
The Public Dimensions of the University in Africa¹

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Abstract

This paper's principal purpose is to explore the range of ways in which African universities act as public institutions—i.e., how both are shaped by and influence the social, political, and economic contexts in which they are situated. In particular, we consider the multiple dimensions, often resulting in tensions in contexts of poverty and instability, of the African university as an actor in politics, civil society, and the public sphere AND as a key institution in the expectations and the strategies of a range of actors, groups, and constituencies.

Résumé

L'objet essentiel de ce texte est d'explorer les différentes voies où les universités africaines interviennent en tant qu'institutions publiques. C'est-à-dire, comment sont-elles façonnées et comment agissent-elles sur le contexte social, politique et économique au sein duquel elles évoluent. Nous tenons particulièrement compte, des dimensions multiples, qui résultent souvent des situations de tension dans des contextes de pauvreté et d'instabilité, des universités africaines qui jouent le rôle d'acteurs dans la politique, la société civile et la sphère publique ET qui sont également considérées comme des institutions clés, dans les attentes et les stratégies d'une variété d'acteurs, de groupes et de cibles.

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Introduction: African Universities as Public and Social Institutions

Higher education (HE) is currently receiving unprecedented attention from international donors, including private foundations as well as multilateral and bilateral agencies, national governments, employers, and citizens the world over. Much of this new emphasis is tied to the notion that knowledge is both the fuel and the glue of the world economy. With knowledge production, dissemination, and consumption imagined at the core of economic transformation, higher education institutions (HEIs) are envisioned as strategic players—the producers and disseminators of knowledge and producers of the “human capital” who will perform these tasks (and, presumably, who will also constitute the principal market for the consumption of knowledge as well).

Given the precarious state of many economies in the developing world and a concern that they will “miss the boat” in benefiting from the knowledge economy, HE in Africa and other parts of the world is being scrutinized as perhaps never before.⁵ The idea that the reduction of inequalities, at both global and national levels, is related in no small measure to the state of HEIs and HE systems in the developing world is a remarkable inversion of the global policy positions of less than a generation ago, when HE was more often discussed as an elitist luxury and when national and international investment were focused on primary and secondary education to address issues of growth and inequality (Banya & Elu, 2001).

Over this period of the waning and now waxing of attention to the HE debate in most Sub-Saharan African countries, universities were always present as key sites of public concern and debate. Indeed, the degraded state of most universities in the region, beginning in the late 1970s and into the 1980s, should not be taken to mean that they had become irrelevant to the societies and polities in which there were embedded. Then, as now, two critical dimensions of HEIs have never been far from the public agenda. First, HEIs, especially the major public universities, are often key sites for debate, critique, and mobilization on behalf of political change, especially but not exclusively in the direction of democratization and the resolution of conflicts. Second, in spite of the institutional hemorrhaging of universities, the decline of national economies and, especially, formal labor markets, and the deepening of social inequalities, the social demand for HE among young Africans and their families has never

5 Of course, concerns and critiques regarding the state of HE in Africa pre-existed current discussions. What seems new is that now HE is seen by donors and at least some governments as a potential source for the re-generation of African economies rather than as a drain on scarce resources or simply irrelevant.

abated—in fact, enrollment rates have soared and new HEIs (public and private, for-profit and not-for-profit) have been created.

The presence and occasional tension between these two public dimensions is inherent in higher education institutions worldwide. Ruth Jonathan argues that analysts on HE in general must ask: “What is it about [HE] which keeps alive our optimism in its socially transformative power and provides the pre-conditions for any socially transformative project, yet which also pulls in the opposite direction—toward an ethos of individual competition and the reproduction of a hierarchy of social advantage” (Jonathan, 2001, p. 48).

The key points here are that African HE systems have always had their own local and national dynamics and that these are now intersecting with, but are not determined by, the recent global context, which provides both constraints and opportunities for universities and their varied constituencies. While our discussion here draws from what relevant research is available in the African context, our primary concern is to clarify and conceptualize these two public dimensions of HEs. It is not our intention to homogenize the experiences of different countries and HEIs across the continent. Indeed, national and historical differences help in understanding variations in the way tensions in the university, as a public actor and as a social space and resource for a range of social groups, is played out. In what follows, we first look at African universities in civil society and in the public sphere; secondly, we examine the demand for and social value of higher education in Africa; and in the concluding section of this paper, we present what we believe could be components of an agenda for further research on the public dimensions of the university in Africa.

African Universities in Civil Society and the Public Sphere

As an actor in the public sphere, the public university has a dual status. On the one hand, as an institution financed and, to varying degrees, controlled by the state, it is potentially part of the ideological apparatus of the state (thus linking it to the reproductive apparatus of society). On the other hand, it is, potentially, one of those social institutions of civil society that may help in holding the state and the business sector accountable while potentially providing a source of debate on current directions and visions of society’s future. It is in this sense that universities are integrated into the public sphere, defined by Habermas as “a sphere between civil society and the state, in which critical public discussion of matters of general interest was institutionally guaranteed” (McCarthy, 1989; also see Habermas, 1989).

