



**THE ROLE OF THE
UNIVERSITY AND ITS
FUTURE IN ZIMBABWE**

**INTERNATIONAL
CONFERENCE
PAPERS**



THE ROLE OF THE UNIVERSITY
AND ITS FUTURE
IN
ZIMBABWE



International Conference Papers

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CONTENTS

	<i>Page</i>
FOREWORD	
by Professor Walter J. Kamba	vi
General Introduction by the Editors	1
<i>Chapter 1</i>	
Opening Speech by the Prime Minister, the Honourable Robert G. Mugabe, M.P.	4
<i>Chapter 2</i>	
The University in Times of Change by Professor Asavia Wandira, Vice-Chancellor, Makerere University	8
<i>Chapter 3</i>	
The Role of the University in Development : Some Sociological and Philosophical Considerations by Professor Ralf Dahrendorf, Director, London School of Economics and Political Science	18
<i>Chapter 4</i>	
The Relationship between the University and Government by Professor Hasu H. Patel, University of Zimbabwe	24
<i>Chapter 5</i>	
University Reform : Changing the University to meet new needs by Dr. Herbert M. Murerwa, Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Manpower Planning and Development	38
<i>Chapter 6</i>	
University Curriculum and Research by Professor Deitrich Goldschmidt, Director of Max-Planck Institute, and Dr. Rukudzo Murapa, Dean of Social Studies, University of Zimbabwe	43
<i>Chapter 7</i>	
The University in the Third World : Comparative Perspectives by Professor Philip G. Altbach, Director, Comparative Education Centre, State University of New York at Buffalo	47
<i>Chapter 8</i>	
The University : From this time on by Professor Walter J. Kamba, Vice-Chancellor, University of Zimbabwe	57
<i>Appendix 1</i>	
Conference Programme	61
<i>Appendix 2</i>	
List of International Visitors	64

FOREWORD

by

Professor W.J. Kaumba
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University of Zimbabwe

This book is a record of the papers which were read at the Conference on the Role of the University and its Future in Zimbabwe, held on this campus in September 1981.

It was perhaps the most important Conference in the history of this University. It was attended by an impressive group of scholars from Africa and abroad, and Government leaders. The papers were highly scholarly and the debate which followed each presentation was very stimulating and thought-provoking.

This collection of essays constitutes a book of readings for students interested in problems of university development in Zimbabwe in particular, and in Africa in general, and those interested in university reform and the politics of higher education.

I must, on behalf of the University, express my gratitude to the Carnegie Corporation of New York for making it possible for us to hold the Conference, and subsequently for enabling us to publish these papers. To the participants who contributed immensely to the Conference; and to the Organising Committee for a job well done, I, also, express my profound gratitude.

CHAPTER 6

THE UNIVERSITY CURRICULUM AND RESEARCH: SOME PRIORITIES

Professor D. Goldschmidt and Dr. R. Murapa

"The full value of university activity can only be obtained when the university and the society it serves are organically linked together. New nations establish their own universities because they need a type of higher education appropriate to their problems and their aspirations. This is not to deny that much knowledge is international . . . But the kind of problems which are examined at a university . . . do and should vary according to the background of society and the anticipated requirements of the students."

(Nyerere on the occasion of his inauguration as Chancellor of the University of Dar-es-Salaam, 29th August, 1970)

THE universities have three main tasks: education, research and consultation. Before we discuss these tasks or functions let us be clear about five underlying or guiding principles specific to an African university in a new state starting its own independent development.

1. National relevance: Education, research and consultation must be of direct relevance to the development of the country. Curricula and research have to be designed correspondingly. The development of the subject areas must be done consistently with careful manpower planning and with proper regard for personnel and available facilities and for research needs. Education must be an instrument for the promotion of national integration; hence it is necessary that all ethnic groups be represented in the students' body and in the faculty or academic staff.

2. Social identification: The modern University has come to Africa as an institution of the northern part of the world — more specifically the western world: It is, however, true that prior to the onset of colonialism distinguished universities existed in the northern and western parts of Africa, e.g. Egypt, Timbaktu etc. The challenge in Africa is to get the University to achieve a social identification with the people it serves. This is one of the major tasks before the University of Zimbabwe. The university must demonstrate that it belongs to the society and that it is not removed from it. The teachers, doctors, engineers, economists and administrators it produces must be instilled with a sense of social identification with the society at large. They must be in a position to identify and appreciate their nation's problems better than their foreign counterparts. In this sense it is necessary that localization takes place in due course. This is not to advocate isolation or parochialism. Indeed, faculty members should be able to go to other countries for further education and training but must be in a position to resist the temptation to fall prey to the brain drain to countries which are more advanced economically and scientifically.

