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Improved Student Learning in Kenyan Universities: A Paradigm Shift

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Higher education leaders confront enormous obstacles and uncertainties in the fast-paced academic environment of today, which makes it difficult for them to handle new problems, handle responsibilities, and spot possibilities. Adults frequently find it difficult to pick up and apply new skills in difficult conditions. This assessment looks at the various issues that crop up in higher education quickly and the need for innovative leadership. With the goal of reconstructing unfair structures, transformative leadership specifically emphasizes the significance of mindsets and knowledge environments. In this situation, changing people's perspectives and encouraging a culture of change among employees and students are critical components of effective leadership. The literature review emphasizes how crucial it is to change the paradigm of learning in Kenyan universities to improve student learning results.

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INTRODUCTION

Universities must implement some change processes to stay relevant given the societal transition towards being sustainable, however, most universities are struggling in this regard (Blaze Corcoran & Wals, 2004; Ferrer-Balas et al., 2004; Hopkinson, 2010; Jansen et al., 2005; Kamp, 2006; Sterling et al.,

2013). Although the role or position of leadership in conventional wisdom still prevails, there exists a groundswell to alternate leadership interpretations and the onset of a 'paradigm shift' clear of thinking in an orthodox manner about the practice of leadership in schools. In sentiments that ring true today, over two decades ago, Day et al. (2000) argued that 'the time has come to consider radical

alternatives to the traditional model of leadership . . . in times of rapid change and novel circumstances we need the most adaptable and flexible structures it is possible to devise' (p. 11). Seven years earlier, Fullan (1993) had stated that:

"It remains that the superhero images of leadership do not work. And it remains that, mandates and incentives are not powerful enough to function as engines that will drive our efforts to improve schools. In tomorrow's world success will depend upon the ability of leaders to harness the capacity of locals, to enhance sense and meaning and to build communities of responsibility" (Fullan, 1993, p. 4).

Transformative leadership is not a predictable leadership approach, relying on set principles, but rather asks for the use of approaches and appeals to the individual leader's ethical disposition. There's a willingness by leaders using this technique to explore and question present reality and are keen, as required by the situation, to construct and reconstruct a new reality. As a moral and social responsibility, transformative leadership cannot be left to one individual. Hence, all members of the organization need to participate to identify and facilitate the vision and mission of the organization. This approach strongly believes in transformation and change for the betterment of society. Transformative leadership is also considered a "liberator" and "realizer" of aspirations and dreams free from oppression, a culture of hope, and advancement of equal opportunity (Hoppers, 2013). It is suggested by Emison that transformative leadership deals with pursuing excellence in complexity (chaos), the connectedness of reality, and putting solutions in context to find the best outcome that is acceptable (Emison, 2011).

Due to the fast-paced societies as well as the academic contexts today, academic leaders are left overwhelmed with the constant change and uncertainties which makes it hard for them to meet the challenges, overcome burdens, and come up with opportunities that are new (Beer et al., 2015; White, 2013). Adults have difficulties in learning and in the application of actions once they are faced with situations that are challenging (Mezirow, 1991). There are several issues that are quite challenging that can arise very quickly in higher education

institutions (Champion et al., 2015; Demers et al., 2013; Russett & Gressard, 2015; U.S. Department of Education, 2008) that call for the need for transformative leaders in these institutions. Leadership that is transformative has as one of its distinguishing features the explicit addressing of the importance of mindsets as well as knowledge contexts and puts emphasis on the need to alter those that perpetuate inequality to reconstruct them in ways that are more equitable. Van Oord (2013) postulated that "The way leadership is perceived and shaped—will to a large extent determine the success of the transformation it instigates among its students and members of staff" (p. 420). Johnson (2008) asserted that "What separates successful leaders from unsuccessful ones is their mental models or meaning structures, not their knowledge, information, training, or experience per se" (p. 85). Thus, the literature in this work proves that for Kenyan universities to experience improved student learning, shifting the learning paradigm is vital.

Therefore, the desired change in higher education as far as student learning is concerned will be made possible by leaders who are willing to spearhead this much-needed change for the quality of student learning. For so long, higher education institutions have been seen to exist to provide instruction. Just over two decades ago, the West, specifically American higher education, started experiencing a paradigm shift from the instruction paradigm to the learning paradigm where a university exists to produce learning. However, in the African context, and the Kenyan context, this shift has not been experienced. Given the knowledge required to deal with the issues and problems faced by the country, and indeed Africa, in this century a paradigm shift has become a necessity. The mission of the university is the production of learning with every student by whatever means that works best. To help deal with the issues and problems of the 21st century in Africa, we need to restructure what we do in higher education based on the learning paradigm.

