
Institutional Transformations and Implications for Access and Quality in Public and Private Universities in Kenya: A Comparative Study

James E. Otiende*

Abstract

This paper discusses the implications of the rapid expansion and transformations in African universities on access and quality. Using the example of Kenya, it looks at both the transformations that have occurred in the number of institutions of higher learning and also in the structural diversity of programmes and enrolment. With public universities facing economic challenges, public-financed higher education is increasingly perceived to be wasteful economically and restrictive in access, and consequently working against the realization of equity and compromising quality due to dependence on receding central government finances. The paper situates this shift in thinking with the emergence of neo-liberalism in Africa in the 1980s and 1990s. It argues that these shifts, together with the fiscal crisis of African countries have accelerated the growth of private universities in Africa. This situation poses serious challenges to the quality of knowledge production and to teaching in private and public universities alike. To address issues of access and quality, the paper emphasizes the need for multidisciplinary, diversification of courses, improved institutional management, greater equity, and quality monitoring and evaluation. The paper argues for improved institutional accountability through institutionalization of external quality control, and for mainstreaming and facilitating research. There is also need for government to assist private universities in sourcing the required capital for their further development.

Résumé

Cet article discute des implications en matière d'accès et de qualité, de la rapide expansion et des transformations survenues au sein des universités africaines. Il s'inspire de l'exemple du Kenya, et examine les transformations ayant eu lieu dans

* Department of Educational Foundation, Kenyatta University, Nairobi, Kenya.

un certain nombre d'institutions de l'enseignement supérieur, mais également au niveau de la diversité structurelle des programmes et des inscriptions universitaires. Du fait que les universités publiques sont confrontées à de multiples défis économiques, le système d'enseignement supérieur financé par les fonds publics est de plus en plus perçu comme étant un gouffre économique et un système à l'accès restreint, donc contraire aux principes d'équité et de qualité, du fait de sa dépendance envers les finances gouvernementales en constante diminution. Cet article restitue ce changement de mentalité dans le contexte de l'émergence du néolibéralisme en Afrique dans les années 80 et 90. Il affirme que ces changements, ainsi que la crise fiscale des pays africains ont accéléré le développement des universités privées en Afrique. Cette situation constitue un sérieux défi à la qualité des connaissances produites, ainsi qu'à l'enseignement dans les universités privées aussi bien que publiques. Afin de résoudre les problèmes d'équité et d'accès, cet article suggère la nécessité d'instaurer la multidisciplinarité, ainsi que la diversification des cours, de même qu'une amélioration de la gestion institutionnelle, une plus grande équité, ainsi qu'un contrôle et une évaluation de la qualité. L'article prône également une plus grande responsabilité institutionnelle à travers l'institutionnalisation du contrôle externe de qualité, ainsi que la rationalisation et la facilitation de la recherche. Le gouvernement devrait également assister les universités privées à recueillir le capital nécessaire à leur développement futur.

Introduction

Transformations in higher education have been occasioned by a number of forces. These include globalisation and the rise of neo-liberalism, the debt crisis, secondary education and the paradigmatic shifts in knowledge production and dissemination. One of such fundamental transformations that has taken place in Africa has been the rapid expansion of universities. For instance, from six institutions in 1960 and there were about ninety-seven universities in Africa by 1992 (Saint 1992). Not only have the transformations occurred in the number of institutions of higher learning but also in the structural diversity of their programmes and enrolment.

Indeed, by the turn of the twentieth century, with public universities facing economic challenges, it became clear that public-financed higher education was not only wasteful in economic terms but also restrictive in terms of access, thus working against the realisation of equity as well as compromising quality due to dependence on receding central government finances (World Bank 1998, 2000; Ranson 1988; Saint 1992). This shift in thinking about higher education was due to the emergence of neo-liberal thinking and the socio-economic paradigm of the 1980s and 1990s. This paradigmatic shift substituted the public-good view of higher education for the private-good conceptions of the same (Lungwangwa 2002). At the level of individual African countries the growing

social demand for higher education in the context of government's weak fiscal position of inevitably meant a lack of funds to expand higher education to meet the growing demand. These paradigmatic shifts together with the fiscal crisis of African countries have accelerated the growth of private universities in Africa. Nevertheless the core functions of the universities, whether public or private, in generating and disseminating knowledge, producing high quality graduates and responding to equity concerns remain unchanged (Sawyer 2001). These transformations have also become a source of challenge in terms of quality education, which is the yardstick in measuring the place of higher education in society.

