

Challenges Facing New Kenyan Higher Education Institutions: The Case of Kibabii University

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Introduction

Over the past two to three decades, universities have faced with major challenges. These have resulted in significant transformations in the scope of their mission, governance, knowledge production and circulation, and relations with wider national, regional and global economies and societies (Materu, 2007). These transformations are part of a wider 'paradigmatic transition' facing all societies and universities, around the world (Santos, 2010). In Kenya, higher education system has expanded significantly since independence based on few elite national universities that catered only for the fortunate few to over 33 public and several private Universities. As a result, student growth has been impressive. Just 1000 students were enrolled in 1963 and today there are over 350,000 university students in Kenya, both full-time and part-time. This exponential growth in student enrollment and public university system has had and still is faced with many challenges. This paper uses Kibabii University, one of the Kenyan universities established in recent times to identify the main challenges facing Kenya's public higher education system and to propose plausible and concrete steps to policy makers and educational leaders can take to address those challenges to ensure the country's higher education system prepares the human capital, which is necessary for the construction of a knowledge economy

Establishment of Kibabii University

Kibabii University was among the 9 that were established at the beginning of this decade. The others were Taita Tavetta, Rongo, Kirinyaga, Murang'a, Machakos, Embu, Co-operative and Garissa. The establishment of Kibabii University (KIBU) is traced to the origins of Kibabii Teacher Training College which dates back to 1932. But was moved to Eregi in 1962. The idea of Kibabii Teachers College was revisited by the local community in 1978. For more than twenty years, the proposed Kibabii Teachers Training College in Bungoma South district remained a mere dream until 19th September, 2007, when His Excellency President Mwai Kibaki graciously presided over a ground breaking ceremony at the proposed site with a target that the college was to be fully operational by 25th of May 2011.

Due to a request by the leaders from Bungoma County, His Excellency, President Mwai Kibaki, declared that the newly constructed facilities for Kibabii Diploma Teachers' College be converted to Kibabii University. This was formalized by the Kenya Gazette Notice of 12th August 2011 that established Kibabii University as a constituent college of Masinde Muliro University of Science and Technology (MMUST) via Legal Notice No.115 of August 2011.

Kibabii university College started operations with a workforce of 52 staff and enrolment of 333 students distributed across four programmes allowed by MMUST Senate including Education Arts and Science, Commerce, Science (Physics, Chemistry and Biology), Computer Science, Information Technology, Social Work and Criminology, all housed in two faculties. In November 2015, His Excellency Hon. Uhuru Muigai Kenyatta President of the Republic of Kenya and Commander in Chief of the Defence Forces awarded the Charter which gave the institution fully-fledged university status.

Rationale for establishment

At the time Kibabii University was established, there were 21 fully fledged Universities in Kenya. Yet there was still the push to have more. According to UNESCO (2014) the expanding number of KCSE students who obtain the required grade of c+ and above for direct admission to universities and in this case the universities have not been able to admit all the students who qualify for direct admission from

school. One major push was the need to have institutions of higher learning that would provide education that was relevant to the national interests and government policies. Efforts towards poverty reduction that came into effect in 2003 had still not been met. The first cycle of the Vision 2030 which laid emphasis on quality higher education to drive Kenya to a middle income country was gaining momentum along with the Millennium Development Goals and Sustainable Development Goals. The narrative of developing critical human resource and responsible citizens to contribute to economic development became imperative.

The existing legal structures in the form of the Universities Act 2012 which provided for a university in each county added momentum. It was not surprising that political pressure and completion from leaders took advantage to lobby for the establishment of such institutions in different parts of the country.

Events at the global level added another dimension. It became clear that without more and better higher education, developing countries would find it increasingly difficult to benefit from the global knowledge economy. Increase in the number of universities and therefore increase in university graduates appeared to be the most possible strategy to leverage. The world economy is changing as knowledge supplants physical capital as the source of present and future wealth particularly with technology driving much of the process. Whoever has a piece of this cake would place themselves at a point of advantage.

One other reason that made it possible for government to concede to the creation of new universities was a decision that was made a decade earlier. In 2003 the Government introduced free and compulsory primary education. The numbers of students seeking admission who may have benefitted from this became clear in 2012. Flow from increased access at secondary level.

