



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF ACADEMIC RESEARCH IN PROGRESSIVE EDUCATION & DEVELOPMENT



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ISSN: 2226-6348

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To Link this Article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARPED/v1-i2/10961>

DOI: 10.6007/IJARPED/v1-i2/10961

Received: 10 April 2012, Revised: 13 May 2012, Accepted: 25 May 2012

Published Online: 18 June 2012

In-Text Citation: (Boit & Kipkoech, 2012)

To Cite this Article: Boit, J. M., & Kipkoech, L. C. (2012). Liberalization of Higher Education in Kenya: Challenges and Prospects. *International Journal of Academic Research in Progressive Education and Development*, 1(2), 44–53.

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Vol. 1(2) 2012, Pg. 44 - 53

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ISSN: 2226-6348

Liberalization of Higher Education in Kenya: Challenges and Prospects

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Abstract

Higher Education is the ultimate aim of every parent who has a child in secondary school today in Kenya. The social demand for this level of education appears to be insatiable. Efforts by the government to quantitatively expand higher education institutions and encourage private sector participation in provision of higher education in this country have failed to create the capacity to absorb all candidates who qualify. Institutions of higher learning have, in the last three decades, witnessed unprecedented growth unparalleled anywhere in the East Africa Region. The number of public universities increased significantly in the 1980s. In 1980 there was only one University but by 2010 Universities had increased to seven and fourteen University Colleges with a corresponding increase in student numbers. Private universities similarly experienced phenomenal growth from two in the early 1980s to over 20 by 2010. However, higher education is considered biased against certain socio-economic groups in society. The wells to do are always a step ahead of the poor and therefore, tend to disproportionately benefit from any quantitative expansion in higher education. There is need therefore, to explore other non-conventional, non-traditional approaches that will increase equity and access to higher education and contribute towards the realization of education for all those who qualify - a barrier free education. Open and Distance Education (OPDE) is such an option among others. This paper examines the challenges of traditional university set up to equalize opportunities for access to university education through quantitative expansion and explores the opportunities offered by other options of higher education provision including OPDE in an effort to make higher education available to all.

Keywords: Access, Challenges, Education, Expansion, Equity, Higher, Liberalization

Introduction

Higher education institutions play a distinctive role in the social and economic life of a country. This fundamental role is not only reflected in government policy documents (GOK, 1976; GOK, 1981) but also on the levels of budgetary allocations these institutions continue to receive. Higher education contributes to the national development of Kenya in four fundamental ways. Firstly, it contributes to the nation's human capital resource development by training highly qualified professional, technical and managerial personnel. These cadres of professional and technical personnel are to be found in a wide range of leadership positions within and outside the public sector and include politicians, technocrats, scientists, technologists, teachers, scholars, managers and administrators. Secondly, through research and post-graduate training higher education creates, generates, adapts and disseminates new knowledge, discoveries, inventions and innovation that are needed for national development. Thirdly, it serves as a repository of knowledge, information and expertise. It also provides a forum for academic debate, discourse and critical analysis of social, political and economic issues. Fourthly, higher education enhances social justice and fosters national unity and identity (Mason, 1991; Okwach, 1997).

University Expansion

The first Phase

The period between 1956-1984 was an era of planned and controlled expansion. During this period one institution, the University of Nairobi, dominated the higher education scene. This is the period when the government pursued a policy of "Africanising" the civil service by investing in the training of high-level skilled manpower. University education was of critical importance in this process. The fundamental role of the university during this period was seen as the production of educated elite to take up new jobs in the civil service including those that were being left by departing expatriate staff following Kenya's independence in 1963. High-level manpower was also required by industry and commerce for economic growth and development. This was largely influenced by the human capital theory. The production of high-level professional personnel for commerce, industry and the civil service was, therefore, considered the principal role of the university. The National Committee on Educational objectives and Policies (1976) makes the following observation about what they saw as the role of the university:

"The university exists in order to develop manpower who have the motivation, the skills and knowledge to serve the nation." (GOK, 1976, p. 83)

The Committee further observed:

"The relatively rapid development of the country and the departure of foreign personnel during the first decade of independence demanded a rapid increase in the number of university places. The University of Nairobi has continually responded to this demand which has been aimed at meeting the unending requirements of modern and increasingly technological society for higher knowledge and skilled manpower."(GOK, 1976, p. 84)

The committee strongly felt that university education should be carefully planned and its development synchronized with the process of national planning and development in order to ensure that sufficient resources were made available by government to enable the university to effectively fulfill these national responsibilities. The Committee thus noted:

“In order to achieve the complex and expensive goals and functions of university education, it is, therefore, essential to plan all the necessary development of facilities and resources well in advance.”(GOK, 1976 p.85)

The second phase

The second phase in university development took place in the period between 1985 and 1990. This is a period when there was unparalleled growth in public university education. In a span of five years (between 1985 and 1990) two universities and two constituent colleges, were established. Student enrolment consequently rose to levels far in excess of numbers projected in the university expansion plans in the early 1980s (World Bank, 1991). This growth was largely unplanned.