Institutional Transformations in the Kenyan Higher Education System

The first major transformations in higher education in Kenya were in terms of the rapid expansions that occurred in the 1970s and 1980s. Following the post-independence trend to expand education at all levels, the university sector experienced expansions in the numbers of institutions, students and programmes (Ajayi 1996). Other than the political motivation, the increasing social demand for higher education coupled with the weak financial position of the government led to some institutional transformations in the provision of higher education in Kenya. These transformations have entailed the introduction of cost sharing and partial privatisation of public universities as well as legislation to enable the creation of more private universities.

In the 1980s there was an increase in the number of students qualifying for university education. This, coupled with pressure for geographical spread of universities, led to the establishment of Moi University, Egerton University and Kenyatta University. At the same time there was a decline in the allocation of finances for higher education in Kenya necessitated by the poor economic conditions that prevailed at the time. Like other social welfare services higher education was also coming to be seen as a private good that served the needs of an individual rather than a public good that was essential for social development (Saint 1992; Ajayi 1996). This view, seen in the context of reduced budgetary allocations to higher education, necessitated the search for alternative funding strategies. One such alternative was to reduce the per-student expenditure as in the double intakes of the 1987/88 and 1990/91 academic years.

In the late 1970s and 1980s the quality of education in public universities was much higher than in private universities. Private universities admitted less qualified students, usually doing so after public universities had taken their share. In addition to this, private universities had a narrower focus of courses, their courses were often poorly drafted and the education they offered was of

lower quality (Mwiria 1998). However, in the 1990s, the image of private universities improved in the public perception in view of the significant role they were playing in admitting students who had indeed qualified for admission to public universities. Access to private universities was enhanced by innovative admission criteria such as admission of mature students, flexible timetables, credit transfers and bridging courses (Wesonga 2003). Furthermore the smaller number of students in private universities ensured less bureaucracy in operations, thus improving communication between the administration and the students, avoiding the student strikes that have eroded the efficiency of public universities. Nonetheless private universities continue to offer a narrower range of courses, mainly theology, humanities and social sciences. Thus the transformations that have taken place in higher education can be summarised as having occurred mainly in the areas of financing, structure and organisation of academic programmes, quality of programmes offered, admission criteria and requirements, all of which have implications for access to and quality of higher education.

The Impact of the Transformations in Public and Private Universities

Both public and private universities have been growing faster than what the limited resources available can cater for. Table 1 shows the enrolment trends of public and private universities between 1996 and 2002. Given their greater capacity and lack of control over enrolments public universities exhibit the highest enrolments and enrolment growth rates. As such even the relatively smaller enrolments and enrolment growth rates of private universities eventually translate into a significant increase in, and consequent impact on, higher education in Kenya. Both public and private universities have to deal with associated management, infrastructural and quality assurance shortcomings as university problems continue to grow beyond the capacity to plan for them. Operating in a depressed economic environment for both public and private universities has led to a situation where the available funds cannot match the necessary provision of critical inputs to sustain acceptable standards of instruction, research and service (Ajayi 1996).

The research capacity of faculty has been affected further by the lower allocation of funds by universities for research due to the reduced overall funding available to them. However, while both public and private universities have limited allocations for research, the opportunities of public university academic staff is enhanced by their lighter workloads, which allows them to scout for individualised funding through competitive proposal writing (Wesonga 2003).