Significant developments

It was expected that Kibabii University would contribute to the generation of knowledge which was becoming increasingly critical to national competencies and strides have been made in this direction. Kibabii University has identified and taken advantage of the opportunities available and has made significant developments in its short period of existence. These include:

i. *Increased autonomy to Universities*

Academics thrive when they are given the liberty to pursue original and timely issues, and the space to provide critical analysis. Their work, in turn, challenges society to grow and improve. Currently 25 per cent of African states constitutionally protect academic freedom. Documents like the *Dar es Salaam Declaration on Academic Freedom and Social Responsibility of Academics*, and the *Kampala Declaration on Intellectual Freedom and Social Responsibility* are also encouraging

In line with these declarations, the Government of Kenya has directed State corporations including universities, to embrace modern business management practices. State corporations boards have therefore been accorded relative autonomy in running their respective organisations. KIBU has seized upon this opportunity to position itself as a major player in innovative research, technology development and transfer. This has been possible due to cordial relationships with regulatory entities, engagement with other stakeholders including the public through its outreach programmes

ii. *Increased awareness on the role of STI in sustainable development*

In the recent past, the government has recognised the important role of STI in sustainable national development. To this end, it has not only increased the number of STI institutions but also increased funding for STI activities. KIBU as a TVET institution has taken advantage of this opportunity to prioritise its activities with flagship projects being STI based.

iii. Increased enrolment

The enrolment trend from 2012 reveals that figures have been rising exponentially and more and more students have over the few years have identified Kibabii as a university of their choice. This is evidenced by the number of PSSP students which has been rising steadily with encouraging gender and ethnic distribution across programmes. In line with the vision,

Review and development of Programmes

In line with the vision, quality and relevance of programmes is a strategic focus of Kibabii University. Previously academic programmes were those inherited from MMUST. After graduation and as one of the requirements by CUE it was found imperative to address issue of quality and relevance of programmes. A successful Curriculum review and Accreditation process for existing programmes has been undertaken incorporating inbuilt quality assurance characteristics such as evaluation of lecturers by students, external moderations and alignment to CUE and ISO standards

In addition, new programmes such as Nursing have been developed to address key development and social issues in the county, region and beyond.

Physical development

Like the rest of the university colleges, Kibabii inherited incomplete structures of the Kibabii Diploma Teacher Training College. With support from the National and County governments, Kibabii University has been able to complete the stalled tuition block. Offices and laboratories. Management. This has facilitated hosting technology materials, ease delivery of lectures, assessment, consultations. Improved Internet access has blended electronic learning and assessment methods to advantage of the academic community.

Reasons for success

The significant strides have been possible due to Clear vision of units and university, Direction for strategic planning with efforts popularize the concept among faculty, students and administration, strict compliance with Stewardship Laws (mwongozo) and other statutory requirements and stakeholder consultations

Challenges

The rise in student numbers has been most dramatic in public universities compared to their private sector counterparts, with the bulk of enrolments occurring in the public sector (Mutula 2002; Ngome 2013). Enrolments in public universities increased steadily from 3,443 students in 1970 to about 20,000 students by 1989/1990 (Ministry of Education 2012). The numbers sky-rocketed with the 1990 intake of 21,450 students, increasing to a total of 41,000 students. By 1998/1999, total enrolment in public universities had climbed to 42,020 students (Mutula 2002), reaching 67,558 students in 2003/2004. The number increased to 159,752 students by 2009/2010, reaching 198,260 students in 2010/11 and about 240,551 students in 2011/12 (ICEF Monitor 2015; Ministry of Education 2012; Nganga 2014; SoftKenya n.d). By the end of 2013, enrolments in public universities had reached 276,349 students (ICEF Monitor 2015; Nganga 2014). The dramatic growth in enrolments in 2013 resulted from the admission of record numbers of students by public universities, beating their fast-growing private sector rivals and defying infrastructure constraints that have been dogging them. Despite the surge in student numbers, higher education faces numerous challenges, frustrating its ability to produce more quality graduates. These include:

1) *Inadequate requisite Infrastructure*

The University is still in the process of building the requisite infrastructure and therefore certain facilities needed for conduct of research such as highly equipped laboratories are not in place. Like most young

Universities KIBU was established in facilities utilized by tertiary institutions of training /learning. Such inherited structures in most cases do not depict a University aura. Even those constructed through government funding are grossly inadequate and do not meet current needs of staff and student rising population. Due to paucity of the facilities, Kibabii University is unable to attract and retain qualified and experienced staff particularly from other parts of Kenya.

