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Higher Education as an Instrument of Social Integration in Tanzania: challenges and prospects

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ABSTRACT In developing countries, higher education is a powerful instrument for social mobility and economic prosperity. An in-depth study of the relationship between higher education and certain equity issues has revealed that in Ghana and Tanzania there is inadequate effort to widen higher education participation to include traditionally disadvantaged groups. The article argues that provided they have strong and visionary leadership, universities can spearhead efforts to make higher education accessible to such disadvantaged groups through the judicious use of their admissions and selection criteria, and the mounting of special make-up and support programmes.

Introduction

In sub-Saharan Africa, higher education (HE) institutions emerged and gained prominence mainly in the 1950s and 1960s at the peak of the movement for political independence. In their book, *The African Experience with Higher Education*, Ajayi et al (1996) tried to capture and highlight some of the key issues that HE had to grapple with as it was trying to take shape and gain a respectable presence in sub-Saharan Africa. A good number of these issues revolve around the questions of relevance of curricula, high unit costs and the ivory tower mentality displayed by some HE participants. Similar concerns had earlier been voiced by Julius Nyerere, first Chancellor of the University of Dar es Salaam, in one of his addresses to the university, when he said:

> We do not build skyscrapers here (*at the University Hill*) so that a few very fortunate individuals can develop their own minds and then live in comfort ... We tax the people to build these places only so that young men and women may become efficient servants to them. There is no other justification for this heavy call being made on poor peasants. (Nyerere, 1968, p.184)

Although Nyerere's concerns are still valid and relevant even today, it should be appreciated that with the continued growth of HE in Africa, new challenges were bound to emerge. Akilagpa Sawyerr (2004), a former Secretary General of the Association of African Universities, confirms this in his article entitled 'Challenges Facing African Universities'. In this article, Sawyerr draws particular attention to the question of who gets university education and why. Over the years, interest in the socio-economic profile of HE participants has been growing both within and outside universities. The interest seems to stem from an increased public understanding and appreciation of the notion of social justice and the need for equitable sharing of the benefits of development. Widening participation, which is the theme of this special issue, epitomises this interest.

The report 'Widening Participation in Higher Education in Ghana and Tanzania: developing an equity scorecard' (WPHEGT), by Morley et al (2010), is an outcome of an in-depth empirical study of the complex relationship between HE and equity issues in two developing countries – namely, Ghana and Tanzania. The study is an attempt to provide living testimony for the need to make HE more socially inclusive. It is based on interviews with policy makers at national level and

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with staff and students at institutional level. The study first looks at existing structures and practices in the HE system at national and institutional levels in order to expose elements in it that hinder wider participation. It then proposes possible measures to be taken to promote wider participation and prevent social exclusion. My task in this article is to highlight some salient features of the study and point to theoretical and practical issues relating to the study's findings or recommendations with respect to Tanzania. My comments draw on my experience in HE in a range of roles: as former Head of Department, Dean of Faculty, Chief Administrative Officer of the University of Dar es Salaam and Professor of Linguistics. My involvement in this research project began at its inception, and I have been involved in facilitating its progress and ultimately engaging in the debate of its findings. In what follows, I first set out some aspects of the development context in which HE operates, before going on to comment on the study findings and recommendations. In particular, I address: admissions criteria, systematic monitoring, resources, quality assurance, private HE and student perceptions.

A Holistic View of Development: a framework for analysing widening participation in higher education in Tanzania

Development is about positive change. The change may be sporadic or a result of programmed intervention. Whether sporadic or programmed, the effect of change on human behaviour is never uniform. The differential effect of change is at the root of equity concerns. Often the differential effects are not accidental but are the result of systematic and persistent discriminatory structures, processes and practices that may exist in a particular society. It is these subtle discriminatory structures and practices that equity is determined to address.

One area in which equity concerns have had a tremendous impact is in the way development is defined and measured today. Human development has long been measured and defined in terms of economic growth alone. Now, however, even the World Bank (2006) acknowledges that development is a much more holistic concept – it also embraces equity issues. The current approach therefore is to measure a country's achievement by looking at three basic aspects of life. These are *health*, as measured by life expectancy at birth; *knowledge*, as measured by a combination of adult literacy rate and combined primary, secondary and tertiary gross enrolment ratio; and a *decent standard of living*, as measured by the gross domestic product (GDP; income) per capita. Therefore, knowledge and health are indicators of development too. It makes little sense for a country to boast of a high GDP when there are large pockets of its citizens living in abject poverty. So long as ignorance and disease are rampant, the Human Development Index of such a country will be low, despite its high GDP.

