can be learned from this emerging experience? The following discussion draws upon current examples of promising practice to suggest options for African governments, universities and donors to consider in their efforts to foster higher education reform.

Building Consensus

Efforts at higher education reform -- whether they focus on organization, finance, curriculum or governance -- stand little chance of sustainable success unless they are grounded in broad public consensus. In Africa, a wide cross-section of society has a personal stake in the university and feels competent to advance opinion on university-related matters. Most civil service employees, plus many political, business and civic leaders are graduates of the national university. Many have sons and daughters who are currently enrolled as students. It is therefore relatively easy for one or another interest group to block reform efforts, and equally difficult to reach agreement on what must be done. Consensus-building should

therefore constitute the first order of business on any agenda for higher education reform. Commenting on the educational reform experience in Costa Rica, Minister of Education Marvin Herrera (1991,32) states:

... it becomes imperative to involve all organizations that have to do with education, in order to achieve the objectives in less time, at the lowest possible cost, and with little wear and tear.

Assessing how change occurs in higher education, Brunner (1991) concludes that the impetus most often derives from one or more of the following three sources: the academic profession, market or environmental demands, and public policy initiative. The first is linked to the capacity of university professors, researchers and administrators to induce limited or fragmentary internal changes on the basis of knowledge advances or positional interests. The second stems from often unanticipated pressures produced by particular consumer or user groups external to the higher education system. The third is prompted by strategic action emanating from the higher levels of government on the basis of authority decision. In practice, these three groups compete amongst themselves for control of the dynamics of change and for conservation of the system, although one of them is usually predominate in any given setting. Within Latin America, for example, Brunner notes a growing trend towards market influence in the face of declining governmental capacities to control and finance higher education development. Nevertheless, consensus-building efforts are well advised to give explicit attention to each of these three spheres of influence.

In an analysis of the recent Chilean experience in forging a national education policy agreement, including a significant higher education component, Minister of Education Ricardo Lagos lists the various interest groups that should be involved educational reform efforts. These include students and their parents, educators and their professional associations, government agencies with relevant responsibilities, university management, private and public entrepreneurs, organized labor, political parties and parliament, and church leaders. Lagos notes that the legislative branch can be a valuable participant in consensus-building because its members are in close contact with their constituencies and

tend to be better in touch with their interests, aspirations and needs than are government executive authorities. He cautions, however, that legislative bodies are not always able to appreciate that education is a complex field in which there are rarely any quick or easy solutions. Most often, the need is for a long term commitment in pursuit of certain policy goals rather than for specific short term actions which play to "educational populism" (Lagos, 1991, 23-24).

Consensus-building is important because it allows for a testing of the political feasibility of proposed changes before actual decisions are made. The challenge is not just to identify potential solutions, but to determine those that are politically viable under specific circumstances, and to discover the pace and conditions under which they can best be implemented. Immediately feasible proposals need to be differentiated from those that are longer term and more controversial. Due to location specific sensitivities, the process of assessing political feasibility of policy changes and building consensus for higher education reform is best undertaken at the national level. The result should be a more stable and effective reform process. Minister Herrera of Costa Rica (1991, 32-33) offers an instructive set of guidelines for national consensus-building in the education sector, and these are summarized in Attachment 1. In the case of Chile, a Presidential Commission on Higher Education Reform

... undertook written consultation with a selected number of institutional authorities, academics, researchers and members of the business world; it held over 60 working meetings in various higher education establishments through the country, in which over 1,500 institutional authorities and academics participated; it met on two occasions with student federation presidents and listened to representatives from 15 professional associations (Brunner, 1991, 63).

The failure to invest in public education and consensus-building prior to the institution of policy changes can generate high costs. In Mali, students and families protesting a February 1991 increase in university fees pulled the Minister of Higher Education from his car and put him to death. In Nigeria, a poorly understood World Bank loan to enhance educational

quality and improve system efficiency in the universities has prompted multiple student demonstrations (Bako,1990). In Kenya, the precipitous announcement of fee increases prompted student protest which closed the country's six universities for much of 1991.

Several alternative approaches to consensus-building have emerged on the African continent. They are (i) the self-study, (ii) the inter-institutional working group, (iii) the intermediary coordinating agency, and (iv) the external visiting committee. Some are initiated by universities; others are undertaken by government. Each of these will be discussed in turn. These methods are not mutually exclusive and can in fact be combined to good advantage.