The 21st Century Higher Education Leadership Context for Transformation

Globally, calls for a new form of leadership to help the world navigate the tempestuous times marked by the turn of the century. Citing the widespread distrust

and disillusionment towards leaders and organizations around the world, Caldwell et al. (2012), called for a novel standard of ethical leadership referred to as “transformative leadership”. In a synopsis of the global socio-economic environment at the turn of the century, Montuori and Fahim contest the orthodox leadership theory wisdom to turn into opportunity the existing crisis. They emphasize that, “transformative leadership begins with a drastic rethinking of the who, what, where, when, and how of leadership” (Montuori and Fahim, 2010). Transformative leaders “(1) review the past, (2) question and recognize the present, (3) envision alternatives and possibilities, and (4) embody and enact the future” (Montuori & Donnelly, 2017, p. 15).

In the African context, Agenda 2063, a 50-year transformative vision branded, “The Africa we want” was launched by African states in May 2013 (African Union Commission, 2015). Countries were committed by the vision to work towards “an integrated prosperous and peaceful Africa, driven by its own citizens, representing a dynamic force in the international arena”. The adoption of a transformative agenda on the African continent was heralded by the turn of the century. Nevertheless, tackling the unconventional challenges that include dynamic economic shifts, the turbulent political, and disruptive global events like the one posed by COVID-19 calls for a new form of leadership.

The chief concern of 21st-century higher education has been quality in the undergraduate experience. Complaints have been received from policymakers, parents, employers, and the public that college is not worth the price and worse, upon graduation, students are ill-prepared for the world of work. Coupled with data that shows completion rates that are lagging, these critiques have ushered in expanded institutional assessment projects, the adoption of performance indicator systems, greater accountability for student outcomes and a range of educational improvement initiatives (Kuh et al., 2015). I submit that at the centre of the debate are learning outcomes. In addition to the quality aspect, the analysis of learning allows students to go beyond learning conceptualization to increasing one’s knowledge, understanding, reproduction, self-

development goal fulfilment and learning conception also in terms of the durability of knowledge and employability (Bamwesiga et al., 2013, p. 348).

The value of education has never been questioned as it is happening presently in society. The education and learning of graduates have been questioned by the labour market. It seems that, though they are being ‘educated’ and ‘learning’, by the time they graduate these members of society have not really met the standards of society for what is to be ‘educated’ and ‘learned’. Education and learning are not the same, even though they have been used interchangeably by many people. Mezirow (1991) in developing the transformative learning theory three decades ago noted that “The issue is not only to acquire new knowledge, but to develop new glasses to look differently at reality and existing knowledge” (Mezirow, 1991).

The quality of teaching and learning in universities has been a source of questions that are grave and fundamental. They relate to changes that are rapid in the manner of delivery and teaching, courseware quality and cost, receptiveness to learner heterogeneity, as well as professionalization of faculty (Bokor, 2012; Bradley et al., 2008; Norton et al., 2013). The direction taken by universities as it pertains to answering these questions means consequences for staffing, design, the means of creation and delivery of the programs for teaching and learning, in addition to how they compete. Proponents of higher education change that is a transformational claim that services in the future presented by universities will be available in marketplaces that are national and global as an alternative to ones that are state and regional, and every so often, in a delivery model that is virtual rather than bricks and mortar (Harden, 2012).

It is a fact that change drivers in the university sector as well as related debates have been around for some time, however, undoubtedly, there is an increase in cadence as far as discussion goes and an obvious sense of fear driving an action call within as well as among universities. Increasingly, linked to responsiveness of needs of students, curriculum quality, learning experiences together with student outcomes are issues of cost, effectiveness,

competitiveness, as well as viability (Kuh et al., 2015). Because of these outcomes, increased focus then results in the manner that universities are organized to deliver.

There have been greater benefits associated with the attainment of university education for society at large and young people specifically. Among these are the provision of improved opportunities for employment and job prospects, improvement in life quality, as well as greater economic growth (AAI, 2015). The State of Higher Education in Africa Report of 2015 showed that as far as return on investment goes, Africa received 21% returns from investment in higher education in the world. All this is even though, compared to the world average of 26%, only 6% of young people were enrolled in institutions of higher education in sub-Saharan Africa. Nevertheless, there is hope since many African countries are seeing a surge in enrollments (Odhiambo, 2018).

