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## **Perspectives on Higher Education in Africa: Fieldnotes on Trends, Themes, Challenges, and Opportunities**

Higher education in Africa is generally characterized by resilience in the face of extreme circumstances. Today's African universities are graduating students ready to compete in a *global* economy, a reflection of the lack of opportunity *at home* for recent graduates. Sub-Saharan African universities, though existing in various forms before European colonization, are hybrids of colonial institutions—designed to train an elite skilled class for post-independence governance—and modern institutions preparing African students to be the next leaders in national development. These historical developments have taken place amidst changing conditions in African governance, economics, and society. Comprehensive multilateral actions are now in place to address the changing dynamics of African higher education through new partnerships.

There is an exciting, cooperative, multilateral effort underway to improve the utility of institutions of higher learning in Africa: the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD). NEPAD's web site lays out broad goals pertaining to higher education in Africa.<sup>i</sup> One of NEPAD's primary goals is "Africanization" of university faculty—replacing foreign professors with Africans— which would theoretically occur when enough Africans could be educated to teach their fellow citizens. Historically, if an African student had professorial ambitions then that student was likely to seek advanced degrees abroad, since early postcolonial African institutions were not yet training enough would-be professors. Only after obtaining an advanced degree outside of Africa would African professors then be able to return to their countries of origin, ready to share their skills. Unfortunately, this pattern tended to fuel the phenomenon of brain drain.

Another of NEPAD's primary goals is reversing the process of "brain drain," a scenario that occurs when African university graduates leave Africa permanently for better academic and living conditions abroad. Brain drain results in African institutions having to hire expensive foreign workers when there aren't enough qualified Africans to do the same job, thus depriving their countries of highly skilled personnel to develop the new nation. Fundamental in this reversal is a skills development program intending to ensure that an overwhelming majority of skilled workers across the continent are African, a program contingent upon improving facilities, research, and technology at the university level. NEPAD seeks to improve and Africanize its member institutions by improving higher education facilities, promoting specialized research, and creating more African centers of technology. Following such expansion and improvements, NEPAD aims to utilize education's ability to foster national development.

In order to understand the issues NEPAD seeks to redress, I interviewed several individuals with varying experience in African higher education in order to explore the profession's challenges and opportunities. The information I gathered from these interviews is concerned with the trends and perspectives of higher education in Anglophone Africa from the colonial era through the present. At the University of California, Los Angeles I was able to interview graduate students from Kenya and Nigeria as well as UCLA professors from the United States, Britain, and Uganda who have studied and taught in African universities from the earliest days of independence through the present era. The interviewees provided a broad perspective encompassing close to 50 years' worth of developments within the Anglophone African higher education sector.

## **The Individuals Interviewed**

Professor Merrick Posnansky came from Cambridge University to Makerere University in 1964 and directed the nascent African Studies program for three years before he taught history and archaeology at the University of Ghana until 1976. Dr. Posnansky's experience as a Briton working in newly independent former British colonies was in step with postcolonial African universities' faculty hiring practices. After receiving his doctorate from London's School of Oriental and African Studies, Professor Ned Alpers taught African history at the University of Dar-es-Salaam in the late 1960s. Professor Alpers offers a perspective on the earliest days of the Africanization of the university community, which for this essay's purpose means the attempt to have Africans at the highest professional and administrative levels of the university. A third interviewee and native Ugandan, Professor Fred Byaruhanga, who studied at Makerere University, connects themes of African higher education from the post-independence days to the present.

Finally, my interviews with two recent graduates of African universities—Saheed Oke Raheem of Obafemi Awolowo University in Nigeria and Erustus Festus Ouko of Kenyatta University in Kenya—covered current trends and perspectives, as well as challenges and opportunities of the present. Interviews with Ouko and Raheem reflect that the majority of professors today in their African universities are indeed African, although they admit that most of these professors still earn their advanced degrees abroad. The experiences of Ouko and Raheem point to positive trends in contemporary Africanization of the faculty and staff, as Africans have taken over the skilled positions in higher administration, but still rely on universities in the West to acquire advanced degrees.

## **The Immediate Post-Independence Days**

Both Professor Posnansky and Professor Alpers came to East Africa to teach during the immediate years after the end of British colonial rule. The academic staff at their respective African universities tended to come from universities in London.<sup>ii</sup> Before 1970, Makerere was known as the University of East Africa and Dar-es-Salaam was an affiliate college of the University of London, a reflection of the reliance upon the old colonial metropole to provide degrees of the highest quality. Universities in newly independent Africa faced staffing dilemmas. With little primary and secondary training for Africans, there were few Africans capable of taking over the skilled technical jobs held by Europeans upon independence.<sup>iii</sup>

There also was a dearth of educators; hence, in the years following independence, university educators traditionally were brought in from the former colonial metropole. Professor Posnansky was recruited to teach at Makerere University from Cambridge and Professor Alpers was hired to instruct at the University of Dar-es-Salaam from the London School of Oriental and African Studies. Professor Alpers in particular spoke with enthusiasm about the opportunity to explore African history from perspectives differing from those traditionally embraced by colonial powers.

## **Rise and Decline**

Both Posnansky and Alpers spoke of the dynamic enthusiasm present in their respective universities because of the post-independence fervor for using the university as a tool for national development. They spoke about the quality of their respective facilities in the 1950s and 1960s, and both stated that the universities were well maintained. Living conditions for both students and faculty were on par with universities in the West.