The second phase of university expansion took place during a critical and challenging period in the evolution of the university system in Kenya. In early 1986, for example, the universities were closed following a student strike and were not reopened until 1987. Consequently there were no university admissions in the intervening period. When the universities reopened in 1987 they were confronted by unprecedented admission problems. There were two cohorts of KCSE candidates to be admitted. Mounting public pressure over the long period of closure forced the university administration to “bite off more than they could chew” in the now famous strategy of “double-intake”. Two groups of university applicants, the 1986 and the 1987 cohorts, were admitted together in 1987 bringing a virtual explosion in admission numbers; from 3,500 students in 1986 to 8,500 students in 1987. In 1990, another “double-intake” occurred following the admission of candidates from both the old 7-4-3-2 system of education and the new 8-4-4 system (World Bank, 1991, GOK, 1994). Altogether the universities admitted 21,450 students bringing total enrolment in the public universities to 41,000 students comprising of 39,000 undergraduates and 2,000 postgraduates. Although the strategy of “double-intake” was initially considered to be a temporary solution to a problem in hand, it remains to date a problem that universities have had to live with. This tactful approach to solving looming admission problems was reported by one of Kenya’s leading monthly magazines thus:

“But more than solving the problem, the double intake tactfully aimed at killing two birds with one stone since measures had to be taken to avoid a possible student population boom at the campuses when the current system of education gives way to the newly adopted 8-4-4 system which will result in two lots of students seeking university admission in 1990.”(Financial Review, October 1987, p. 12)

The public universities did not seem to be adequately prepared to handle such a large number of students within the existing infrastructure. Construction of additional physical facilities that had begun at the time of the “double-intake” in 1987 was still going on in some universities while it had stalled in others due to financial difficulties. It was imperative, therefore, that government had to provide additional physical facilities to enable the universities to cope with the large number of students already on their doorsteps. The victims of the accommodation and teaching space crisis in the public universities were the middle-level colleges. The government phased out some of the middle-level personnel training institutions and turned over their facilities to the universities. This decision by the government legitimized the view of the Working Party on Education and Manpower for the Next Decade and Beyond (1988), under the chairmanship of Mr. Kamunge, when they observed:

“In addition, it is the view of the Working Party that future expansion of university education can be done through the utilization of training and research institutions being allowed to develop as university institutions. Some of them have the facilities, equipment and personnel capable of offering high quality university education, training and research.”(GOK, 1988, p. 70)

Moi University took over the former Moi Science Teachers Training College, Siriba Diploma Teachers College and Government Training Institute, Maseno while Egerton University acquired the former Laikipia Teachers Training College. Kenyatta University temporarily made use of facilities at Kasarani International Sports Complex for student accommodation and lectures. The University of Nairobi took over physical facilities belonging to a number of government institutions within the city of Nairobi amongst them the Government Secretarial College at Parklands, the Kenya Institute of Administration at Lower Kabete and the Institute of Adult Education at Kikuyu.

Even with these additional facilities the universities were unable to accommodate all the students at once. There was also the complexity of teaching two groups of students with different syllabuses and completion dates. One group was on a three-year programme - the “A” level group; while the other was on a four-year period programme - the 8-4-4 group. The “A” level groups were particularly large and could not fit into any existing lecture rooms. At Moi University, for example, the Bachelor of Education programme had, in the 1990/1991 academic year, over 1,700 first year undergraduate students.

Teaching was staggered over three semesters instead of the usual two (a semester is a period of study consisting of sixteen weeks). Consequently, semesters for the two groups of students, the “A level” and the “8-4-4”, were run concurrently. The end of one semester was often the beginning of another sometimes with as much as a weekend break in between. Staggering of semesters delayed completion dates of programmes for as much as a year. Consequently, admission of first year students was also similarly delayed and the effects are still felt to date.