The World Bank Report (2015) has shown that an increase in levels of tertiary education by an average of one year would raise the GDP growth annually in Africa by 0.39 percentage points, which will eventually increase by 12% in GDP. The last 15 years or so have seen a rapid increase in the Kenyan education sector (Mukhwana et al., 2016). A survey by the Kenya National Bureau of Statistics showed that the education sector contributed 5.0% of GDP and thus, was among the key sectors that had driven the Kenyan economy (KNBS, 2016). Nonetheless, there still remain some serious concerns around the capability of the universities in Kenya to produce those graduates capable of driving the country forward even though there is the rapid growth being experienced in Kenyan university education. There are widespread concerns being raised on the employment of those who graduate from university as well as the kind of skills brought to the workplace and the contribution they make to the development of the goals of the country (British Council, 2014; Wanzala, 2015). Hence, there continues to be a sustained debate on the relevance and quality of Kenyan university education (Odhiambo, 2011).

The outlook of Kenya's economy is not as good as it should be given the high rates of unemployment that are high among young people as well as the system

of schooling still failing to deliver a better education that is compulsory for everyone. A review recently authorized by the United Kingdom's Department for International Development (DFID) on university education's impact on development concludes with a limited impact by various factors, specifically, quality (Oketch et al., 2014). Separately, a picture that is gloomy for Kenya's university education was painted by yet another recent audit inspection report that was made available on February 16th, 2017 (Commission for University Education, 2017b).

Skills development is perceived by countries, companies, and individuals as strategic, hence, skills investment is sought to be stepped up at the university level. For most countries, strategic interest in their national growth and development is the equipping of the workforce with the required skills for today's and tomorrow's work. Eventually, the prosperity of an individual country is dependent on how many of its citizens are working and, on their productivity, therein, consequently relying on the skills they possess as well as the effectiveness of those skills in use which forms the basis of decent work. When citizens of a given country receive primary and secondary education of good quality, together with vocational and university training that is relevant, then future generations are prepared for their productive lives, which endows them with important skills meant to enable them to progress with learning in addition to contributing effectively to their countries' development (Odhiambo, 2018).

The generation of skills and knowledge is the university's mission as far as the labour market is concerned but not necessarily to offer employment, but irrespective of this, there is little uncertainty that there is a relationship between university education with employment. West (2000) posits that graduates are recruited by employers; through university education, each person seeks to improve their future careers; formation of new or destruction of existing industries can be guaranteed through research; in addition, governments – who on behalf of the public invest into higher education – many a time, generally, hope for an economic payback.

The Need for a Paradigm Shift in the African Higher Education Context

As a result of globalization, nations have seen a marked increase in interdependence on each other as well as highlighting the inequalities existing in the world, hence, it is especially very important to envision the purpose of higher education (UNESCO, 2014). The modern world has challenges that call for the need for a citizenry that is differently educated to address them, especially in the context of a landscape that is unequal and complex culturally, socially, and politically. With the changing employment nature and changes in the university degree as well as the development in the range of choices available for employers and learners, there arises a need to design university curricula of different sorts (Lauder, 2011).

Even though there is a reality of many more university students in the lecture rooms, at play remains a deeper crisis in learning: in the process of attending university, not many students gain basic skills, a fact made known and clear by employers and industry (Mukhwana et al., 2016). Several factors account for the low figures in graduation including funds availability, alternatives sought by students, as well as time invested by students in more fulfilling ways and pursuit of purpose in life since universities do not deliver on their mission of transformation of minds as well as societal by research, training, teaching, in addition, development of community (Atal, 1995).

In Kenya, there is a need for the universities to keep at par with the present global trends that are dynamic, and more specifically, in the labour market so as for relevance to be maintained (Banya & Elu, 2001). A case in point for Kenya is that statistics show that not enough human resources are produced in STEM at 13% of university graduates. There are more students being trained in Education (arts) and Arts as well as humanities, and Business at 74% of all enrolled students yet the country has a shortage of manpower in medical and engineering fields (Mukhwana et al., 2016). Paradoxically, emphasis is put by the Kenya Vision 2030 on pharmacy, medicine, engineering as well as technical-based programs (STEM) in striving to make sure that by 2030 Kenya will be a newly industrialized middle-

income country (Nakayiwa, 2016; Ochuodho, 2016; Sam-Amoah et al., 2016; Shibru et al., 2016; Valeta et al., 2016).