Globally, HE institutions have played a significant role in raising awareness of the need to show concern for the fate of all members of society who might be excluded from the development processes. One of the functions of a university is to be 'an agent of social justice and mobility' (Boulton & Lucas, 2008, p. 4). In tackling the issue of widening access, two principal ways have often been used by HE institutions in many parts of the world. One approach is to provide financial aid to students from families of low economic status. The second approach is to exploit admissions policies and selection criteria – that is, to be sensitive to a student's socio-economic background. This is sometimes referred to as affirmative action. Although affirmative action programmes are rather contentious, even from the legal point of view, they seem to work well in contexts where they are used to put an end to legislated inequalities. These programmes are often justified on the basis of one or more of the following reasons: *redress* for a past injury affecting a particular group negatively; *compensation* for ongoing disadvantages affecting a particular group; or *increased* diversity in a learning environment. As agents of social justice (Boulton & Lucas, 2008), public universities should not hesitate to use their legitimate power to adopt policies and practices that can bring about meaningful and desirable change in society.

The agenda of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs; United Nations Development Programme, 2009) is also in many ways a global response to equity issues. One of the purposes of the MDGs is to tackle ignorance and disease in order to improve the Human Development Index of different countries. It is therefore a matter of concern to find in the WPHEGT report the finding that the MDGs do not feature significantly in the curricula of the selected universities. Worse still,

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many staff members are reported to be either ignorant of or unconcerned about the MDGs, although many did subscribe to their substantive content. Nevertheless, HE institutions are supposed to be at the forefront in supporting any worldwide initiatives focusing on the alleviation of poverty, and so it is not unreasonable to expect from them a greater degree of awareness.

Even the World Bank, traditionally concerned only with economic matters, has consistently advocated the need to pay attention to equity matters in its advice on education to developing countries. In one of its recent publications, the World Bank (2006) suggests that equity advocacy in tertiary education should entail three things: (1) ensuring equality of opportunity; (2) devising cost-sharing arrangements which do not harm equity of access; and (3) improving the participation of the least represented groups. The World Bank therefore advises governments to take the following measures in order to address equity in HE:

- assess the extent and origin of equity issues;
- strengthen the integration of planning between secondary and tertiary education systems;
- consider positive discrimination policies for particular groups whose prior educational disadvantage is well identified; and
- provide incentives to HE institutions to widen participation and provide extra support for students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

It might be worth pointing out here that equity concerns are not confined to the area of education. There are also equity concerns relating to access to land or other resources that can result in systematic social exclusion to the detriment of particular groups. Kaijage & Tibaijuka (1996) conducted a commendable study on poverty and social exclusion in Tanzania. Their study, like the WPHEGT study, provides food for thought. There is a good deal of similarity between the two studies in terms of objectives and methodologies, and even their conceptual framework. According to Kaijage & Tibaijuka, social exclusion consists of

> the set of social arrangements which create conditions under which some social groups are disempowered in ways which limit, or even hinder, their access to economic and cultural resources so that their economic well-being is profoundly impaired and their scopes of self-realization as human beings and members of society are decisively curtailed. (Kaijage & Tibaijuka, 1996, p. 188)

Education – and HE in particular – is both an economic and cultural resource. It is therefore an area that can easily fall prey to social exclusion.

Context: current access routes to higher education in Tanzania

Currently, there are three ways in which one can gain admission to HE institutions in Tanzania:

1. *Direct entry*. This route is based on A (Advanced) level performance. It is the most reliable and trusted route since it is the logical culmination point of the educational pipeline. Good HE systems are normally built on the foundation of quality schooling.
2. *Equivalent qualifications*. This route is based on qualifications other than A level performance. These qualifications are usually additional learning certification obtained after O (Ordinary) level that are deemed to be a sufficient substitute for A level learning. The equivalence is usually expressed in terms of diplomas or certificates of a particular level and category approved by the Senate of a particular institution. There is a great deal of variation between institutions and between programmes on this matter. In most cases, this route caters for those who did not perform well enough to merit direct entry or those whose formal schooling took a different path.
3. *Mature Age Scheme*. This route is based on passing a special examination called the Mature Age Examination. It caters for the over 25s who did not get a chance to go to A level. This diagnostic examination is not pan-territorial but institution-specific. The purpose of this scheme is explained in the University of Dar es Salaam's prospectuses as follows:

> In order to give opportunity to exceptionally well qualified Tanzanian candidates who wish to study for a first degree of the UDSM [University of Dar es Salaam] but do not possess qualifications which satisfy Direct Entry Requirements, the University offers an alternative

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> method of entry by the Mature Age Scheme for persons who satisfy certain conditions.
> (University of Dar es Salaam, 2007, p. 15)

It is, however, well known that with respect to equity issues, each of these routes has limitations. There are, indeed, capable people in the broader society who, through no fault of their own, will still find it difficult to access HE through any of these routes. Thus:

1. The direct entry route, which is considered to be the most fair, is not perfectly fair since at primary school level a significant number of girls and children of low-income families tend to drop out of school. The reason is that either they find the school environment hostile (feeling deprived relative to others) or they do not get sufficient support/encouragement from home. The same phenomenon occurs at secondary school level, albeit on a smaller scale. At all stages of the educational pipeline, it is usually children from poor families who get weeded out. It might also be worth pointing out here that the A level examination, which is pan-territorial, is blind to gender, socio-economic status and school environment! Students with different levels of preparedness are subjected to the same examination.
2. The equivalent qualifications route is likewise biased in favour of those who can afford to pursue additional studies leading to qualifications that are considered equivalent to A level. Children from low-income families are unlikely to feature strongly in this category of university entrants since their income acts as a barrier to pursuing additional studies.
3. The Mature Age Scheme is considered by many to be the most difficult route. Only a tiny fraction of those who attempt this examination get selected. Furthermore, after the age of 25, many potential candidates – especially women – get entangled in family responsibilities. It might be worth pointing out here, too, that children from low- income families also tend to marry and assume family responsibilities early.

The WPHEGT Project

As stated earlier, the WPHEGT project (Morley et al, 2010) is basically an in-depth study of the complex relationship between HE and certain equity issues. It attempts to explore the impact of national-level policy initiatives and interventions aimed at supporting or promoting equity issues. At the institutional level, it probes into structures, practices and processes that directly or indirectly respond to equity concerns. Interview is the main tool used to gather information. The most interesting information gathered is about the perceptions of individual students who had actually experienced some form of inequitable treatment in their educational careers. For practical purposes, the study confined itself to four programmes at each of the four selected institutions (a public and a private university in each country).

At the public institution in Tanzania, these programmes were: the Bachelor of Commerce, Bachelor of Law, Bachelor of Science in Engineering and Bachelor of Science with Education. From the private institution, the following programmes were selected: the Bachelor of Law, Bachelor of Business Administration, Bachelor of Medicine and Bachelor of Educational Mathematics. It is commendable that engineering and medicine have been included in the study programmes since these are disciplines which disadvantaged groups find it particularly difficult to enrol in or perform well in because they often feel ill-prepared for them. The study focused on three aspects of the academic process: admissions and retention, as well as completion and achievement rates. Furthermore, the study selected the following 'structures of inequality': gender, socio-economic status and age.

Comments on the Study Findings and Recommendations

The study has exposed a number of factors concerning the complex relationship that exists between HE and selected equity issues. The report has also made recommendations for improving the situation. It is not possible to comment on all the issues raised either in the findings or in the recommendations. I have therefore taken the liberty to comment briefly on just six issues, which I consider to be particularly challenging.

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Admissions Criteria

Because of the limit of space and other resources, not every student who qualifies can find a place in a university. The number of students who are enrolled in each university is determined by the institution's capacity. The selection begins with the student with the highest grade and moves downward until the capacity is saturated. Therefore, the lowest admission grade or cut-off point will vary from year to year. This cut-off point may be far above the minimum admission grade. Often, therefore, students who qualify in terms of grade are not selected just because the institution has exhausted its capacity. The proposal to adopt an affirmative action approach in order to bring in disadvantaged students who fall below the cut-off point but meet the minimum qualification for entry is a very good strategy. However, there is a downside to it. It may cause stigmatisation. Using different cut-off points for different categories of students has been done in many places, particularly with respect to gender. If stigmatisation does occur, ways should be found to deal with its possible negative effect on students so affected.

Systematic Monitoring

It is true that many universities are poor at record-keeping and record management. It is virtually impossible to carry out systematic monitoring of student progression without reliable records. The monitoring required for purposes of widening participation effectively is of two types. One is the monitoring of the efficiency and effectiveness of current admissions criteria. A periodic review of these criteria is necessary in order to satisfy oneself that those admitted are performing according to expectations. The exercise might help to initiate discussion as to whether greater flexibility could safely be adopted in order to bring in more students from diverse backgrounds. Second, systematic monitoring is also required for following up students' progress in order to anticipate possible problems and deal with them early before they develop into a crisis. Furthermore, systematic monitoring helps to anticipate what kind of additional support might be needed in order to ensure smooth progression, timely completion and higher levels of achievement. The WPHEGT study refers to both types of monitoring.

