



Re-inventing Kenya's university: From a “Graduate-mill” to a development-oriented paradigm



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ABSTRACT

Kenya's university sector has experienced tremendous growth, particularly during the Kibaki administration, the third Kenyan president (2003–2014). This numerical growth in institutions and student enrollment applies to both public and private universities. During the same period, the government embarked on vision 2030, a blue print designed to propel the country into a middle income status by 2030. Cognizant of the global shift to knowledge economy, the government underscored the important role higher education needs to play to achieve those development goals. However, this growth has been characterized by a myriad of challenges. By analyzing published research on education and development, this paper interrogates implications of the exponential expansion of Kenya's university, the “graduate-mill” approach, to the country's development goals and proposes reforms required to re-invent the sector so that it can play its envisioned role in national development.

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1. Introduction

Plenty of scholarship exists on Kenyan universities ranging from the history of Kenya's higher education, growth of Kenyan universities and challenges attributable to this growth, and political interference in the running of universities. This paper addresses the current exponential expansion of Kenyan universities and the implications of that expansion to the country's development goals. Although the Kenya government recognizes the importance of higher education in the global knowledge economy paradigm, the expansion of higher education raises numerous questions in light of the many challenges facing the sector. These include complaints about inadequate facilities, shortage of qualified teachers, poor quality education, and governance issues. These challenges bring to question the viability of the sector to play its envisioned role in the country's development goals. While cognizant of the debate on the correlation between education and development, this paper critiques the “graduate-mill” architecture of the Kenyan university, the focus on numbers, and addresses the issue of quality, relevance, financing, and aligning university education to the country's development needs. The paper proposes adoption of a problem-solving education approach that gives due attention to quality education, innovation, and critical thinking with national needs

playing a critical role in shaping educational goals, policy, theory, praxis, and regulatory framework. This shift would entail commitment to institutional good governance; reconfiguration of the role and mission of the university, including pedagogy; and re-examination of financing of higher education with a greater focus on establishing linkages among stakeholders and leveraging government investment on the sector to defined education outcomes.

2. Education and development

This paper analyzes the state of the Kenyan university and its place in the country's development goals in the context of existing research on education and development. Scholars are divided on the contribution of education to national development: some attribute a direct linkage between higher education and development whereas others are skeptical of such a direct correlation. Others hold a nuanced view—that although a connection may exist, the exact role is contentious. In light of this debate, Oketch et al. (2014) distinguish between economic growth, “assumed to be measurable through per-capita GDP” and development, “assumed to include both economic and non-economic elements.” In their view, elements that constitute development comprise many “desirable outcomes beyond strict improvement in GDP.” These include “poverty reduction, increased income equality, improved health, literacy, access to high-quality primary and secondary education, civic participation, good governance and the protection of human rights” (p. 10). Despite these differences, these authors

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argue the two concepts are interrelated since increased growth could “contribute to development” whereas enhancing “development indicators” could contribute to growth (p. 9).

As to the role of higher education in national development, [Leslie \(1988\)](#) considers education “a major contributor” to the United States’ economic growth. As he puts it, education “directly” accounts for about 15–20% of growth in American national income, with higher education accounting for almost one-fourth of this contribution. An additional 20–40% is attributed to “improvements in knowledge and its application” [emphasis added] (p. 12). The latter, it can be argued, involves education and, therefore, underscores education’s contribution to America’s economic growth. Similarly, [Qazi et al., \(2013\)](#) view human capital as the main determinant of living standards; that what sets apart living standards in different countries is the level of human capital. They argue that economic growth of a country is determined by its “human or intellectual capital”—that “the development and accumulation in human capital is a main substance of growth of any economy” (p. 1651). This position is premised on the view that higher education produces “critical thinkers, researchers, scholars, innovators and responsible citizens to societies” and provides “opportunities to maintain social mobility and high living standards”—attributes that are particularly crucial in developing countries such as Pakistan, which is the focus of their research (p. 1652). Advancing the same proposition, [Salmi \(2003\)](#) argues on the vitality of “knowledge accumulation and application” as “drivers of economic development” in the twenty-first century globalized knowledge economy that requires countries to obtain competitive advantage (pp. 65–66). A World Bank report supports the linkage between higher education and development by highlighting the connection between knowledge production, use of that knowledge, comparative advantage, and national development ([World Bank, 2009](#)). Similar views on the direct connection between knowledge and development are expressed by [Kimenyi \(2011\)](#), [Gopinathan \(2007\)](#), and [Bailey et al. \(2011\)](#). In fact, the latter attribute Kenya’s low competitiveness (ranked 106 out of 139 countries) to the country’s failure to reform its higher education sector ([Bailey et al., 2011, p. 10](#)).