To achieve Kenya's Vision 2030, there is recognition that education will contribute tremendously. Hence, the sector has received increasing as well as commendable support from the government which involves an increase in the amount of allocated funds for research and placement of 10,000 students funded by the government into private universities (Mukhwana et al., 2017). The strategy of Kenya Vision 2030 puts emphasis on the fact that, to her citizens, Kenya needs to provide quality education research and training that is competitive at the global level for development as well as enhancement of the well-being of the individual. Emphasis is further placed on the fundamental role played by university education needed for the achievement of development goals (Chege, 2015).

Role of University's Quality Systems in the Achievement of its Strategic Goals

"Transformative leadership begins with questions of justice and democracy, critiques inequitable practices, and addresses both individual and public good" (Shields, 2010). Further, several tenets of transformative leadership are described as follows: 1) acknowledgement of power and privilege, 2) articulation of both personal and collective purposes, 3) balancing promise and critique, 4) deconstructing and reconstructing socio-cultural knowledge frameworks that generate inequity, 5) effecting deep and equitable change, 6) work towards transformation: emancipation, liberation, equity, democracy, and excellence, and 7) demonstrate moral courage and activism (Shields, 2011).

As per a report by the Commission of University Education in Kenya, the population of students in the university was 539,749 by the year 2015. Of these students, 90% were in public and 10% in private universities (Mukhwana et al., 2016). This expansion revealed that the issue with university education access had been addressed, but there were issues realized around relevance as well as quality of programs being put forward (Martin and Antony, 2007). The last decade has seen CUE work together

with universities and other stakeholders to come up with guidelines, rules, and standards on which to assess and monitor several aspects of university education, by use of a mechanism of peer review. In the country, quality assurance, both within (the university) and outside (by the CUE or other delegated to professional bodies that are relevant), is now well institutionalized, even though so many challenges are faced by the system (Mukhwana, 2016).

There are issues facing the system of university education among which is the issue of how to fund university education given the rise in the demand for places as well as the fears of falling academic standards. The situation has not been helped by the regulatory framework that is fragile. The government, given the increase in the quality challenges facing higher education, by a legal mandate that came about through an Act of Parliament (Cap 210B) in 1985, created a Commission for Higher Education (CHE) to supervise and heighten the quality of Kenyan higher education. Later, through an Act of Parliament, the Universities Act No. 42 of 2012, CHE was substituted by CUE (the Commission for University Education). Nonetheless, CUE has been short on administrative, technological, and human capabilities to monitor as well as compel compliance on quality (Odhiambo, 2014).

While professional bodies have tried to fill the gap left by the inadequacies of the CUE by intervening to fold up programs in universities not meeting standards at the industry levels, these bodies have faced legal challenges as they are not been given statutory powers. A case in point is the 2011 refusal by the Engineering Registration Board of Kenya to recognize the engineering degree offered by three Kenyan leading public universities due to a lack of qualified lecturers, poor curricula, as well as inadequate appropriate facilities. Similarly, for pretty much the same reasons, applications by several public and private university graduates who wanted to practice law were rejected by the Council of Legal Education of Kenya (Odhiambo, 2018).

Relating to quality and outcomes in Kenya, there is inadequate statistical information. Nonetheless, concerns are rife regarding the university graduate's

readiness which is so often related to severe challenges of quality faced by universities (Wesangula, 2014; Munene, 2016; Ndirangu & Udoto, 2011). In the context of inadequate funding, expansion has placed substantial strain on the system. For instance, there are almost 64 students currently for every academic staff at main public universities in Kenya (Commission for Higher Education, 2013). The Inter-University Council for East Africa (IUCEA) in 2015 gave a shocking survey that of the graduates in Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzanian universities, between 51 to 63 percent were 'half-baked', 'unfit for jobs' in addition to 'lacked job market skills' (Mungai, 2015). Most cases that were commonplace depicted lecturers who themselves lacked qualifications and preparation that was adequate in addition to transmission-based pedagogy as well as rote learning (British Council, 2014). However, there are severe inadequacies in the physical facilities suffered by universities that comprised buildings, libraries, as well as laboratories.