The university is also a site for struggles over power and resources. Like other institutions, it has its own internal dynamics and may present a mirror image of the society where it is located, in terms of the diversity of ideological

influences and material interests. At the same time, it is a highly unique social institution. Its role as a base for an important fraction of the intelligentsia, the fact that it produces the teachers or the trainers of teachers for the lower levels of the education system, and its production of most of the cadres later employed in the higher echelons of the public and private sectors are influences specific to the HE sector, and, in Africa, to public universities in particular.

Advancing our understanding of the public dimensions of the university requires a historicizing of the public sphere in Africa and the place of universities within it. In most Sub-Saharan African (SSA) countries, new social spaces⁶ began taking shape with the establishment of colonial boundaries and administrations over and above the states and polities that were conquered by the colonial powers. While the context had changed with the coming of independence, a number of limitations remained on the possibility of having a critical public discussion on matters of general interest, and there were important restrictions on academic freedom and the autonomy of universities. Most universities were also caught up in this developmentalism of the fifties, sixties, and seventies.

African States and African Universities

The nature and evolution of SSA economies and political regimes has had a direct impact on the university, not only from the point of view of the types and levels of funding that were available, but also in terms of levels of institutional autonomy and academic freedom. The specific roles that HE institutions play in a given society at any moment depends on a range of factors that have to do not only with their nature and status—public or private, autonomous and enjoying a high degree of academic freedom or laboring under strict governmental control, confessional or corporate, virtual or existing with a campus and contact students, etc.—but also with the prevailing global and local environments within which they are located. Universities, as social and political institutions, and the individuals and groups within them, such as the students, faculty, and non-academic staff, have often been involved in struggles for change. They have also been directly affected when there is a shift in regimes or policies.

Until the fairly recent waves of diversification in the HE sector, the university was synonymous with the *public* university, which, in many countries, played a leading role in the formation and in the reproduction of emerging elites and in the integration of different sections of the elite—what Bayart (1989) calls the “reciprocal assimilation of elites,” a process that took place at global, regional, and national levels—whose role in the construction of national public spheres

6 These were simultaneously physical spaces, social spaces of production and reproduction, as well as spaces of representation (Lefebvre, 1974).

was to become very critical. In its Western origins, in the effects of its teaching and research, and in the worldviews of the elites and the mass of students (both graduates and dropouts), the university became an influential institution of post-colonial⁷ SSA societies.

The higher education sector has considerably expanded over the forty years or so of SSA independence. After an initial period of great enthusiasm for HE during which many universities were built, a period of deep crises and adjustment ensued, during which the universities lost much of their earlier prestige and became much less of a national priority.⁸ The fortunes of the university have, therefore, been very closely tied to those of the state, which was the main promoter of HE in first few decades after independence.

As African societies were being subjected to structural adjustment programs (SAPs), which were themselves highly problematic as remedial policies, universities came under attack for not adapting to new contexts or for being isolated (the familiar “ivory tower” accusation). Ironically, these criticisms became more severe as graduates entered the jobless ranks, in no small part because of the impact of SAPs on the civil service—once the main employer of university graduates. The often contradictory nature of such criticisms results from inattention to what we have identified as the university’s public roles: 1) as a provider of opportunities and services for individual members of society, the state, civil society organizations, donors, private companies, and other actors; and 2) as an institution of civil society that is part and parcel of the struggle for democracy and for defining and protecting the national identity and interests. Thus, the university is both an actor in evolving social processes, specifically in conditions of transition, and an object that is affected by these broader processes of transition.

This dual identity of academics and academic institutions is best exemplified in the struggle for academic freedom. Restrictions on academic freedom appear in reaction to state and non-state restrictions on the freedom of individual academics and on the autonomy of academic institutions, while being integral in the struggles that shape the public sphere. Academic freedom often comes under attack when it is needed most. In post-conflict transitions, the fear of being seen as a bystander, as not participating in the reconstruction

7 The concept ‘post-colonial’ is used here in the purely chronological sense of “after the colonial period.”

8 This corresponded more or less to the two phases of “developmentalism,” what Ali El Kenz calls “the years of development hope” and the years of crises and SAP (El Kenz, 1996; also see Mkandawire and Soludo, 1999).

process, or as being unnecessarily critical is very real and, thus, may limit the post-conflict reconstruction of the public sphere.

Academics and Academic Institutions in African Transitions

Academics are part of the intelligentsia, a term that gained currency in Russia at the beginning of the last century “as a collective term for the intellectual class” (Khan, 1994), and, as such, they often play catalytic roles in political processes. African intellectuals have, at times, taken an active part in the struggles for change. Change was not always conceptualized as a democratic process, however. Some intellectuals also took part in or argued in favor of change through coups and armed struggles. Not surprisingly, many have been victims of political struggles and conflicts, often as specific targets. Different components of the intelligentsia have thus been the ideologues for the state and of social movements for justice, rights, and democracy. A few have competed directly for political power through democratic and other means.