The problem with universities in developing countries on the question of proper record management is threefold: (1) there is a lack of appreciation of the value of basing decisions on reliable information; (2) there is a low desire to forecast future trends using well-kept and organised data; and (3) low priority is given to this kind of undertaking in the face of what are perceived as more pressing issues and problems. The question of widening participation is not viewed as a matter of concern by staff so long as the admissions criteria are not explicitly biased against anybody.

Inadequacy of Resources

The WPHEGT study found that existing facilities and learning support systems are grossly inadequate for the regular student in both universities. Enrolling students from less privileged backgrounds may entail obtaining additional resources to help them cope with study demands that they might be poorly prepared for. This might be one of the reasons why people do not talk enthusiastically about widening participation. Such students will almost certainly require additional support. The question that immediately arises is: Where will such additional support come from? We should learn from our experiences with pre-entry programmes. Pre-entry programmes have been tried out in a number of universities. When such programmes begin, there is a good deal of enthusiasm to support them. As time passes, however, the enthusiasm wanes and the institution is then left to fend for itself. Including this as a regular cost item in the budget has often been resisted on the grounds that it is not a mainstream activity of the university. Although it is not proper to blame everything on poor funding, there is little doubt that poor funding does account for many shortcomings in the running of universities. Poor leadership also contributes significantly to the underperformance of African universities.

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Private Higher Education

The WPHEGT report suggests that, in both countries, many students prefer to study at public universities rather than at private universities. This is said to be due to two reasons: firstly, the public universities are better endowed and command more prestige, and, secondly, going to a private university suggests failure to qualify to join a public university. This is contrary to what is happening elsewhere. Private universities elsewhere tend to be relatively small, expensive, better endowed and command high respect. This is because they usually pay close attention to the growth and development of individual students, and are willing to tailor programmes to job market requirements. This is certainly an interesting finding. Most private universities in Tanzania have affiliations to religious organisations and are not therefore for-profit. In terms of financial and human resource capability, they vary considerably. It is also generally assumed that these universities are motivated by the wish to provide the opportunity to less privileged people to access HE. The findings suggest that there is a perception that the programmes offered are of inferior quality compared to those of public universities. There is therefore a need to look critically into the matter in order to take appropriate action to protect the public against such programmes. The regulatory authority may have to lay down more stringent conditions for establishing and running HE institutions in Tanzania.

Quality Assurance

Externally driven quality assurance mechanisms are also a relatively new phenomenon in HE in sub-Saharan Africa. It is a development that was sparked by the massification of HE enrolments (Brennan & Shah, 2000; Mohamedbhai, 2008). Traditionally, HE had been selective, elitist and self-governing. It did not need external agents to attest to quality. The WPHEGT study confirms that there are, indeed, some malpractices that undermine the quality of the programmes being offered. In continuous assessment, for example, some lecturers do not give feedback on time so that students can improve their performance in the next assignment. Some lecturers do not provide students with a detailed outline of what they are expected to cover during the semester. In some cases, students have complained that the course outline has not fully been covered during the semester. These are all bad practices. Many of these practices stem from inadequate resources, negligence and poor leadership. The report therefore recommends the strengthening and widening of the scope of the quality assurance systems that are already in place. This is particularly true of big classes. It should also be appreciated that externally driven quality assurance mechanisms in Tanzania, and in East Africa as a whole, were introduced with the liberalisation of HE provision. In the minds of many, therefore, these mechanisms are specifically for private providers. This is a rather unfortunate perception. Tanzania has already rectified the root of this misconception by enacting the Universities Act (2005), which in effect repealed the Acts that had established individual public universities and brought all universities under one regulatory framework.

Student Perceptions

Both positive and negative experiences have been reported by the interviewed students. There is a great deal of information here which can be studied and interpreted in different ways. Here, I wish to comment on only two issues. First, it is clear from the report that students do value the opportunity they have to network with their fellow students in a face-to-face learning environment. This gives them a chance to accumulate social capital which may prove valuable during and after college life. In the process of this interaction, students do influence one another, and this is part of the process of maturing socially and intellectually. HE students learning through distance or open learning systems are deprived of this opportunity. It is important to view university life not just as a process of gaining knowledge and skills, but also as an opportunity for being cultured in a particular manner through the process of intensive interaction with like minds. Therefore, a college student who studies in isolation is deprived of this valuable opportunity to network and benefit intellectually.

