Editorial

Africa: Things Fall Apart?

Higher Education Policy (2003) **16**, 255–258. doi:10.1057/palgrave.hep.8300028

Although it has by no means attained the status of a habit, examining developments in the various systems of higher education of sub Saharan Africa in terms of crisis has a long, if not always optimistic, history. Nevertheless, one may detect a certain element of paradox in the progress that the provision of higher learning has made there. If one considers that five decades ago, with the exception of South Africa — then under a regime best forgotten — how few were the number of universities across the Continent, one can only be astounded at what has been accomplished in the intervening period. Agreed, experts will note, for instance, that in general mass higher education remains a goal yet to be achieved and that spectacular demographic growth variously compounded by dwindling resources, by the burden of debt, have meant that this desirable goal still lies well beyond the capacities of many African governments to deliver to society.

That higher education in Africa is often analysed in terms of crisis, is not utterly justified. In its original meaning that, hopefully some retain, a crisis is that turn of events when a solution, choice or action — usually painful for some — cannot be avoided. A crisis means decision time, the place and moment when the buck can no longer be passed. Whether the decision taken is the correct one, of course, history, the policy buff and occasionally, the voter will be called upon to express an opinion. However, what is one to conclude from a succession of crises?

Oscar Wilde and Government Failure

To parody the famous line from Oscar Wilde's comedy, *The Importance of Being Earnest*: 'to be faced with one crisis, is a tragedy. To be faced with two or more, appears suspiciously like negligence.' In the terminology loaded with euphemism that litters the fields of Economics, Political Science and Public Administration, two crises appear suspiciously like 'government failure' and if the government has failed to prevent crises following one upon the other, it is not unreasonable to look to civil society to find ways of contributing the resources that governments for one reason or another, have been unable to raise, to allocate or to prevent from being turned aside. Thus, we see increasing reliance on the development of higher education in sub-Saharan Africa upon

various measures of privatization — either through private individuals, corporate groups or foundations setting up new universities or by permitting universities to charge economic rates for what was previously provided as part of the student experience — tuition fees being one, accommodation fees being another.

Still, whether they emerge in demands for expanded institutional provision, content of courses inadapted to national circumstance and mirroring an earlier colonial interpretation of them, the continuous and insatiable demand for places and the expectations that the student experience generates, crises in Africa's higher education systems appear unending. So strange a situation deserves some explanation for its persistence. The debilitating effect of repeated crises is, not surprisingly, that the extraordinary becomes the norm. It is usual to present Africa's universities as in crisis because that is — alas — the state of where things are. However, there is another side to development interpreted as crisis recurrent that is the inability to represent the university in any other condition than crisis. There is, however, another possibility and it has to do with the pace of change on the one hand and notions that relate to the ability of systems to keep up with it on the other.

Even if we take an ethnocentric view on the matter and believe that the speed with which a system of higher education can adapt to external change should at least be as rapid as our own, we are obliged to recognize one very essential truth. When placed against the effectively millennial development of universities in — say Europe — higher education in Africa has been astoundingly rapid. To be sure, as Saint and his coauthors show in the case of Nigeria, one of Africa's resource-rich lands, the recent years have seen an equally marked backsliding in terms of academia output. That it should happen at all is disastrous. However, in a perverse way, it also underlines the very substantial nature of what has been achieved already.

The Unbearable Cost of Cost-Bearing

The spread of cost-bearing policies — the first step towards that other goal which accompanies the introduction of privatization — namely, positive revenue generation — provides a Leitmotif across many of the articles in this issue of *Higher Education Policy*. Saint and his colleagues focus on Africa's largest nation, Nigeria. They examine the drive of national policy and its repercussions at the institutional level. Evacuated from its social and political context, the burden of the reforms that the Nigerian government has engaged upon has a familiar ring, both in the measures themselves and, ultimately, in the strategy they are intended to uphold. Greater differentiation between institutions, changes to the system of governance, the setting in place of an

active policy for quality assurance are all familiar themes that this journal has explored over the years, sometimes in one setting, sometimes in another.

Institutional Self-Determination

Certainly, greater institutional self-determination is seen as vital if higher education is to assume once more that purpose which justified previous policies and earlier investments, namely, to contribute to economic growth. In this connection, one may make two points. That the new policies Saint and his colleagues analyse have as their purpose to return higher education as a net contributor of the nation's economic fortunes is also a tacit admission that previous ones did not attain this end. The second point is that the strategy emerging in both Nigeria and South Africa is clearly engaged in taking on an additional dimension in the quest to restore economic advance. This new dimension is research capacity as a direct lever upon raising the so-called innovative capacity of both nations.

Generating Research Capacity

Ogude and his colleagues take us into greater detail about the way research capacity may be extended from its historic base in the university and set to take root in the nonuniversity sector. Their examination of how South Africa's Technikons — broadly speaking a functional equivalent to the one-time British Polytechnics, the French University Institutes of Technology — while ostensibly an evaluation of this policy, in effect, provide us with an interesting insight into the tensions this initiative generated as much within the Technikons as between the Technikons and the university sector.

Fortunes, Absent or Vanished or to be Tapped

Insider views are always valuable, not least because they bring a ring of authenticity and sometimes even passion to debate, qualities that outside observers rightly shy away from. Osinubi paints a dramatic account of the fortunes — or to be more precise, their absence — of higher education in Nigeria. His presentation can, with a certain stretch of the imagination, perhaps be seen as a higher education counterpart of Chinua Achebe's classic novel about social change in Nigeria 40 years ago, 'Things Fall Apart.' Yet, despite the vehemence, the suggestions that Osinubi outlines as remedies to the collapse he believes to be imminent, are not greatly different from those

advanced by Saint and his colleagues — namely the charging of tuition fees and the injection of money from nongovernment sources.

Oketch also examines the issue of ‘resourcing’ higher education and while he also concentrates on concrete developments that follow from policies of privatization, institutional diversity and financial diversification, he draws his examples from Kenya. Here also, the central questions are how far private higher education can meet increased demand and how may quality be maintained? One of the more powerful arguments that have been made in favour of full cost fees is that the rise in expense is the beginning of wisdom. Students — or their parents — who have to bear the full expense of higher education, so it is suggested, will not only be more careful about what they study but they will also be more demanding of how it is taught. Students are then a major channel through which the demands of the market place penetrate to the lecture theatre. In theory, at least, raising fees may be justified by the greater sensitivity to the market of what it taught and greater responsibility exercised by those who learn.

Opportunities Wasted

However, while cost may have an indirect influence on efficiency, dropping out has an impact both direct and immediate. Sall’s article on the cost that premature leaving inflicts on an institution is of more than passing interest, not least because it focuses on an institutional case study from Francophone Africa.

Finally, this issue contains two very substantial articles in the Forum Section. The first, by Majid Al Haj, examines the limited opportunities that higher education provides for the Arabs in Israel. The second, by Maria Menon, evaluates what was once one of the more powerful techniques for resource allocation — Rate of Return analysis.

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