

Higher Education and the Idea of Permanent Knowledge Renewability

by

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First Version

Introduction

A critical and deep analysis of higher education institutions in the beginning of the third decade of the 21st century and expansion of the frontiers of the information and communication technologies, shows that on many fronts the institutions higher learning, especially the universities, are still a reflection of the essence of medieval and modern European historical realities. In their mission, curricular and eligibility criteria, they were by design set up to serve a select elite in all aspects of the western education paradigm. By the system that recognized and celebrated the final stage of the learning process, they were also mainly conceptualized to recognize and grant qualifications in compartmentalized way. Those who based on their social origin or progression in the system could not fit in a compartment were ejected.

In the case of Africa, institutions of higher learning have historical and deep cultural roots as well that were endogenous (Ajayi et Al. 1996, Lulat 2005) or were the product of the convergence of African and external Islamic traditions out of which emerged Afro-Islamic institutions (Mazrui 2013, Kane 2011), all of which preceded medieval time in Europe and its embryonic work with higher education and certainly European colonial presence in Africa. However, with European colonial expansion and the subsequent establishment of units modelled after the metropolitan systems, including after formal colonization ended and wider spread of European/Western system was fuelled by the contemporary cultural component of globalization. This concept note is a reflective essay with ideas that, from the perspectives of the actual and potential beneficiaries of the system, including those who have been excluded. The essay intends to address an element of institutional stiffness that supports the reproduction of a century-old structure of the institutions of higher education that are inadequate in responding to the challenges and needs of the populations in the current and future historical moments. It also addresses issues of harnessing fuller potentials of individuals and groups in their life journey in relation to those institutions.

The first part focuses on the institutional DNA that served a certain social structure which, although its main beneficiaries consider the inevitable character of the inherited system from its inception. The second part aims to discuss ideas about the individuals and groups in their life journeys and relationship with education systems. The third part supports the consideration for a fundamental change in the institutional character and opportunities for critically open, flexible and constructive relation between individuals and groups within and between different levels of education institutions.

1. Critical examination of the essence of contemporary institution of higher learning

Despite the creation of various types of post-secondary institutions such as community colleges in the United States, for instance, and which communicate and sustain the perception of structural change, in reality the old system of higher education institutions, especially the universities, with

the medieval/classical university as a model, has been allowed or supported to persist. The response to parallel institutions that are created to meet increasing demand, suggests that the latter are “tolerated” or perhaps they are necessary to contribute to legitimizing the classical universities.

Despite some significant changes that have been made in the past few decades, those changes are not fundamental enough to shake the foundation of the system that has spread globally and continues, to attract the youth the world over and is de facto defended by faculty and administration. In its book *Differing Types of Higher Education* (Abdalla 1977) the International Association of Universities (IAU) referred to the universities as guardians of “the heritage of the past ... enshrine both hope and nostalgia” and “are linked to ways of life which may be out of date but which, since they are collective stereotypes, continue to appeal to the imagination of the young and to guide many of their choices (1977: 8). In observing the universities today, it is quite striking to see that the analysis by Eric Ashby (1966:3) is still very relevant as he argued that “An institution is the embodiment of an ideal. In order to survive, an institution must fulfil two conditions: it must be sufficiently stable to sustain the ideal which gave it birth and sufficiently responsive to remain relevant to the society which supports it.” In applying this observation to universities, he argued that the university as “a medieval institution ... fulfils both these conditions.” (Ashby:3).

What is presented as a natural reproduction and survival of a system is the result of a deliberate imposition of a system shielded against the corrosive power of time and space. It remains the reference and reigns supreme everywhere. The reproduction of the European medieval university is deliberate and ensures the preservation of a system that contributes to sustain remnants of colonial power and control. It has been artificially considered to be a natural phenomenon constituted by a powerful and uncontrollable engine .

The global appeal in the context of colonial transfers and liberal globalization with de facto advertisement or outright imposition of old traditions and European systems as the indicator has led to a process of global homogenization, leaving little room for serious transformative undertakings, as the process of education itself works to ensure global acceptance of the system as uniquely indispensable.

In a joint publication entitled *Guide to Higher Education in Africa*, the Association of African Universities (AAU), the International Association of Universities and UNESCO (2002) provide some useful information on the different types of institutions of higher learning in each African country. Despite some efforts to present these institutions according to some regional specificities and cultural or educational traditions and history, one element stands out: African universities reflect the traditions of the respective colonial powers and together they reflect European traditions.