3. State hegemony: The African states are extremely short of means for education. According to UNESCO, in 1978, seven African states spent less than 10% of their budget on higher education; thirteen states gave 10% - 20%; six states gave 20% - 30%. These figures indicate the extreme need for qualified and well trained personnel in African States. They also underly the great need to have manpower planning as a government responsibility and to foster a close working relationship between the government and the university. Government has an obligation to insist that the university must play a major role in meeting national manpower needs. In this respect, the academic staff is expected to co-operate with the government in a consultative capacity.

In Africa, the university is a national institution to be financed from the national budget. Government influence is therefore more direct on the African university than it is on many western universities.

"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 Government too by virtue of its position of leadership in the task of planning and execution of economic and social programmes, seems the best placed to determine the priorities for the universities. The African University should, in normal circumstances, therefore, accept the hegemony of state government."

(Yesufu: *Summary, Workshop of the Association of African Universities, Accra, July, 1972*).

Echoing this view, Prime Minister Mugabe in his address opening this conference stated: "Higher education is too important a business to be left entirely to deans, professors, lecturers and university administrators".

4. Academic freedom: In addition to the principles of national relevance, social identification and state hegemony, there is the principle of academic freedom which must be preserved. But it is academic freedom of a particular type i.e. one whose parameters are defined by the preceding three principles. If these three principles are accepted, then the basis for responsible academic freedom exists. Within this framework the specification of curricula, the standards of examinations, the execution of research projects and the publication of textbooks as well as the research results must be the responsibility of the university members. Furthermore, the faculty members must have the right to nominate candidates and select candidates for academic appointments. Yesufu concludes his report by saying:—

"Academic freedom is a freedom which African universities must defend all the time."

5. International Communication: While there is great need for the African university to develop a specific identity, caution must be taken not to allow the African university to be too provincial and too utilitarian. The African university must continue to be a member of the international science community. Where Governments are concerned about their international prestige, efforts must be made to ensure that the university remains respected by the international science community and not to be seen as simply an institution under the administration of a given ministry. The university must continue to pursue communication with its international counterparts. Such communication normally manifests itself in the form of:

- foreign support for buildings and equipment,
- training and research partnerships with foreign universities and institutions.
- foreign visiting lecturers and professors. In a short-term or even long term perspective, it may be very useful to keep about 10% foreigners in teaching and research (not administration) in the faculty. These should normally be experienced senior people who no longer harbour career interests. Likewise, Zimbabwean members of staff should go to foreign universities on temporary assignments.
- training of the post graduates at foreign universities in cases where they cannot receive the appropriate training of their own country.

We now come to the point of defining priorities of the development of (a) education by appropriate curricula and (b) research. We shall deal with education first as this seems to be the most urgent demand on the university at present. We should not however forget that teaching and research at university level should never be separated from each other completely.

For the development of curricula, we should like to make nine points:—

1. Weight must be put on subjects which are *directly relevant* to the development of the country (including basic subjects needed for education in specific fields like mathematics for engineers, chemistry for doctors, physics etc.). It is safe to assume that in a developing country like Zimbabwe the university must provide the following:—

- (a) basic fields such as human and veterinary medicine
 - agriculture,
 - engineering (food and chemical processing, production and processing of raw materials, mechanical and electrical engineering, architecture, maintenance etc.)
- (b) fields for further development of the administrative socio-economic and cultural system; law, teacher training, administration, town and country planning etc.
- (c) humanities and social sciences i.e. philosophy, political science, economics, sociology,

8. Development of teaching materials: Textbooks and other scientific literature are needed. The greater need however is to ensure that the content of such textbooks and literature is of relevance to Zimbabwe and Africa. Too often, African universities depend on textbooks not only written from a eurocentric perspective but which also focus on issues of little relevance to Africa and the specific countries. Unfortunately, this tendency is encouraged by transnational publishers such as Longman, Oxford University Press, Heinemann, Praeger etc. whose major concern is the markets. Furthermore, local publishers shy away from publishing such material because the relatively small market would make the price unreasonably high. Perhaps one way to get around this problem is to have the university establish a modern off-set printing shop as one of its own enterprises. Once the problem of publication is solved, the onus falls on the academic staff to provide the necessary manuscripts. It is a task that must be accorded the highest priority for which time and money must be found. The University would do well to facilitate the employment of teaching assistants so that lecturers can have the necessary time to do research on and publish material of relevance to their teaching and the country. There is also need to develop or acquire other teaching materials including video tapes, demonstration materials etc.