The Self-Study: This is an institutional review initiated by senior university management. Through a process of internal analysis and consultation, it seeks to review the existing mission statement, organizational structure, key policies, and/or installed capacities for consistency as well as responsiveness to the external environment. This appraisal is often led by an ad hoc steering group drawn from academic and administrative staff. Preliminary results are shared with representatives of administration, faculty, students and non-academic staff in a workshop setting. Subsequently, small project teams may be used to develop detailed strategies for change in identified problem areas. The resulting institutional development strategy is then shared with government, donor and private sector representatives, and campus leaders. The self-study approach has been effectively employed by Eduardo Mondlane University (1991) in Mozambique and by the University of Dar es Salaam (1991), Tanzania. The pay-off from this exercise can be high, as the lack of clearly defined institutional priorities has been identified as a major obstacle to university development (Mosha,1986).

The strengths of this approach are that it is broadly consultative within the institution that will be directly affected by the resulting changes. This creates a process which builds understanding of the need for change and agreement on institutional strategies within the larger university community. It also allows higher education reform to evolve from the "bottom-up", thereby facilitating the emergence of an institutionally

diverse higher education system. A potential weakness is that the process may be divorced from influential political decision-makers and run the risk of proposing a course of action which is seen as politically untenable.

Box 1. A Self-Study Experience at Eduardo Mondlane University

In 1990 leadership at Eduardo Mondlane University in Mozambique decided to initiate an internal study of challenges faced by the institution in the effort to design a strategy for its stabilization and development. The study sought to update and explain the University's mission to government at a time when economic policy and political changes were creating a new operating environment in Mozambique, and responded to a sense that considerable donor assistance was being given to the University without an institutional plan to guide its application

Over roughly eighteen months, a process of internal appraisal took place. It involved (i) brainstorming roundtable discussions; (ii) the establishment of working groups to address key issues; (iii) internal review of a draft report, including with students; (iv) consideration and incorporation of 27 written reactions by constituent groups within the university; (v) a consultative workshop for all interested staff; (vi) internal acceptance of the plan; (vii) careful prior discussion and agreement with government on the overall financial implications of the plan, and on the concept of greater autonomy that it proposed, and (viii) a two-day consultative meeting with government, donors, and private sector representatives at which the plan was presented and discussed.

This planning exercise has generated numerous benefits for the university. It has created a more open and supportive working environment based on internal and external consensus. The plan itself has become an extensively used resource document for fund-raising purposes. The plan's proposal for more flexible donor funding has produced some positive responses, and in return the University is now strengthening its accountability mechanisms. Finally, it laid the foundation for a World Bank credit which is expected to provide needed investment in institutional rehabilitation and development

The Inter-Institutional Steering Committee: This is a sector review undertaken by government. At the initiative of a senior government official, often the president himself, a formal steering committee is established with authority to review higher education policy as well as its

financial and organizational implications. Representation often includes the Office of the President; the Ministries of Education, Finance, Planning, and Labour; and university leaders. Others (e.g. national teachers association, private sector) may be incorporated as needed. The committee may constitute subordinate working groups with responsibility for studying specific policy issues and offering recommendations. The Committee meets periodically to review progress and to draft its report. Its final report is formally presented to government for executive decision. This approach is currently being utilized in Cameroon (Groupe de Pilotage) and in Ghana (National Committee on Tertiary Education Reforms). A non-governmental variation of this approach is currently being pursued in South Africa by the National Education Policy Investigation (NEPI). Through a series of ad hoc working groups organized around critical policy issues, NEPI will produce a 1992 report that offers a progressive policy agenda for the education sector in the post-apartheid era.

Advantages of the Steering Committee approach include broad political consultation within government and assurance of political support at the highest levels of decision-making. A principal risk is that other key actors such as non-academic staff, students and their families may be brought into the process very late or not at all. Government may subsequently be faced with the task of "selling" its policy changes to higher education consumers, with the possibility of unanticipated reactions and consequent political negotiation.

The Intermediary Coordinating Agency: This is a formally constituted umbrella government organization with responsibility for overseeing the higher education sector. It normally mediates between a multi-university system and government, supervises the budget allocation process, and monitors academic standards. Examples include the Nigerian National Universities Commission, the Kenyan Commission on Higher Education, and the Zimbabwean National Council for Higher Education. In Nigeria and Kenya, these agencies have played a key role in the emerging process of higher education reform.