It is not the university per se that has the innate immutable character. Rather, the European/Western university and the values embedded in the broader university and the self-proclaimed right to dominate and shape the rest of the world that explain what can be considered the apparent eternal essence of these institutions. Evolution is made to find new ways to preserve the old system (Carnoy 1974) the same way the post-Westphalian model of nation-states has been spread across the globe via colonial intransigent rule.

2. Enabling individual journey for learning, development and fuller contribution to society

The system of education that was inherited included the whole package transferred with the philosophical and metaphysical conception of social organization in which it was created and evolved. One of the enduring characteristics is that the system of education was conceived according to an individualistic ethos and a linear trajectory for individuals to navigate it in a unidirectional and upward progression aimed to celebrate individual distinction on the ladder of the social mobility.

In this process, the capabilities of the learners, as individuals and as groups, are not developed and nurtured. It has been some time since the notion of multiple intelligences has been acknowledged (Michelle Marenus 2020). Furthermore, a person may develop multiple intelligences. Some individuals or groups with multiple intelligences may develop faster and become sharper at different periods in the life journeys. Therefore, it is not enough to acknowledge that different people have different areas of strength upon which they may be selected and promoted to upper levels of the education system or discarded under many disguises of dismissal and forced-out procedures.

Too many talents are choked into oblivion by not being allowed to have the benefits and support of enabling spaces and moments to hatch. What a loss for the individuals, families, communities, societies, nations and the world! The whole education system and its upwards unidirectional organization is inadequate to enable such developments to emerge and thrive, as people are taught let bygone be bygone and just keep moving on and up or exit. At particular junctures, the system and its entire apparatus including the curriculum, language of learning, and criteria of evaluation and selection make a life-time judgment. Embracing all levels of education would allow everyone to develop their potential and thrive in a circular and regenerative system.

3. Institutional change and permanent corrective agility character

Ideas of future possibilities require the location of the discussion about how to restructure society and its values in a space that assumes that change is possible and necessary. Agency to express the quest for actual change is a major step. Education in general and particularly higher education, are dialectically related to the different socio-historical, political and broader societal system and its various non-education institutions which in turn contribute to define and redefine directly or indirectly the university. Historical factors explain why, how and what have hitherto ensured that some traditions prevail and are transferred from generation to generation and across the globe. They constitute the guarantor of the permanence of the culture that moulded them in a rigid frame and manner at their inception and in the subsequent historical moments despite the necessity to at least adjust to some changes in the social environment.

While African societies, in their complexities across the continent, set up “indigenous higher education produced and transmitted new knowledge necessary for understanding the world, the nature of man (sic), society, God and various divinities, the promotion of agriculture and health, literature and philosophy”, (Ajayi et al., 1996, p. 5) they ought to be acknowledged now in a forward-looking manner. Africans themselves affirmed the unhealthy transfer (Assie-Lumumba

2016) and must take the responsibility to promote the necessary changes in the structure and idea of life journey, in embracing possibilities for deliberately learning from any of their aspects from the philosophy that guided them to their practical organization.

The collective ethos must be affirmed as relevant or as a sign of civilization for the future. The ongoing pandemic has clearly demonstrated that one of the aspects of survival/ lifesaving is to embrace the collective wellbeing as contingent to inter-dependence and open the doors for a new institutional framework toward the development of human capabilities in the future. The Cartesian affirmation of the supremacy of the individual over the group that was reflected in the educational institutions, especially the universities of European ethos and medieval time, has to give way and accord more importance to a system founded on collective ethos of uBuntu (Goduka 2000, Letseka 2000) and utilize education as a global good to be nurtured in everyone toward collective interest.

Concluding remarks

The global dynamics of outcry against the entrenched systems of oppression and legitimized exclusion of individuals and groups are pointing to possibilities for the future. The current rigidity and exclusion in the higher education institutions must give way to more inclusive, flexible, and diverse educational systems, harnessing the potential of information and communication technologies. More choices, in terms of multiple disciplinary development of knowledge creation and intellectual growth, would be contribute to better mitigate the uncertainties of now and the imagined future of the world.

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