There are also scholars who view higher education as playing a role in development even though their position is nuanced. For instance, [Shin \(2012\)](#) argues that despite the controversy on claims of causality between tertiary education and economic growth, it is hard to dismiss that connection. He observes that countries with the “fastest growing economies” have the “fastest growing higher education” (p. 67). Similarly, [Benhabib and Spiegel \(1994\)](#) observe a connection between human capital and productivity; that human capital is the prime driver of technological innovation, which in turn drives development. They argue that even though higher education may not lead to direct local innovation, it facilitates adoption of technology, thus enabling countries with less innovation to quickly “catch-up” with more developed, more innovating countries (p. 145). Likewise, [Oketch \(2006\)](#) argues that although development of human capital on its own may not drive growth, human capital and physical capital are interconnected—that growth in “human resources” facilitates growth of “productive sectors” and vice versa (pp. 554–555).

The endogenous development model provides a more comprehensive theoretical framework for analyzing the role of higher education in national development. It makes it possible to account for “human capital and human capital outcomes” that transcend “narrowly defined economics of job markets and earnings” ([McMahon, 2009, p. 5](#)). The theory provides tools for analyzing non-market benefits of higher education and how these benefits directly or indirectly contribute to development. Although [Oketch et al. \(2014\)](#) acknowledge skepticism on the benefits of higher education, their extensive research reveals that tertiary education

plays a bigger role in national growth than was assumed; that although it may be hard to identify “macro-level” benefits of tertiary education, there is a correlation between higher education and technological adaptation, which is crucial to growth (p. 6). Furthermore, they argue that these non-market *social* benefits may produce “wider social impacts, such as the strengthening of democracy, social cohesion and good governance” that may in turn contribute to growth (p. 14). Delving further into the endogenous model, [McMahon and Oketch \(2013\)](#) are of the view that although some benefits of education may appear private, in the long run, in their totality, these benefits contribute to overall national development (p. 2). They conclude that although indirect benefits of education are “benefits in and of themselves,” ultimately they contribute to growth (p. 24). [Kimenyi et al., \(2006\)](#) applied the endogenous growth model to research returns on education in Kenya. Although the data they used could be considered outdated (they used data collected by the Kenyan government in 1994), their conclusions affirm the human capital externality argument that increasing human capital not only increases private returns but that these benefits cascade to other individuals and the wider society ([Kimenyi et al., 2006, p. 495](#)).

All these scholars’ views contrast those of skeptics of the value of higher education such as [Freeman \(1976\)](#) and [Psacharopoulos \(1994\)](#). But, evidence from literature reviewed supports the view that whether directly or indirectly, higher education plays an important role in national development. Underpinned on that premise, that indeed tertiary education plays a role in national development, is the Kenyan university, as currently configured, playing the role it should in Kenya’s development goals? If not, how can the sector be re-invented to ensure it plays its role? Although there are no definitive answers to these two questions, interrogating them is germane to evaluating prospects of the Kenyan university playing a meaningful role in the country’s development goals and enhance the country’s competitive advantage in the global knowledge economy.

3. The State of the Kenyan university

3.1. Expansion of the Kenyan university

The Kenyan university has experienced significant growth over the years. By the time of independence in 1963, Kenya had one institution with a university status, the University College of Nairobi, operating under a special arrangement with the University of London. It was not until 1970 that it attained a full university status ([Oketch, 2003, p. 18](#)). By early 2000s, the number had risen to 6 public universities and 17 private universities ([Oketch, 2009, p. 25](#)). That number grew to 22 public universities and 9 public university constituent colleges and 33 private universities, a total of 64 universities, by 2013 ([CUE Newsletter, 2013, p. 2](#)). Likewise, student enrollment grew from 452 undergraduates in 1963 to 5, 454 undergraduates and 1383 postgraduates in 1983 ([Sifuna, 1997, p. 416](#)) to 341,558 in 2013 ([Republic of Kenya, 2014a, p. 11](#) [Republic of Kenya, 2014a, p. 11](#)).

There are multiple forces driving this exponential growth. [Oketch \(2003\)](#) attributes growth of private universities in Kenya to five factors: demand, global trends, success in secondary school participation, diminishing confidence in public universities, and reduced government monopoly. Many of these factors are also responsible for growth in public universities. First, which is a global phenomenon, is the demand for higher education driven by the linkage of university education to employment and social mobility ([Oketch, 2003](#); [Gudo et al., 2011](#); [King, 2007](#)). The second factor is the growth of the middle class that has led to more children successfully completing primary and secondary education ([Oketch, 2003](#); [Gudo et al., 2011](#)). Moreover, growth of the middle

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