The second double-intake admission of 1990, however, exacerbated the problem of staff shortage forcing public universities to recruit staff with lower academic qualifications. Recruitment of personnel with masters degrees directly from universities' graduate programmes, primary school teacher training colleges, middle level personnel training institutions such as polytechnics and government training institutes and research institutions began in haste. The universities were still unable to fill all the vacant positions from local recruitment especially in disciplines such as science, medicine and technology. The universities and the government had to look beyond the national borders in search of lecturers. Consequently, a recruitment team consisting of representatives from the public universities and the government was hastily contrived and dispatched on a recruitment mission overseas, mainly to Europe and North America in search of lecturers. This was a crisis that had to be addressed with urgency. Clearly, the crisis was becoming a public concern as indicated by a remark in the Weekly Review (1991):

"Indeed, there was a major fear that a crisis was in the making as far as the student-teacher ratio was concerned and the universities hurriedly dispatched a team of officials led by Prof. S. O. Wandinga to Europe and North America in search of lecturers. Although the mission was not made public, it was easy to see why the matter was causing so much concern."(The Weekly Review, 1991 p.8)

As a stopgap measure, the public universities recruited part-time lecturers from other public as well as private sector institutions such as polytechnics, private universities, and research institutions as well as from each other. Part-timing appears to be getting entrenched with the risk of becoming a permanent feature of the public university education system. In these times of economic stringencies public universities are using part-time lecturers as a short-term cost-saving measure since they do not draw benefits of regular staff such as medical allowance, house allowance, or pension. However, the effect of part-timing is the impact it is likely to have on the quality of university education in terms of teaching and research.

The third phase

The third phase (1991-) of university development began in 1991 when the government founded the University of Nairobi and Kenyatta University College. It also introduced a number of policy measures to stabilize, rationalize and control university development. One of the policy initiatives was the introduction, in 1991, of cost-sharing as a measure of cost-recovery in all public universities. The universities were also, for the first time, required to formulate ten year development plans to guide their physical, academic and staff development programmes. In addition, they had to justify and rationalize their establishments, academic programmes and budgets.

Challenges of Quantitative Expansion

Although the quantitative growth of Kenyan university systems has been very impressive, beyond what was envisaged in the 1960s, they have, however, been confronted with a plethora of problems. Nevertheless, higher education expansion has been responsible for benefits that

include political and social stability, economies of scale, equity, and increased access of students of rural origins among others (Psacharopoulos and Woodhall, 1985; McMahon, 1987). As already noted, expansion of higher education has occurred in a period of diminishing budgetary resources caused by difficult macro-economic conditions. These conditions do not seem to be getting any better. The scenario of constraint resource environment combined with rapid increase in student enrolment has had a number of adverse effects on higher education. These include: a) increased public expenditure b) reduction in per student expenditure; c) shortage of academic staff; d) shortage of funds; e) falling academic standards; and d) misallocation of scarce resources

Increased Public Expenditure on Higher Education

One of the major consequences of the rapid expansion in student enrolment has been the corresponding growth in public expenditure on education. In 1963, for example, education accounted for 15 per cent of total recurrent expenditure, 30 per cent in 1980 and had risen to 36 per cent by 1989/90 (GOK 1988; GOK, 1994). The rapid university expansion has inevitably led to increased public expenditure in higher education not only in absolute terms, that is, as a percentage of national budget on education but also as a percentage of Gross Domestic Product (GDP). In 1984/85 financial year, for example, education accounted for 29.45 per cent of the national recurrent budget and 3.93 per cent of the capital development budget. By 1990/91 financial year this had risen to 40.55 per cent and 9.57 per cent respectively. Recurrent expenditure had similarly increased. By 1990/91 higher education accounted for 19 per cent of total expenditure up from 11 per cent in 1980/81 (MOF, 1996). A large part of this expenditure comprised allocation to the student loan scheme.

Shortage of Academic Staff

The higher education crisis has resulted in a shortage of academic staff particularly of appropriately qualified persons (PhD holders) for recruitment into teaching positions. Consequently, universities have had to recruit staff from their postgraduate (M.Phil.) programmes. This practice can be risky since it can cause serious 'in-breeding' problems as the universities begin to 'feed upon themselves'. The real danger of 'in-breeding' lies in the likelihood of a vicious cycle of mediocrity being created particularly when the standard of postgraduate education is low. The multiplier effect of mediocrity can have lasting consequences of untold proportions on the quality of university education with the ripple effects being felt throughout the whole economy. This indeed was the experience of India in the wake of the rapid expansion of their higher education system in the 1970s and 1980s (Singh, 1988; Jayaram, 1991). Recruitment of a large number of staff with masters degree level qualifications requiring further training for higher degrees (Ph.D.) also has cost implications. The universities are forced to expend their scarce resources to upgrade these staff effectively turning themselves into "staff-training establishments".