In the colonial period, the political views and aspirations of academics and other intellectuals was typically greeted with mistrust. Many post-colonial governments have inherited such orientations. Denials of academic freedom were widespread. Appointments to important administrative and academic positions were often highly politicized (Ajayi et al., 1996), and university autonomy was restricted in a number of ways. Certain sensitive issues were declared off-limits for research and academic or public debates. The struggle for academic freedom and the autonomy of academic institutions, particularly the universities, was, therefore, part of a larger project of the expansion of human rights, democratic space, and possibilities for rational-critical debates about public affairs involving journalists, musicians, writers, religious leaders, and other members of the intelligentsia (Diouf & Mamdani, 1994; CODESRIA, 1996; Ibrahim, 1997). These struggles became more consequential in the late eighties and nineties, partly as an expression of what had then become a worldwide phenomenon following the fall of the Berlin Wall. The prominent role of intellectuals and of ideas in the debates over and the functioning of democracy in Senegal, for instance, made the philosopher Aminata Diaw call Senegalese democracy, “a democracy of intellectuals”—*la démocratie des lettres* (Diaw, 1993).⁹

In the heyday of developmentalism and monolithic “nation-building,” the possibilities for the emergence of what Calhoun calls “a public sphere adequate to a democratic polity” (Calhoun, 1992, p. 2; also see Habermas, 1989) were structurally limited in many ways. Two such limitations were the weakness of

9 For an illustration of the role played by Senegalese academics in the negotiation over the implementation of HE sectoral adjustment measures in the 1980s and 1990s, see Niane, 2000.

civil society organizations and the limited number of potential participants in scientific or “rational-critical” debates, given the extremely small number of universities and the small size of the intelligentsia. While there was a consensus on the potential for academics and academic institutions to contribute significantly to the development and social transformation process through teaching and research, how to do so was the critical question. Some of the academics shared the view that priority had to be given to taking part, if uncritically, in nation-building and development efforts rather than to the defense of academic freedom or the institutional autonomy of universities. For others, academics and academic institutions were viewed as key elements in the process of defining the priorities and the agenda for development, both through their work and from their own scientific and professional perspectives, rather than merely responding to short-term demands formulated by governments.

There are numerous examples of individual academics taking an active part in struggles for democracy and the respect of human rights, as well as “bread and butter issues” of students and academic staff. The latter set of issues often took on political significance, linking campus-specific issues to broader debates on political priorities and policy options. Student and academic staff unions, such as the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU), in Nigeria, and the teachers unions of Burkina Faso and Senegal, to name only a few examples, have been among the fiercest critics of government attempts to encroach on public liberties. These activist organizations may not limit their activities to partisan political action but may also look to assert themselves in broader roles in the public sphere. For example, while activists at the University of Dar es Salaam were involved in debates about the advantages of doing away with the single party TANU, the university itself was engaged in two major projects—the Research and Education for Democracy in Tanzania (REDET) and the Tanzania Election Monitoring Committee (TEMCO)—consisting of civic education, training, and monitoring elections.

By the time of the post-adjustment and political liberalization years of the nineties, the size of the academic community (faculty and students) had increased tremendously, and the shortcomings of authoritarian nation building and developmentalism were quite apparent to all. The exponential rise in the numbers of civil society organizations, and the spectacular increase in the numbers of newspapers and community and FM radio stations in the nineties went hand in hand with a major increase in the number of universities. This was significant for the struggles of civil society in at least two ways: 1) the institutional base of the intelligentsia became wider and more diversified, as private academic institutions also increased in numbers; and 2) the numbers of potential contributors to critical public debates became larger. University lecturers

are in some cases routinely called upon to participate in debates on radio and TV and to speak on current affairs in forums organized by NGOs.

These struggles became very intense in the late eighties and early nineties. Student and non-student youth-based movements and teacher unions, along with other civic organizations, took to the streets and challenged the military in Mali, Nigeria, and elsewhere. The struggles were over more than just stipends, salaries, and related “bread and butter” issues—although where these “internal” issues existed, they were very often politicized beyond the bounds of the university. Some student associations had close links with political parties (in office or of the opposition), which increased the potential for confrontation. In Nigeria, for instance, both the ASUU, the academic staff union, and the NANS, the National Association of Students, took part in the wider campaign for democracy, and the Burkinabe student movement was close both to radical sections of the political opposition and, towards the mid-nineties, to the human rights movement. The universities, therefore, naturally became targets for repression. Among the worst cases were those of Lubumbashi, in former Zaire, in 1990, and Yopougon in Cote d’Ivoire in 1991, both of which were raided by security forces with a considerable amount of brutality. In a number of Francophone SSA countries, students and faculty played a role in “sovereign national conferences,” which marked a shift away from single-party or military authoritarianism towards more open and plural political systems.

The Role of the University in Post-Conflict Transition

Of course, not all political transitions in the region have been characterized by social movements and relatively peaceful political protest. Several feature violent upheavals and the breakdown of state institutions. Universities have been among the many victims of the armed conflicts that have been ravaging SSA, particularly in the nineties. University campuses have been a theater of confrontation and were occasionally occupied by regular armies or rebel factions in a wide range of countries such as D.R.Congo, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Guinea Bissau, and Rwanda. In almost all war-torn societies, intellectual capital is one of the casualties of the conflicts. Universities and research institutions have been severely affected, and many intellectuals either have had to go into exile or have lost their lives.