Byaruhanga addressed how this nationalistic enthusiasm and optimism declined as African governments, which traditionally were responsible for funding higher education, began to neglect the university as a tool for national development when Africa's economic fortunes took a downturn in the 1970s and 1980s. As newly independent African nations built primary and secondary institutions to educate their youth, the expansion of higher education did not match the expansion at the primary and secondary levels. This, coupled with the economic downturn, contributed to a situation where underfinanced and crumbling universities were faced with an explosion of students they were underprepared to accommodate. The structural adjustment policies of the 1980s marginalized the university as an instrument of national development, and standards subsequently dropped.<sup>iv</sup>

NEPAD aims to revive African higher education facilities and standards, promote specialized research, and create more African centers of technology. Professor Byaruhanga noted the difficulties faced by today's faculty. Large class size, limited teaching and educational resources, limited pay, and limited opportunities for research and professional development are among the challenges facing African professors that have contributed to poor conditions for scholarly life. Interviews with Raheem and Ouko offered a glimpse into the problems students face trying to study at a modern African university. They both spoke about overcrowded living quarters and classrooms; diminished university support for tuition, fees, and books; and the need to constantly buy food to cook in their respective rooms because they considered cafeteria meal plans too expensive, among other things. The need to improve the university experience in all these areas calls for increased funding and cooperation between national governments and public state universities, as laid out by NEPAD.

## **The Changing Utility of the African University**

Today's African academics have an opportunity to interact with their nations through new scholarship, at the primary, secondary, and university level, emphasizing the Afro-centric. The three levels are interrelated. Without a sound primary and secondary system, higher education has no solid basis of entrants prepared for the rigors of higher education. The university's role, therefore, is now to contribute to the maintenance and continuous improvement of the educational system of which it is the leading part.<sup>v</sup>

Professors Posnansky and Alpers spoke of how, when they were teaching history at their respective universities, they were involved in rewriting African history by developing new textbooks emphasizing the African perspective. And Ouko, who took a teaching position at Westpark University in Nairobi after graduating from Kenyatta, spoke of how even now his Westpark world history book was still primarily focused on achievements in British history, a legacy of Kenya's colonial past. Though some might find irony in White British and American professors teaching African history to Africans, Posnansky and Alpers's situation was an unfortunate circumstance of history; the colonial system had produced few Africans who had attained their level of knowledge of African history at the time. Hence, there were few African educators to turn to for a drastic reappraisal of traditional European colonial thought.

Both Ouko and Raheem are here in the United States to obtain their PhDs. Raheem is unspecific about his postdoctoral plans, but Ouko wants to use the degrees he acquires here to return to Kenya and put his skills to work there. Ouko would like to work with the Kenyan Ministry of Education to improve Kenya's educational standards. His desire to return to Kenya is an example of another NEPAD objective: using higher education to foster national development.

The student interviewees remarked that their respective universities' curricula were liberal arts-based back in the 1960s and 1970s, but with the need to develop nationally, the curricula have shifted to being more vocational—training engineers, economists, and doctors. Ouko spoke about how Kenyatta's curriculum began changing during the aforementioned decades of economic downturn from a liberal arts-oriented university designed to train Africa's academic elite to a more technical university where economics and commerce now dominate the curriculum. The new emphasis on these disciplines signifies the recognition that the African university must produce graduates with skills to improve a nation's economic development.

### **Challenges and Opportunities for the Future**

Primary and secondary school access in sub-Saharan Africa has been expanded following independence, providing Africa with a new generation of individuals ready to study at the university level. Unfortunately, the growth and financing of universities does not seem to have expanded at the same rate as primary and secondary facilities. Today's African professors must cope with institutions that are overcrowded and underfunded. University graduates find themselves graduating into an economy that is not ready to absorb all of them. Many students take jobs in the informal sector to cope. The shift from preparing students to become academic elites to now becoming engineers of commerce and development is becoming a trend, but the use of the university as a tool of national development will be a long process until universities are better funded and African economies have the opportunity to employ university graduates.

Another interesting development is the relationship between the university and the government. Finding ways for universities and governments to work together remains a challenge. Funding needs to be consistent. There needs to be a consensus for the university's



mission. Both Ouko and Raheem talked about the numerous clashes among students wanting better learning conditions, faculty wanting better salaries, and a government ill equipped to provide these necessities. A sense of fatalism pervaded their responses as they recognized that redressing these issues will be a lengthy, complex process. These conflicts are compounded by the fact that criticism of both government inaction and failure to develop the university has resulted in government interference in African higher education—from having governments select university personnel who won't be critical of the government to outright shutting down universities to silence dissent. Cooperation between the university and the government remains both an opportunity and a challenge.

Since large public African universities are financed by the state, the challenge for NEPAD is to find a way to support and develop the university in the face of difficult economic times. Professors and students have an opportunity to improve their lives and their country's development, but this requires a mutually beneficial relationship between higher education and governance.

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<sup>i</sup> See NEPAD web site: <http://www.nepad.org>

<sup>ii</sup> Ajayi et al, *The African Experience with Higher Education*

<sup>iii</sup> Lulat , *A History of African Higher Education from Antiquity to the Present*, 223

<sup>iv</sup> Magatte, *An Overview of Trends and Challenges of Higher Education in Africa* 20

<sup>v</sup> Goma, *The Role of Higher Education in the Education Sector*, 81

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