Intermediary agencies are relatively new phenomena in Africa, often arising as a management response when multi-university systems emerge. Experience to date suggests that their strengths include the ability to identify common ground for policy initiative within the competing interests of universities and government, and to broker the negotiation process of conflict and compromise among different interest groups into effective agreement on key policy issues. Potential weaknesses are a tendency to work within the machinery of government to the exclusion of major interest groups such as faculty and students, and to lose legitimacy where the agency is unable to serve both universities and government in a situation of conflicting interests.

The External Visiting Committee: In many countries, particularly those of the British Commonwealth, a "blue ribbon" committee of outside experts is periodically invited to review all aspects of a higher education institution or system. Such reviews normally occur every three to five years and are linked to forward planning and budgeting processes. Countries that have employed external visiting committees in recent years include Botswana, Namibia and Zimbabwe:

External visiting committees offer distinct advantages and drawbacks. On the one hand, they can contribute fresh insight, comparative experience, and the legitimacy of recognized, disinterested expertise. In local settings where a division of opinion surrounds key policy issues, these committees have the added advantage of tendering dispassionate analysis while keeping institutional or personal politics at arm's length, and of preferring "trial balloons" on sensitive issues without forcing key actors to take positions on them. On the other hand, the shortcomings of this approach include the committee's inevitably limited understanding of the local situation, the need for active institutional leadership to follow up on the committee's recommendations, and the tendency to compress what often should be an extended process of consultation and consensus-building into the brief period of the committee's visit.

Creating a Supportive Environment

In virtually all cases, African higher education reform efforts have suffered from inattention to the need for public education on key and often controversial issues. Newspaper articles, broadcast interviews and consultative meetings are options for informing public opinion concerning the source and consequences of higher education problems, and for laying the groundwork for eventual consensus regarding the response. Often, the issue of deteriorating educational quality can serve as a unifying theme for the constructive involvement of students (and their families), academic staff and policymakers in reform initiatives.

Several examples of government efforts to inform a general public concerning higher education problems and possible responses illustrate what can be accomplished. In Ghana, the Higher Education Division of the Ministry of Education initiated a newsletter in 1991 in the effort to make the process of higher education reform more transparent and participatory. Entitled *Hi Ed News*, it contains summaries of governmental policies and plans, reports of World Bank missions, and opinion by staff and students. In Senegal, a series of studies on higher education issues are being used to nourish a national debate on the future structure and content of the nation's higher education system, including through radio and television broadcasts. In Hungary, broad-based public interest in university reform was fostered by a booklet produced by the Ministry of Education (Coordination Office for Higher Education, 1991). The booklet laid out the main issues and identified associated policy options. It was widely disseminated one year in advance of a legislative vote on a higher education reform package, and contributed to an informed process of consensus-building debate prior to the actual policy decision. In Brazil, officials from the Ministry of Finance wrote a series of newspaper articles that questioned prevailing patterns of inequitable and inefficient higher education finance, counterbalanced the lobbying efforts of strong staff and student associations, and put the issue of reform on the public agenda.

What is Government's Role ?

Government is the central actor in the field of African higher education. It finances the lion's share of university budgets, sets access policies, appoints key officials, and insures that standards are maintained through accreditation or other mechanisms. Consequently, the way in which government relates to the higher education sector in carrying out these responsibilities will very much condition the possibilities and pace for higher education reform. Two contrasting approaches to governmental regulation of public sector responsibilities such as higher education are identified and analyzed by van Vught (1992).

The first approach is that of *state control*. In its purest version, it assumes that knowledge of the object of regulation is firm, control over the object of regulation is complete, and that the self-image of the regulating entity is holistic. It applies a highly rational planning process to decisionmaking by comprehensively evaluating all conceivable consequences of all conceivable alternatives. It implies a centralized decision-making process and substantial control over policy choices and subsequent implementation. It also requires that all parties concerned place considerable confidence in the capabilities of governmental actors and agencies to fully understand the issues and make the right decisions. Often, a series of rules and control mechanisms are used to steer institutional behaviour towards the desired policy objective (van Vught, 1992, 11-13).

In settings where the skilled human resource base is somewhat limited and institutional capacities are still in formative stages, the state control approach often exerts considerable appeal from a management standpoint. This may be particularly true in instances where a high degree of agreement on national goals is assumed to exist among all interested parties. In the early days of African independence, for example, it was generally believed that universities and their governments shared common goals in promoting national development and nation-building. The following statement from the landmark 1972 conference on "Creating the African University" captures this mood.