University lecturers and students have also taken part in formulating arguments that were later used to justify armed conflict or even genocide, and in some cases they have been involved in actual fighting.¹⁰ In the processes of

10 On Sierra Leone, see Richards, 1996, and Abdullah and Bangura, 1997. On Rwanda, see African Rights, 1994; DesForges, 1999; and OAU, 2000.

reconciliation and post-conflict reconstruction, universities are among the public institutions that need to be rebuilt, both physically and in terms of getting their teaching, research, and community service programs restored. Certain universities have taken up projects directly and immediately connected to the transitions in as broad a range of fields as engineering, appropriate technology departments, law, and political science.¹¹

More difficult is the rebuilding of intellectual communities that, in the more extreme cases such as Rwanda, Burundi, and, more recently and to a lesser degree, Cote d'Ivoire, are seriously fractured as a result of the deep civil conflicts. They may, at this precise moment, be faced with even more severe resource constraints, given the general scarcity of resources that prevails under such conditions. Indeed, HE might not be a high priority issue in the eyes of donors or transition governments.

At the same time, universities are often solicited for their services in even more pressing ways. Individual academics are drawn into the government bureaucracy or to work for aid agencies and NGOs. Scholars and their institutions may be seen (or at least see themselves) as providers of a social and political vision for a peaceful future. Among the general population (including demobilized combatants), access to higher education may be part of broader social expectations of a return to "normalcy."

How have the universities and their staffs and students been responding to such challenges and demands? The return of teachers and students from exile might not immediately follow the end of the conflict, or, at least, not in numbers that are as large as may be needed. Most university departments in such contexts remain understaffed for extended periods of time. Long after the end of the conflict, the countries may still be seen as unsafe, which often makes it difficult to arrange for external examiners and visiting professors. The university itself is often so consumed by its day-to-day operational problems that it may be marginal to public debates on issues related to reconciliation and reconstruction processes. When academics and researchers are called upon to participate in commissions established to look into major public issues, such as human rights, they take part as individuals rather than as representatives of their institution. Similarly, the limited amount of research that is being carried out by academics is very rarely handled at the departmental or faculty level but rather through individual contracts with donors, and few research projects are collective or contribute to institutional capacity.

11 For instance, the Kigali Institute of Technology in Rwanda is building community cooking stoves that have led to a 60–70% reduction in the extensive use of firewood to cook for the 120,000 detainees following the genocide; it is also involved in solving the problems of sewage disposal in the prisons, while making bio-gas and fertilizer out of the sewage.

Yet, by virtue of their complexity, post-conflict transition processes call for research and serious public debates on almost every aspect of these transitions: understanding what exactly happened—the nature of the crises/conflicts—and why, the challenge of building democratic governance systems that would address some of the issues that led to conflict in the first place, etc. In a number of cases, besides rebuilding halls and laboratories, universities have established centers for conflict and peace studies, with some even attempting to “mainstream” peace studies.¹² Such academic investments often reflect an understanding of the conflict that identifies individual attitudes, including those of academics themselves, as a key part of the explanation for past conflicts.¹³

Thus, some universities are playing, or are expected to play, important roles in the reconstruction of the public sphere through the dissemination of research results, the writings of scholars, the training of students, and outreach activities. In certain cases, the intelligentsia has responded quite rapidly and initiated debates both over the Internet and in other fora. In a number of other cases, such as Sierra Leone, such debates took time to get started, however. The role of the local media and of the Internet in conveying the views of academics have been very important in the transitions of the nineties.

African Universities, the Knowledge Society, and Global Forces

While analysis of African higher education’s public roles requires detailed attention to local and national dynamics, these dynamics must also be examined within a global context. The place of African universities in the public sphere is critically shaped by a range of global forces and policy discourses. Much of the recent attention to HE worldwide has taken place in the context of debates about the *knowledge society*. The implications of this term are that knowledge matters for a range of socio-political issues that play out in the public sphere—an informed citizenry, an independent media, a space for public intellectual debate, the forging of social networks that facilitate cooperation and collective action, the forging of a “human rights culture,” etc. We do not need to accept the more utopian versions of the *knowledge society* to take seriously the role that knowledge may play in the constitution of the public sphere.

Key questions calling out for answers include: What kinds of global forces impact upon African universities’ capacities to play a role in the public sphere?

12 See D. Hoffmann, 2002, The academy and conflict in Sierra Leone—An interview with Dr. Joe A.D. Alie, in the SSRC’s Global Security and Cooperation Program’s newsletter, *GSC Quarterly Newsletter*, No 3, Winter 2002.

13 While this is certainly true in some cases (see the debates on the origins of the civil war in Sierra Leone, and on the ideological roots of the genocide in Rwanda), it does not address key structural problems such as the marginalization of large sections of the youth.

How do those forces influence the public university as a social space that intersects with the agendas of staff, students, prospective students, parents, and the local community in which the institution is enmeshed?

One place to start is the political dimension of neo-liberalism. While the economic logic of neo-liberalism has, in practice, often trumped its democratizing designs, universalistic discourses on democracy impact African universities in complex ways. On the one hand, global ideas and infrastructures (e.g., advocacy-oriented NGOs) of “democratization” provide fertile ground and sources of external support for key features of HE’s public role. Values such as university autonomy and academic freedom are seen as both indicators of democratic progress and as necessary components of an open society.¹⁴ These values, ideally, enable the university to be a site of social debate and critique while also empowering it to impart democratic habits to students.