Another area that students complained bitterly about is assessment. There are numerous allegations in this area. Lack of transparency and inconsistency are among the features that are

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mentioned most frequently. In today's world, this is a thorny area; every student believes that he or she deserves to get nothing less than a B+. It is true that this is a very important issue for a student since once he or she is marked, he or she is marked forever! The mark will appear on the transcript forever. So one of the ways to address this problem is to adopt what is proposed in the report – namely, to develop a code of assessment conduct and make sure that all final examinations are marked by more than one person. This will go a long way towards promoting transparency and minimising perceptions or experiences of victimisation.

Equity Issues and Tanzania Development Vision 2025

In order for a society to embrace equity issues and firmly integrate them into its culture, it is important that such issues are strategically embedded or echoed in a nationwide development plan. Tanzania is no stranger to equity issues and national plans. Its policies of socialism and self-reliance of the late 1960s and 1970s were strategically geared to combine in its development plan both growth and equity considerations. The lesson learned from the failure to realise that dream is that equity issues must go hand in hand with steady economic growth. A disproportionate emphasis on equity issues at the expense of economic growth is bound to lead to disaster.

Tanzania's new development plan is articulated in *Tanzania Development Vision 2025* (Planning Commission, 2000). According to this plan, by 2025 Tanzania should strive to become a nation with the following attributes:

- a high-quality livelihood;
- peace, stability and unity;
- a well-educated and learning society;
- good governance; and
- a competitive economy capable of producing sustainable growth and shared benefits.

Peace, stability and unity can only flourish in a society that does not entertain structures and practices of social exclusion. Therefore, equity issues are already indirectly embedded in *Vision 2025*. It would, however, have been better if there was an explicit statement about equity issues in the document. Studies carried out in Mozambique, Uganda and Ghana seem to suggest that, in Africa, the elite tend to use public subsidies to regenerate themselves educationally at the expense of people of low-income status (Sawyerr, 2004). If such a trend is left unchecked, it could lead to a deep social crisis.

Vision 2025 cautions that it will not be easy for Tanzania to realise this vision unless four impediments are tackled first or concomitantly: (1) a donor-dependent syndrome and a defeatist mindset; (2) a low capacity for economic management; (3) weak governance structures and a low ability to organise production; and (4) an ineffective implementation syndrome. It seems to me that these are serious limitations that could render the whole endeavour ineffective. A recent study of the state of implementation of *Vision 2025*, with specific reference to education, had this to say:

> Access to education at all levels remains low and is partly a function of inadequate investment in the sector. In particular access to and equity in tertiary education remain huge challenges. It is unlikely that Tanzania will be able to participate in the knowledge economy to any significant extent with current outputs in human capital from the tertiary education system. (Center for Higher Education Transformation, 2010, p. 15)

The impediments mentioned above appear to be particularly strong. If HE institutions in Tanzania are to embrace equity issues in their development plans, they will need a very strong and visionary leadership that can champion the cause against all odds.

Conclusion

The WPHEGT study has exposed a number of disturbing elements in the HE system in Tanzania. These elements impede the fair and effective participation of the disadvantaged in the system in its present state. Therefore, in order to promote equity successfully, we need to tackle a range of problems at national, institutional and even at individual levels. We need a better understanding of who the true disadvantaged groups are and what they need most with respect to HE. With regard

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to intervention, it can probably be clustered into four types: (1) the judicious use of the admissions and selection policies; (2) the use of pre-entry make-up programmes; (3) the establishment of special funds to support needy students; and (4) the diversification of our modes of offering HE so as to cater for different categories of students, including the use of distance and open learning modes. The immediate challenge that we must also address is the question of competing demands on the HE system. The competing demands are expansion, quality, efficiency and equity. We need to expand in order to produce the critical mass needed to steer the economy. We need to maintain high standards of quality in order to compete effectively in the knowledge-driven society. We need to observe efficiency in order to get value for every cent spent. We need to pay attention to equity in order to ensure that nobody is excluded from the benefits or opportunities offered by development. All the three elements – namely, a clear definition of the disadvantaged, the different possible types of intervention and the four competing demands – require a highly committed and visionary leadership in order to stir and coordinate efforts, mobilise resources, and manage the institution so as to achieve the desired goal and objectives. The goal is to have a well-performing institution that is constantly sensitive to equity issues.

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