Shortage of Funds

With the massive increases in enrolments without corresponding allocation of funds universities can neither expand their facilities in order to support the growing number of students nor

maintain existing ones. The result has been decaying infrastructure and buildings that have stalled at different stages of construction seen in our public universities today. The consequences are universities that are overcrowded with inadequate teaching space, laboratory facilities, library resources, accommodation space and scientific equipment. The extent of deterioration of resources is illustrated by a recent survey of 31 sub-Saharan African countries in which it was found that the average number of books per university student had gone down in the last decade from 49 to 7 (World Bank, 1992; Etuk, 1996). Moi University, which was designed to accommodate 6000 students in 1995 had over 8,000 students and in 2005 had exceeded 12000 students with 1990 facilities (Moi University Academic Plan, 1987).

Equity and Equality of Opportunity Issues

Recent World Bank studies from the very few countries that collect socio-economic data on the origin of students enrolled in higher education indicate that despite equity reasons for expanding higher education more prosperous families are still disproportionately represented in higher education. In Latin America, for example, 45 per cent of higher education enrolments were found to come from white-collar employees who make up only 15 per cent of the population. In Francophone Africa, while white-collar job employees account for 6 per cent of the total labour force, they claimed 40 per cent of tertiary enrolment. Similar trends were also observed in Asia and the Middle East where professionals representing only 10 per cent of the population in each of the regions accounted for 43 per cent and 47 per cent of tertiary enrolment respectively (World Bank, 1992; Salmi, 1991).

Despite increases in public resources devoted to education as indicated above there is a growing concern for disparities in access to higher education (MOF, 1996). The challenge and dilemma facing Kenya, in the light of resource constraint, is how to achieve social and educational objectives of equity, equality of educational opportunity in higher education.

Opportunities

Demand for higher education in Kenya is far from being met. About 10,000 students are admittedly annually to public Universities and approximately 2,000 to the Private Universities. This figure is about eight percent of students who sit for Kenya Secondary School Examinations (KCSE). In the developed countries over 40% of the young people of University going-age are in Universities. In order to expand opportunities for all that qualify to join higher education the following options need to be explored and enhanced to complement government efforts in the provision of higher education and to alleviate financial pressures on public expenditure for higher education.

Open and Distance Learning

The social and individual demand for higher education in Kenya is enormous and cannot be satisfied through the traditional university set-ups. There are also intolerable inequalities in access to higher education due to geographical reasons, gender reasons, relevance reasons, age reasons, occupational reasons, and socio-economic reasons amongst others. Indications are that 70 % of those who qualify annually with a mean grade of c+ in Kenya Certificate of secondary

Education (KCSE) are unable to access university education and about 45% of students who complete primary school education are admitted to secondary schools. A continued reliance on quantitative expansion of conventional residential universities to address issues of equity and access is a zero-sum game. Equity and access to higher education can never be achieved in the foreseeable future if of necessity distance education strategies through use of contemporary technology communication are not adopted. Open and Distance learning offers the hope of making quality education available to all at low cost since they can be cost effective. The potential of this mode of delivering education has been emphasized in almost all Government Policy Reports and Plans beginning with the Ominde Report of 1964/65, The National Development Plans of 1966 and 1976; the Gachathi Report on Educational Objectives and Policies of 1976; The Mackay Report of 1981; The Kamunge Report of 1988, The master Plan on Education and Training 1998 to 2000 and the Davy Koech Report of 1999. Although Open learning and Distance Education initiatives have been introduced in some universities in Kenya they are however on a limited scale. There is need for the government to develop a comprehensive National policy on Open Learning and Distance Education that will give providers and stakeholders direction and focus as well to facilitate coordination of effort.

Open Learning and Distance Education is becoming an indispensable part of mainstream education in both developing and developed countries. It provides opportunity for developing countries like Kenya to achieve its educational goals. Today India is the World leader in Open learning and Distance Education. About 20% of students in Indian higher education are in National and State Open University. The Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) alone has one million students or 10% of the total students in open Universities in India. Other countries with Open University systems include UK, Korea, Indonesia, Canada Tanzania, and Rwanda amongst others.

Conclusion

As demonstrated in this paper, proportionately fewer children from less privileged backgrounds tend to get promoted into the higher education system. This has the effect of increasing inequality in the distribution of places at the higher education level and disproportionately benefiting children from the more privileged background. Consequently intergenerational mobility gains achieved in a democratized primary and secondary school systems are neutralized and even reversed at the higher education levels. The lessons of experience as illustrated above tell us that quantitative expansion of conventional public higher education systems alone is not a viable option in addressing equity and equality of opportunities concerns. Open and Distance learning initiative appears to be the direction that offers the hope of making quality education available to all at low cost. The potential of this mode of delivering education in the efforts to democratize higher education cannot therefore be underscored.

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