Table 1: Enrolments of public and private universities, 1996–2002

Year	Public			Private			Foreign		
	M	F	T	M	F	T	M	F	T
1996/97	11,381	28,047	39,428	2,872	3,092	5,964	1,568	1,919	3,447
1997/98	10,940	27,586	38,526	2,328	2,642	4,970	1,853	2,750	4,603
1998/99	12,339	28,231	40,570	3,382	3,609	6,991	2,109	2,982	5,901
1999/2000	12,770	28,498	41,268	4,122	3,963	8,085	2,042	3,228	5,270
2000/2001	15,481	29,029	44,510	4,101	4,111	8,212	2,054	3,066	5,120
2001/2002	15,884	32,552	48,437	4,486	4,401	8,887	-	3,069	-

Source: CHE/MOEST

In public universities especially, academic staff members been forced to work in impoverished environments characterised by poor physical resources, lack of teaching materials and poor remuneration and promotion prospects. Coupled with limited staff development avenues and a continuing brain drain of senior academic staff, the motivation of the academic staff members in public universities has for many years been relatively low (Saint 1992; Ajayi 1996). While the academic staff in private universities are better motivated through better remuneration and facilities, questions, have been raised regarding their quality of teaching, given their bloated teaching workloads (Wesonga 2003).

Limited finances have also come with the challenge of offering market – driven programmes with a curriculum that is relevant to the emergent needs of the country. For instance the curriculum offered at independence emphasised the liberal arts and humanities in order to prepare students for civil service jobs (Ajayi 1996). This curriculum is no longer relevant today, but unfortunately, due mainly to lack of funds, Kenyan public universities and even some of the private ones still provide irrelevant programmes which cannot adequately prepare students to tackle emerging social, economic and political changes in Kenya. The continued enrolment in such courses can be seen from the two tables below. Table 2 below shows the undergraduate student participation by gender and area of specialisation at United States International University (USIU), a leading private university in Nairobi, during the 1998/1999 academic year, while Table 3 shows the enrolments by department at the same institution from 1997 to 2000.

Table 2: Undergraduate students by gender and area of specialisation at USIU, 1998/1999

Department	1998			1999		
	M	F	%	M	F	%
Arts & Science	96	264	73	129	275	68
Business Administration	946	901	49	887	866	49

Table 3: Enrolment per department between 1997 and 2000 at USIU

Department	1997/98	1998/99	1999/2000	%
Commerce	645	1049	782	50.4
Communication	374	358	386	24.9
Community Development	256	262	303	19.5
Education	44	30	38	2.4
Language	9	80	10	0.6
Music	—	—	5	0.3
Bible	21	26	28	1.8
Total	1349	1733	1552	100

The transformation regarding access to higher education has taken the form of adjustment of admission criteria to cater for regional, gender and other disparities related to circumstances such as disability and age. However, under closer scrutiny, higher education can be seen to have been commercialised with students being viewed to be customers and products, a situation which often impacts negatively on the quality of higher education, particularly with the public universities admitting female students with lower cut-off points.

The Way Forward

To address issues of access and quality, the following matters need to be considered:

- There is need to diversify courses to include more science and technology subjects as well as to enhance interdisciplinary modes of delivery. Implicit here is the need to investigate the extent to which the programmes in the public and private universities have shifted towards science, engineering and business and management needed to supplement private-sector development and private labour, given the ever-growing technological advancements.
- Since the missions, policies, planning processes, organisational structures and monitoring and evaluation systems in place in universities determine the public perception of the quality of education they offer, there is need to establish the specific levels of institutional management

in both public and private universities in order to enhance the quality of education on offer.

- Equity, access and quality monitoring and evaluation should be undertaken on a regular basis so as to keep these matters to the fore. Both public and private universities should consider improving their institutional accountability by institutionalising external quality control in their methods and criteria of student evaluation. This will ensure the authenticity of their programmes and evaluation criteria as well as help in managing the public perception of the quality of their education and graduates.
- Public and private universities should formulate research policies that seek to mainstream research in all their programmes and allocate corresponding resources. Such a policy should address the reduction of teaching load for faculty doing research and also indicate the resources available for both faculty and student researchers.
- The government through the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology should assist private universities in sourcing the required capital for their further development.

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