Connecting Quality Processes and Education Development

For a long period of time, the system was left to expand without matching resources which resulted in a catastrophic drop in quality with an ever more rising number of graduates who were ill-equipped to proceed into a now congested job market (Odhiambo, 2018). In a phenomenological study on learning in higher education, more specifically from the perspective of the learners, when the quality aspect is added to the analysis of learning, students are allowed to go beyond the conceptualization of learning as expanding an individual's knowledge, understanding, reproduction, goal fulfilment and self-development as well as also, to the conception of learning as durability of knowledge and employability (Bamwesiga et al., 2013, p. 348). To make sure that there is a strong link between the labour market and the universities which in turn will ensure that Kenya realizes its potential, there is a need to guarantee that graduates produce a strong society and growth. A fundamental area by which a contribution to the country's development of university institutions can be done by enhancing academic receptiveness to the progressively

compound labour market needs as well as the industry necessities (Odhiambo, 2018).

The disparity involving skills that learners have as well as the market demand has in recent years prompted employers to team up with universities with the aim of trying to resolve this gap. Linking and networking between industry leaders and those from universities has been the major objective for sustainability (Wanzala, 2017). Pan Africa Christian (PAC) University in partnership with Kenya Private Sector Alliance (KEPSA) as well as Visions of Hope for Africa organized a conference which was an idea for the university-industry sustainability platform.

To obtain work and make a constructive impact in the workplace and the overall Kenyan society, graduates should be prepared well. Three major areas of work that the universities should focus on as suggested by the British Council (2014): the quality of taught courses should be improved, for students, enable wider learning experiences as well as provide feedback on target employability (a reflection on the personal aptitudes and a reflection of the same by individual students given the information of career opportunities; programs to enhance skills in addition to stronger link up with employers). The quality of education offered in the universities is what matters over the numbers enrolled. Therefore, urgently needed is a shift of conception from access to quality, rather put specifically, a shift is needed towards access with quality since a critical role is played by universities in nurturing work skills, technological invention, engagement as well as general growth (Odhiambo, 2018).

High living standards and stronger economies are correlated with high-quality university sectors which has been demonstrated by international evidence, but nonetheless, just like when free primary education was introduced in Kenya, many universities are suffering from quality dip due to rapid expansion which are facing similar challenges of strain on infrastructure as well as standard drops (Odhiambo, 2014). For the sake of finding work, very few graduates gain the skills they require (British Council, 2016) with the transition to the labour market being where this challenge of quality is most evident. Unemployment among graduates is high and across the country, employers protest the lack of

basic, practical, and skills that are transferable (British Council, 2014; Nesoba, 2012). A decade ago, to secure a job in Kenya, a graduate took up to 5 years (Omolo, 2012).

The role of the teacher is critical in the processes of transformative learning and critical reflection. Approaches to transformative learning require teachers to take risks, question cultural-discipline norms and reflect critically on themselves and their work (Neuman, 1996 as cited in Taylor, 1998). In transformative learning, critical awareness as well as problematization of a teacher's positionality is a very crucial element (Montgomery, 2014). As a form of cultural production, it is essential teachers understand pedagogy as well as become transformative intellectuals (Giroux, 1992). This journey can be stressful and very personal, which impacts the identities of teachers. Individuals' identities are multifaceted hence dealing with concepts that are disorienting can result in responses that are ambivalent within ourselves and other learners (Boyd, 1989; Clark & Dirks, 2000). On the complexity of the self, Erichsen (2011, p. 126) writes that it is "a process ever negotiated and accomplished in interaction with the significant actors in a person's life and within varying social contexts", where, rewriting our own narrative is what we are engaged in and our life experiences reconstructed, what Gill (2007) describes as "the reweaving of the fragmented self" (Gill, 2007 as cited in Erichsen, 2011, p. 111). Therefore, transformative learning is about both our ontological and epistemological selves (Kreber, 2004). Teachers therefore need to be moved through these spaces that are difficult, to enlighten their individual understanding, before facilitating their students' journey (Author, 2005; Neumann, 1996).

CONCLUSION

Higher education leadership needs to change to meet the ever-changing demands of the modern learning environment. One important strategy for overcoming these obstacles is transformative leadership, which focuses on changing knowledge environments and mindsets to advance equity and encourage creativity. The studied literature emphasizes how critical it is for Kenyan universities to adopt transformative leadership in order to

improve the educational experiences of their students. Institutions can successfully navigate uncertainty, overcome challenges, and foster a climate that supports academic success and continual development by placing a high priority on transformative leadership.

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