The general view was that whatever the position in the more developed countries, the university in Africa occupied too critical a position of importance to be left alone to determine its own priorities. The university is generally set up on the initiative, and at the expense of, the government to meet certain objectives. The government, too, by virtue of its position of leadership in the task of planning and execution of economic and social programs, seems the best placed to determine the priorities for the universities. The African university should, in normal circumstances, therefore accept the hegemony of government. (Yesufu,1973,45)

Under such circumstances, it is not surprising that many African governments adopted variations of the state control approach in their management of higher education sectors.

The second approach is the strategy of *state supervision*. In many ways, it stands in opposition to the model of state control. It recognizes that knowledge is shifting and highly uncertain, and believes that control is therefore difficult if not impossible. Instead of seeing itself as the regulating actor, governments employing the state supervision approach see important advantages in a division and decentralization of responsibilities. This model assumes that the disaggregation of complex decisionmaking processes offers the benefits of a high level of robustness, a substantial degree of flexibility, considerable capacity for innovation, and low information, transaction and administrative costs. Within this orientation, decisionmakers focus on monitoring feedback from a small set of critical policy variables, which they seek to keep within tolerable ranges, and evaluate the criteria by which these critical variables and the tolerable ranges are chosen. System emphasis is on the self-regulatory capacities of decentralized decisionmaking units (van Vught,1992,13).

In assessing the relevance of these two models for promoting development and innovation within higher education systems, van Vught argues in favour of the state supervision approach. It appears better suited to the context of higher education, acknowledging the fundamental characteristics of universities and seeking to use some of these

characteristics to stimulate innovation within the system. By judiciously managing relations of autonomy and accountability between universities and the state, it creates incentives for internal and external efficiency, as well as quality performance. In contrast, the state control model employs assumptions that are at odds with some of the basic characteristics of higher education institutions such as the high level of professional autonomy, the considerable degree of organizational independence, and the sizeable decentralization of decisionmaking power (van Vught, 1992, 41). Even in settings where a shortage of skilled professionals and associated limits on institutional capacity favour a general model of centralized management and state control, it should be recognized that higher education institutions contain high concentrations of skilled professional talent which are harnessed within proven institutional structures. As a result, they are likely to possess a greater capacity for self-regulation and autonomous governance than most other public institutions. For these reasons, the role of government in managing higher education change should be essentially a supervisory one.

What is University's Role?

Efforts to stabilize and revitalize Africa's universities will be facilitated where these academic institutions are able to offer a clear statement as to their institutional objectives and role in society. To the extent that universities can offer their supporters (government and donors) and consumers (students and their families, private sector) a coherent vision of their institutional role and output, the consensus-building process referred to above will be made easier. In short, universities themselves must take the first steps in their quest for greater stability and vitality.

Mission Statements: This undertaking must be premised on a strong commitment by university leadership to a soul-searching institutional review. It begins with a consultative process which seeks to address three questions: What kind of university does the country have? What kind of university does the country need? What kind of university can the country afford? Discussions should seek to develop a mission statement for the university which responds to present and anticipated future national circumstances, and to accompany this with appropriate cost projections. At a minimum, the resulting statements should integrate attention to

educational quality, finances, curriculum, distribution of students among principal disciplines, staff development, research, access, governance and management. The Association of African Universities, among others, has called upon African universities to reappraise their mission, goals and objectives in response to shifting circumstances (AAU, 1991, xvi).

Where universities are able to produce updated institutional assessments, these can be used as a basis for coordinating funding from government and donors. Ideally, this coordination would be initiated by university leadership, and be undertaken through some type of collective facilitating mechanism composed of the principal university funders in each case. This approach implies greater flexibility in the structuring of governmental and donor support for universities, including an increased delegation of authority to university management in determining the application of funds within the framework of the institutional plan. The approach also requires a willingness by university, government and donors representatives alike to engage in open discussion of their respective priorities, and to make longer term capacity-building commitments to activities in which a coincidence of interests can be found.

Higher Education Research: Greater understanding of African higher education issues is needed in order to formulate appropriate institutional plans and policy guidance. Without an adequate information base and the capacity to document university performance on a regular basis, the state supervision approach suggested above will have difficulty in operationally defining and tracking critical policy variables for the sector. While these capacities can, and sometimes are, established within government ministries or intermediary bodies such as a national council on higher education, there are certain advantages to housing them within universities. These include greater ease of access to information by all interested parties, the opportunity to link this research with university training programs, and the enrichment that comes from the opportunity for pluralistic discussion of difficult policy issues among the institutions concerned.