On the other hand, the anti-statism that often accompanies neo-liberal versions of democratization legitimize and encourage the expansion of private, non-governmental institutions that are seen as vital checks on state power. In the case of HE, this means legitimacy for private HE institutions.¹⁵ As indicated above, their presence create a dilemma for public universities as the imperative to compete with non-state providers for resources, students, and status may clash with their efforts to engage the public sphere and address the “public good”—a role which most of their new competitors are not likely to adopt.¹⁶

Moreover, when directed to the HE sector, global democratic discourses sometimes attack universities as bastions of elite privilege. This critique can weaken arguments in favor of public investment in higher education (as opposed to primary or secondary schooling). Alternatively, and as we have seen in the case of post-conflict transitions (although far from limited to these cases), it is often transmuted into an argument for “relevance”—that universities’ research and training missions must directly address developmental needs and

14 Within the continent, CODESRIA and its academic freedom program has been a consistent advocate on this issue. See its annual academic freedom reports and Diouf & Mamdani (Eds.), 1994.

15 While we do not discuss them here, non-governmental research institutes and networks have also entered the field of knowledge production once dominated by public universities, and the majority of these exist due to external financial support and linkages to Northern organizations. Since few of them do any training, their main area of competition and/or symbiosis with universities is research. For further analysis, see Ebrima Sall, 2003, forthcoming; Prewitt (Ed.), 1998; and Johnson, 1999.

16 Of course, we should not overstate the degree to which public universities have, in practice, actually played such a role. The point is that private institutions, while clearly having an economic incentive to address the private demands for HE, will have less potential to play an intentional public role.

social inequalities that, in practice, place limits on institutional autonomy and academic freedom in the name of public accountability.¹⁷ Thus, while the political logic of neo-liberalism implies a challenge to the *dirigiste* and authoritarian currents behind the idea of the “developmental university” of a generation ago, elements of this idea have been incorporated into debates of HE relevance and accountability in a democratizing society.¹⁸

One other component of global academic networks is the African intellectual diaspora, based not only in the North but also in other parts of the continent outside of their homelands (most notably, South Africa).¹⁹ However devastating the “brain drain” may be, discussions of its impact rarely acknowledge that a sizeable proportion of African scholars based elsewhere (as well as other émigrés) maintain significant ties to universities in their country of origin. These ties should not be romanticized. While many (although certainly not all) diasporic Nigerian intellectuals provided moral and other kinds of support to their colleagues and former institutions during the Abacha regime, some (although certainly not all) diasporic Rwandan intellectuals provided ideological and other kinds of ammunition that helped fuel the conflict during that country’s civil war and genocide.²⁰ The point is, whether for good or ill, these ties often do matter for African universities and for African societies, as diasporic intellectuals may continue to play a role in supporting or opposing current political arrangements in their homelands.

The Social Demand and Social Value of Higher Education in Africa

Despite the relative paucity of hard data on the university’s role in the public sphere, the deeply politicized nature of HE in SSA has obscured our understanding of other dimensions of HE with major public consequences, such as the nature of the social demands on or the social value of university education

17 For a good general discussion of this tension, see Jonathan, 2001.

18 See James Smoot Coleman’s discussion of the African university as an “omnifunctional developmental institution” in Coleman, 1994. This essay was originally published in 1984. Coleman writes that “the dangers of overdevelopment are very real. Not only can the quality of performance of traditional functions be seriously compromised (teaching, research, and the critical function), but the quality of performance of the new developmental functions could be equally compromised through ‘oversell,’ with the resultant disesteem and contempt for universities as an institution” (p. 351).

19 The role of Diasporas in disseminating “university ideas” has been tremendous right from the end of the 19th century. It has impacted upon both the perception of the social value of HE (particularly among urban classes in coastal West Africa) and on the definition of HE landscapes (for example in Nigeria where ideas brought back by early nationalists successfully undermined colonial development plans for HE.)

20 On Rwanda, see the earlier note.

and degrees in Sub-Saharan Africa. The HE choices and expectations of individuals, families, or larger groups also affect the universities' provision of courses and services and more, thus shaping HE fields and, potentially, the role of HE in political transformations. The patterns of student enrollments, their experience of HE and their integration in the labor market are critical for understanding transformations of the roles and functions of universities. They are a vital window on processes of social mobility in Africa and the social significance of university expansion. At the same time, they provide a needed corrective to what is often a misleading homogeneous picture of HE institutionalization in Sub-Saharan Africa.

From “Ivory Towers” to “Mass Institutions”: Stereotypes and Paradigms about African Universities and Their Students

Higher education needs to be seen not only in its more obvious economic and political aspects but also as a space of social positions and as a factor in patterns of social mobility.²¹ As mentioned earlier, there has been a tendency to imagine African universities as “ivory towers” and “citadels of learning” which consider students (at least until recently) as a privileged group (irrespective of their social background) and higher education as a passport to a middle class westernized standard of living and to influential positions. Consequently, the social origins of students or the solidarity networks they mobilize to gain access to HE has often been ignored or assumed to be largely elite-based without empirical evidence to support these beliefs.

As Dubet remarks, students usually become a subject of sociological analysis when they become a “problem” (Dubet, 2000), and the 1980s crises that hit many African countries generated a renewed interest in students' working and living conditions. The withdrawal of welfare policies, such as scholarship schemes, subsidized on-campus accommodation, and other effects on HE during the crisis years, impacted individual private strategies towards higher education. In particular, a significant number of students were diverted from “traditional HE education”²² prospects, and access to universities was restricted to an even more socially advantaged population. Thus, the adjustment years paradoxically created an avenue for an unprecedented diversification of the post-

21 That such aspects have been relatively ignored partly reflects the late and still marginal interest of sociology in African studies (Copans, 1990) and the poor performance of this discipline within the African social sciences themselves (Hendricks, 2000).