9. Attitude To implement the foregoing suggestions it is necessary to command broad based support from the academic staff as a whole. A modern and growing university such as the university of Zimbabwe situated in a setting of tremendous social change requires that the teaching staff be sensitive and responsive to the emerging environment. There must be more awareness on the part of the faculty members of the dialectical problems they face. A large segment of the staff members may have consciously or unconsciously subscribed to the culture and values of the old order. There is, therefore, a need for a revolutionary attitudinal change in order to adapt to the new socio-political and cultural order. Inter-disciplinary staff seminars may be used as instruments to facilitate such changes as they help to develop some kind of a dialectic of cultural transition from a eurocentric to an afroscentric perspective. Knowledge and concepts can be more easily understood and internalized if they can be linked to one's own upbringing.

Having made these fairly general points concerning the developments of future curricula, we should like to make four more specific points about the dialectics of cultural transition.

1. Language: The contents of science and arts as taught in most African universities have been developed nearly exclusively in the west and the medium for transmitting that knowledge has been European languages — largely French and English. This has not always allowed for total communication. Instead communication has rather been limited to technicalities of the particular subject. Such communication cannot always achieve an all embracing mutual exchange of questions, reactions and ideas. This is true in such fields as humanities and social sciences but it is equally true, if not more so in medicine, natural sciences and engineering. Yet there is no gainsaying the fact that in a country such as Zimbabwe — at least for the foreseeable future — English will remain the medium of instruction at the university. Our intention, therefore, is simply to alert faculty members of the cultural context in which they operate and the limitations in communication imposed by the use of a foreign language — English.

2. Learning: In addition to the cultural factors, there are economic factors which may compromise the ability of students in an African University to acquire knowledge with the same facility as their counterparts in European settings. Poor housing conditions, lack of adequate transport, health facilities, public media etc cause difficulties that can hamper the ability of students to achieve their optimum capacity in learning. Efforts have to be made to develop methods of learning how to learn under those circumstances.

3. The Social Groups: Without adhering to romantic concepts about the coherence of African families there is little doubt that traditional life in Zimbabwe and Africa in general has always encouraged co-operation and communal work. The socialist ideology that Zimbabwe has opted for reinforces this concept. Academic work, on the other hand, usually puts weight on individual achievements and has the tendency to isolate people from each other. This is particularly true where students have to pass competitive examinations. One should be aware of the fact that this individualization is alien to most work situations into which the graduates will eventually find themselves. Team work on projects — possibly even interdisciplinary projects — should become important elements of the curricula.

4. Man and Nature: The African university student — particularly one who comes from

the rural area (mostly the majority) — experiences two concepts of the world i.e. the African world with all its traditions and customs and the so-called modern world built on science and technology. The task for university education in Africa is to harmonize these two world views and experiences. Can bridges be built between traditional and modern (usually western) concepts?. (e.g. in Medicine, appropriate technology etc.)

Finally, a word concerning research. We have already in passing, touched on this issue but it is necessary that we comment on two more general points.

1. Priority must be on those research projects that are likely to make a direct and immediate contribution to national development. In other words, research which may well serve the general progress of science but would promise little or no direct results for the development of the country should be given a low priority rating. The national agenda is too pressing and the resources too limited to allow the luxury of research for its own sake. This does not necessarily mean that every one must concentrate on so-called applied research. There is also fundamental research which nevertheless has profound implications for Zimbabwe e.g. in humanities — history, geography, cultural anthropology, medicine, biology, politics, economics etc.

2. In view of the urgent needs of the country and of the scarce resources short term research i.e. of not more than five years duration should have priority over mid-term or long term projects. Efforts must be made to resist the temptation of falling prey to international funding agencies who normally would fund only those research projects consistent with their own list of priorities (cf: Ziman, J. *The Patterns of Research in Developing Countries*, Minerva, Vol. 9, 1971).

The most urgent need for immediate research comes from the university's primary task of education. Research has to be done for the development of curricula, for the development of teaching materials (including textbooks as mentioned earlier) and in the interdisciplinary field of the dialectics between scholars with different cultural backgrounds. A new and relevant perspective — afrocentric — has to be brought to bear so that the eurocentric features in arts and sciences can be recognized and seen in their specific and limited validity.



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