At present, relatively little analysis of higher education issues is carried out by African scholars. Consequently, much of the present policy

discussion in this field is framed and promoted by donor agencies, particularly the World Bank. Local capacities to generate and analyze information on higher education are limited in many parts of Africa. For example, an educational research symposium for African graduate students in the United States included five topics on higher education among 24 presentations (Ohio University, 1990). Of these, two dealt with South Africa. Likewise, just two out of 178 sessions scheduled for the annual meetings of the (American) African Studies Association were dedicated to education, and neither of these focussed specifically on higher education.

Policy discussion and institutional planning in this field would certainly be enriched if African higher education specialists were able to stimulate a true dialogue by contributing their own analyses. This is precisely the aim of the Association of African Universities, which has undertaken several comparative studies of universities since 1989. Topics include the cost-effectiveness of universities, graduate education and research, and the potential for great university collaboration with the private sector. Additional research on higher education management will be launched by the AAU in 1992. Although these studies show some variation in quality which reflects the current state of this particular art in the region, they nevertheless represent the first significant effort by an African institution to assess higher education performance in more than a decade.

Towards an Agenda for Higher Education Reform

Based on this discussion, and anticipating the thrust of the World Bank's policy paper on higher education scheduled for release in 1993 (Salmi, 1992), the following issues are suggested as input to an agenda for African higher education reform. The specific forms that these actions will take at the national level, however, must be the responsibility of each government and the institutions involved.

Policy Framework: A set of key policy parameters are needed to guide the development of higher education. These should address critical issues such as growth, access, financing, graduate output, governance, and accreditation.

System Differentiation: As Africa's higher education systems move from elite to mass orientations, they must decide how best to incorporate growing student enrollment in ways that meet social demand and respond to labour market needs while meeting the test of efficient resource use. The most effective approach may be through an institutional diversification strategy based on the development of a variety of lower cost alternative institutions differentiated in terms of missions, functions and modes of delivery while also consolidating prestige in institutions specializing in graduate studies and research.

Balancing Enrollments with Financing: To preserve quality as the demand for higher education expands faster than governments' ability to provide it, a financial pact between universities and their governments is proposed. This arrangement would commit government to providing a certain portion of the unit cost of educating each student, thereby linking enrollments to budget availabilities. In return, higher education institutions would commit themselves to covering the remaining portion of these costs.

Financial Diversification: Strategies of financial diversification should be developed and pursued as a means of insuring greater measures of institutional stability and autonomy, and of generating the additional resources needed to launch reform initiatives.

University Autonomy: Greater autonomy, particularly in the financial administration of universities, is needed in order to provide the incentives necessary to encourage quality performance, management efficiency and a capacity for innovation in the face of change.

Improved Governance: Universities are currently challenged to become more responsive to the needs of government and society in order to justify the considerable investments made in them. Improved university government structures, through greater participation by interested parties from within and outside the university, offer one means of achieving this goal.

Efficient Management: Better management is the best short term strategy for freeing resources to meet the needs of higher education institutions. It also provides assurance to government and donors that their limited resources are being put to good use, and communicates positive professional values to students.

Strategic University Plans: Universities must seize the initiative in order to achieve their own stabilization and revitalization. They can do this by undertaking a self-study which re-assesses their institutional mission, performance and organization. The study can be used to build the internal and external consensus needed to initiate proposed reforms.

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Attachment 1

Consensus-building Guidelines For Education Reform

-Generate a (higher) education plan based on a social and educational diagnosis closely related to the country's economic policies and socio-economic needs.

- Establish a Standing Consultative Committee, appointed by the President or Minister, composed of representatives from academic and staff organizations, and from political parties.

- Include representatives from academic and political organizations in decisionmaking teams on research, planning and programming. This will allow participants in these processes to present their proposals for change.

- Undertake national consultations on specific educational problems in order to know the solution proposed by those interviewed.

- Explore the feelings and thoughts of actors and beneficiaries of (higher) education through various techniques.

- Heighten the awareness and understanding of groups or officials whose decisions are determinant for success in the policy changes: parliament, senior ministry staff, institutional leaders, Boards of Directors, etc.

- Disseminate the reasons and advantages of proposals or changes to the various groups with an interest in (higher) education.

- Involve all educational actors--both endogenous and exogenous--in implementing the changes agreed upon, in accordance with their areas of competence.

- Advocate the enhancement of professional skills for academic and administrative staff as well as improvement in their terms of service and work environments.
- Involve social communications media in disseminating educational policy changes and in supporting them.
- Fulfill that which was agreed.



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