22 What E. Sall (2001) defines as “education dispensed in tertiary education institutions such as the public and private universities, colleges, polytechnics, what the French used to call *Instituts Universitaires de Technologie* (IUT)...” (Sall, 2001, pp. 10-11)

compulsory educational sector that is, often too simplistically, viewed as a massification of HE.

The steady demand for higher education, boosted by universal primary education, expanded secondary education access, and population growth, has never been met by “traditional” higher institutions in Sub-Saharan Africa, particularly when examined through transition rates and gross enrollments. Notwithstanding the traditional images of overcrowded residence halls and lecture theaters in African universities, social demand has largely been met by less selective non-traditional institutions, or, in some cases, by fee-paying programs offered by universities alongside their more traditional modes of entry. If the student population has become a “falsely homogeneous category” (Lebeau, 2000), this is more a function of the extension of the HE market now encompassing lower ranked institutions than of a democratization of access to traditional higher education.²³ The crucial importance of the transition period from secondary to tertiary level, therefore, should not be underestimated as a period which tends to last much longer in countries where less than 10% of eligible candidates are actually offered admission to traditional HE institutions and which students try to put to good use (with additional training, work experience, guidance counseling) to “make the right choice.”

Understanding the Social Value of Higher Education²⁴

Research on higher education in most African countries has followed two broad streams: one dealing with the place of HE institutions in broader educational systems and the other with faculty attitudes and academic activities. To use Martin Trow’s classification of HE research, they have mainly covered aspects of the “public” and “private” life of universities. While this research is important, we know far less about the social identities of students and their educational strategies, which can provide a micro-perspective on how and why uni-

23 This point is supported by few existing national or regional case studies of educational strategies at the higher level and by recent works done on graduate employment in Africa such as the tracer studies carried out by the Association of African Universities in seven African countries between 1996 and 2000. All these studies tend to stress the importance of the type of institution attended for the professional achievement of graduates.

24 Although this section deliberately focuses on the demand for HE, we believe that the social value of universities extends far beyond the determining factors of students enrollment and experience and encompasses issues related to staff status and careers that we have dealt with in more detail elsewhere. For instance, even with the drastic devaluation of currencies under structural adjustment, and the subsequent relative ‘devaluation’ of the status marked by the unprecedented brain drain of the late 1980s and early 1990s, being a university lecturer or professor still has a prestigious side to it and universities remain a valuable milieu from which more and more governments draw their staff.

versity education is highly valued and pursued. The kinds of capital (social, cultural, and economic) that the HE experience and degree provide (and is expected to provide) depend on political and economic opportunity structures *and* on the socio-economic and cultural backgrounds of students.

Take as an example the assumption that the demand for HE correlates with levels of economic development. Upheavals in patterns of social mobility and pupils' educational careers at primary and secondary levels (Lange, 1999; Colclough and Al-Samarrai, 1998) challenge this assumed connection between economic conditions and educational demand. On the basis of comparative sources such as national household surveys, field surveys, and case study findings, research has revealed patterns of enrollment and family strategies demonstrating that economic development, in the sense of achieving growth in national income per capita, is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for movement towards a steady demand for education (Colclough, Rose, and Tembon, 1998). Studies in Nigeria have shown similar patterns in higher education demand. The important regional variations in enrollment figures neither reflect exclusively the distribution of institutions or that of incentive policies by local authorities, nor do they strictly replicate the unequal delivery of secondary education. The value attributed by households and communities to higher education may well vary upon national policies on education, but it also reflects both the volatility of patterns of social mobility in uncertain economic environments, as well as cultural factors affecting the expectations of a university degree. A striking illustration of this complexity is offered by the contrast between figures of female students' enrollment and their weak integration into the labor market for workers with advanced qualifications.²⁵

If the widening of social participation in HE matters so much from the perspective of knowledge-driven development (World Bank, 2002), then the social and cultural backgrounds of students must be a central focus in the research on students, in order to capture how different social groups view higher education as an investment and to what extent family investment in higher education "pays."²⁶ In addition, family strategies and social network mobilization are key elements in analyzing access to HE across various social categories. Education's role in the constitution of social capital varies greatly in coun-

25 See Dunne & Sayed (2002) on changing patterns of female access to higher education across the continent.

26 Even if data on the socio-economic origin of students are not systematically gathered, a combination of census and household survey data with limited surveys can help in mapping the unequal institutionalization of HE, and highlight the role of social and educational background in promoting or constraining access to higher education. An example of such quantitative survey is offered by M.K. Mayanja's case study carried of Makerere students (Mayanja, 1998).

tries where a process of massification of HE has occurred, as compared to those countries where secondary education itself remains the privilege of less than 15% of the population.

Questions such as how schooling careers are actually constructed, what role is played by various actors (counsel and guidance departments of secondary schools when available, relatives, churches, brotherhoods, and other social networks) need to be put in a comparative perspective in order to determine how and how much education contributes to social capital and social mobility. Research in Europe has shown that, particularly in periods in which unemployment and its attendant hardships put families under considerable strain, networks of economic dependence on extended families often came into play even at the HE level (Dyhouse, 2001). This is not necessarily the case, however, in places where education's social value is being continuously challenged by other sources of prestige and means of achievement and where the interruption of schooling careers is a constant response to economic hardships of not only "disadvantaged" groups (such as minorities and women) but of the majority, as well.

If access to HE is largely determined by past school trajectories and socio-economic background, a tendency in Africa that has been reinforced by the withdrawal of most states from their support policies for students (scholarships, on-campus social services, etc.), we can begin to understand the differential value of degrees offered in a more and more fragmented market. Two dynamics have been operating in this regard in the last 15 years or so. The first one is a consequence of the economic crisis of the 1980s, and the second can be interpreted as an institutional response to the conditionalities and/or recommendations of international donors and financial institutions.

With the structural adjustment policies (SAPs) adopted in the 1980s, the sudden problem of graduate employability called into question the relevance of the inherited curricula and tertiary degrees which had been left unchanged since HE's inception in many countries across Africa. Also, the cutbacks in support to students, coupled in some cases with the introduction of fees, generated a greater awareness of the unequal "value for money" of degrees by families, who now had to spend more money on university education. These conditions led to the introduction and multiplication of pre-degree and post-graduate, professionally-oriented courses in all public universities. As a consequence, the 60/40 ratio policy in favor of science oriented courses, adopted by most African countries to produce the engineers and scientists required by their projected developmental needs, were bypassed, and new programs leading to banking, management, ICT, and applied social sciences qualifications were introduced, to the detriment of traditional academic disciplines and degrees.

The financial constraints of the 1980s also resulted in a proportion of the urban middle class population, whose children used to complete their studies abroad, now having to envisage having entirely local tertiary training. One of the many side effects of SAPs was the development of private schools in vibrant urban centers such as Nairobi or Abidjan, offering MBA programs to a local petty bourgeoisie suddenly dispossessed of its international access. Such private institutes have continued to mushroom since the late 1980s. The key issue here is not so much whether or not various states made provision for the development of private tertiary education. Instead, a more important consideration is that accreditation was largely sought elsewhere, since the state was no longer considered as a reference point in this respect.

The weakened HE systems in Africa, despite their apparent image of high centralization and rigidity, have allowed universities to respond to the changing nature of their market in the 1980s. The structural adjustment policies have profoundly reshaped the social composition of the population accessing HE. Universities, in many cases public ones, have responded rather successfully to the new demands of a socially diversified student population, often seized as opportunities to compensate for the loss of state support. This dynamic contradicts a common perception of reforms and changes in peripheral HE systems as shaped by changes in the global market of educational services rather than by local needs and demands.

Still, it remains a fact that the global context definitely impacts the delivery of courses and the admission policies in African universities. With knowledge increasingly constituted as a commodity central to economic growth and transformation, higher education institutions are seen as key sites, both through the useable knowledge they generate and the training and skills they impart to labor market entrants. Public policies are pushed toward the diversification of the higher education sector to allow for competition and a division of labor that would respond to the demands of employers and those seeking skills and credentials in the labor market. At the policy level, globalization can be seen as a force that requires both greater attention by the state towards calibrating labor market demands and HE outputs (i.e. manpower policies)²⁷ and more space for private providers to meet demands and pressure the public sector to be more competitive and cost-effective.²⁸ The latter goal for a leaner institution (often fuelled by demands from foreign donors) is what partly drives the liber-

27 See, for example, the linkages between HE policy and labor market forecasts in South Africa as described in Council on Higher Education, 2002.

28 See the World Bank's recent recommendations in the report *Constructing Knowledge Societies*. (World Bank, 2002).

alizing shifts within public universities; shifts which are often based on models of HE in the global North—the introduction of student fees and cost sharing, the re-orientation of curricula and programs toward the perceived future-oriented needs of the “knowledge economy” and present-oriented labor market demands, the sub-contracting of various functions to private firms, the establishment of for-profit units, and an emphasis on applied knowledge and research and development (R&D) partnerships with the private sector.

Finally, it is important to stress that in Africa, as elsewhere in the world, the social value of HE extends beyond the professional prospects it offers to individuals and their families. Examples of a steady demand for HE are found in many places where the qualified job market is already saturated because of lack of economic investment and opportunity resulting from political instability and civil wars.²⁹ An answer to this apparent contradiction may well be found on the African campuses themselves, in the ways in which students construct their own experiences, in their narratives about their experiences, and in the ways they take advantage of their opportunities. The status of being a student has proved to be an attractive way of living in itself and a relatively secure transition to an individual and urban mode of living, particularly where access to universities remains more or less free of fees (e.g., Senegal and Nigeria). In many of the academically less-demanding (but probably less rewarding) tertiary institutions that have mushroomed in the wake of the liberalization of HE markets, schools provide “the semblance of having a recognized position and status in life” (Dubet, 2000). In some countries of central Africa (e.g., Gabon, Congo), education at the secondary and tertiary levels stands as the main vehicle for inter-city and rural-urban migration, indicating how attractive student status can be beyond the social value and career prospects actually offered by the institutions.

Thus, the increase in student numbers, the diversification in types of institutions and degrees offered, the privatization of on-campus facilities and services, and the changing balance of resident and non-resident students, young and mature students, male and female students, etc., reveals the diversity of

29 Student populations tend to rise in immediate post-conflict situations, as if the young people of university-going age want to “catch-up.” Interviews with child combatants and ex-child combatants in Sierra Leone show the strength of their desire to continue their education. (Richards, 1996; Peters and Richards, 1998). The National University of Rwanda (NUR), after being closed from onset of the genocide and political killings on April 7, 1994, re-opened in 1995 with 3,000 students. By the end of 2002, NUR had 7,000 students. Two other HEIs, the Kigali Institute of Technology (KIST), established as an independent institute in 1997, and the Kigali Institute of Education have also begun operations. The Rwandan government plans to establish other specialized universities in various regions of the country.

student experiences (Lebeau, 1997) and is critical for understanding the general frustration that such a desired experience can generate and why studying abroad remains a dream for most African students.

In the few African countries, such as Nigeria, where research into these aspects is already providing some kind of historical perspective, one can see how higher education has gradually reached the status of a social need, “regardless of the actual functional requirements of the economy or of the institution” (Castells, 2001, p. 211) even if enrollment figures are far from the massification of the system as observed in the West. The trends highlighted above are exposing universities as organizations to various kinds of demands and pressures from society. Because the national systems being considered do not have the means (South Africa being, to a certain extent, an exception) to respond to excess demand by “downgrading some elements of the system” (Castells, 2001, p. 211), social segregation tends to be recreated informally within or outside the formal institutional system. One of the dramatic public consequences already observed is the political threat of restive unemployed graduates and of non-entrants excluded from the system by lack of means and/or connections.

The multiple purposes of HE from the perspective of social demand demonstrate that the public importance of HE is not reducible to its political or policy dimensions. The ostensibly private choices and experiences of young Africans in relation to HE are central to the processes of stratification and social reproduction, the formation of social and political identities, and the expectations and often hard realities of future livelihoods. This has been the case from the very inception of HEIs in SSA. Colonial HEIs were unequally distributed and generated various expectations from their internal and external constituencies. Diverse national policies on education then followed the recommendations and conditionalities of international organizations, thus shaping HE landscapes that strongly reflect national trajectories despite some inevitable global tendencies.

Conclusion: Towards a Research Agenda

While the effects of global attention and global influences must be accounted for in a complete understanding of the public role and public consequences of HEIs in Africa, the most immediate need in understanding the complex relationship between HE and society is research “on the ground,” to reveal the ways African universities and societies intersect and mutually shape each other. Such research requires in-depth description and analysis of both the university’s engagement in civil society and the public sphere and the social demand and social value of HE for individuals, families, and social groups. As noted above,

these two dimensions are rarely considered within the same framework. There are understandable reasons for this, as they take very different points of departure in terms of the ways they situate HE within broader social and political contexts.

Further investigation of the *role* of HEIs in civil society and the public sphere is greatly needed but can be vulnerable either to overstating the importance of HE to a range of outcomes (e.g. political transition) or to imposing a normative rather than empirical perspective—that is, to focusing on how and what HEIs ought to be doing as public institutions, rather than what they are doing. Even when observers recognize this basic difference, they often characterize empirical deviations from the ideal as pathological or irrational.

A focus on the private strategies and social demands of actors has the advantage of opening up the university for research by viewing it as a *social space* that shapes, and is shaped by, deep processes of social stratification and reproduction, and by taking individual projects for social mobility at face value and without judgement. Its critical perspective can be vulnerable to turning overly cynical, however, if collective social projects and the role of intellectuals and students in those projects are reduced to struggles and strategies for private advance or privilege.

Overall, these two dimensions are always present but differently configured in specific places whose political economies, social networks, and HE institutional structures and cultures inevitably vary. New and constructive problematics and research clusters on the public importance of African universities can be located in this nexus. Because HE tends to be considered everywhere in Africa as a social need and as a right, while access policies remain highly elitist (at least in comparison to most Northern institutions), public universities in Africa are facing intense social pressures from below, threatening not only their once enviable and inescapable position as a vehicle of elite reproduction, but also their role as catalysts of social and political change. Paradoxically, it is the more “colonial” and elitist of these institutions where resistance to state authoritarianism has been nurtured over the years on a platform of national development and anti-imperialism. Dakar and Ibadan are probably the most striking illustrations of the capacity of university communities to challenge the state monopoly of developmental and patriotic discourses. More recently created institutions, often established to satisfy regional political appetites but often seen as being more responsive to their immediate environment and more accessible in their social recruitment, have hardly been able to resist political pressures and stand as guarantors of the defense of the acceptable shared interests that constitute the public sphere.

New empirical research, based on theoretically informed case studies, are needed to bring together these two dimensions creatively. Over the past ten years a number of SSA countries, despite many specific differences, have come to share 1) the reality of political transition and uncertainty, as well as shifts in social structure and processes, and 2) major modifications and transformations in public universities and HE systems as a whole. Social research on the public dimensions of the university in Africa can shed significant light on the connections between these two transitions, and a comparative perspective will provide real insights while allowing space for case-specific particularities and dynamics. In the end, future research should bring about the emergence of a fresh view on in what ways and for what ends public universities matter for their societies, a view far more complex and potentially richer than the current discussions about higher education and the knowledge economy/society. Such research could itself be a contribution to the public debate by acknowledging the range of stakeholders in African HE and proving a basis for understanding the politics of HE reform.

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