Poor and inadequate infrastructure has often led to congestion in the library, lecture rooms, laboratories and catering.

2) *Inadequate collaboration*

Although the University is already collaborating with other peer academic and research institutions and development partners, this remains inadequate and needs enhancement in a globalized education system to improve on student/staff exchange and Public and Private Partnerships (PPP) especially in establishing of suitable accommodation facilities. Being a relatively nascent University, KIBU is still in the process of establishing and operationalising the requisite infrastructure, structures and systems to enable it to fully meet its mandate in development and also to be recognised internationally.

3) *Relatively low visibility amongst peers*

The visibility of KIBU is still low and is partly attributed to *Inadequate ICT capacity*. ICT is a key driver for research, innovation, technology development and transfer. The current ICT infrastructure at KIBU is not adequate to support the growing demands for its services. Teaching methods are outmoded. Rote learning is common. A more enlightened view of learning is urgently needed, emphasizing active intellectual engagement, participation, and discovery, rather than the passive absorption of facts..

4) *Inadequate human resource*

Numbers and quality. Majority are holders of masters degrees. These are unable to provide academic leadership and capacity in cutting edge research that would attract funding. The other dimension is administrative staff. As a result, institutions make do with officers who have little grasp of operations in institutions of higher learning and are unable to give direction and stewardship in terms of development of policy, financial management, human resource /labour issues and principles of corporate governance.

Funding (*Budgetary*) Constraints

Currently, Kibabii University draws its funding from the National Government. As presented in table 1, the funds are grossly inadequate for KIBU's activities. Being in a nascent Institution, KIBU needs a large pool of developmental and recurrent expenditure..

Exchequer grants for the period 2012 to 2017

Financial year	Recurrent	Capital development
2012/2013	178,900,000.00	33,587,515.00
2013/2014	206,505,672.00	50,223,809.00
2014/2015	231,670,749.00	177,746,667.00
2015/2016	281,558,795.00	100,994,714.00
2016/2017		235,000,000.00
Total		

In addition, the policy requirements that funds are released against completion certificates meant that KIBU missed on 2013 and 2014 allocations on development capitation. This is great setback on requisite infrastructural development needed to meet the basic requirements. With poor structures, the University is unable to attract fee paying student raise enough appropriation in aid (A- in A) and since ability to invest in other income generating projects is limited. It is thus not possible to raise A-in-A to supplement and complement Government funding.

Geographical Location

Universities established in the rural settings with no complement infrastructure including all weather roads, power supply, fixed line or even mobile telephone connections, internet services, appropriate medical services, accommodation facilities, etc find it difficult to attract and retain qualified staff and students. For instance, Commission for University Education has outlawed pit latrines on university campuses but in the rural areas without reliable water supply, this becomes the only remedy.

Local population expectations and External interference

External interference from political circles and local leadership which has been exacerbated by devolution. It is common for communities to demand for their own in the appointment of academic and administrative staff. There is discernible element of tribalism, nepotism and favouritism at the expense of quality. Unfortunately this has also infiltrated students' minds, relations and leadership. There is an emerging trend of rising ethnicity among staff and students. Politicization: while it has helped address injustices and promote democracy, in many instance it has inappropriately disrupted campus life.

Problems faced by students

Difficult conditions for study. Overcrowded classroom, inadequate library and laboratory facilities, distracting living conditions and few student services if any. Cost of education: Roughly 15% of students are unable to raise fees and pay for upkeep. For one reason or the other, these are the ones normally left out of the Higher Education Loans Board safety net. Even when they benefit, they are rarely allocated the full amount applied for. Of great concern is that some of the underprivileged use this meagre resource to also support siblings back home. Many students start studies academically unprepared for higher education and the drastic shift from employment based to entrepreneurial training.

Way forward

Debate about higher education must be informed by historical and comparative knowledge about contribution of higher education to social, economic and political development-but also should take clear account of the challenges the future will bring.

- Manager should be: competent, hardworking, forward looking, effective management, and communication skills, professionalism, ethics, flexibility among qualities expected.
- Cost cutting measures: School practice. Restricted to within the region, cost of operations reduced, phase out campuses, right sizing staff, out sourcing, use of staff on contract. Strategies to decrease medical bills.
- Need for dialogue-national conversation. Higher education no longer a luxury. It is essential to national social and economic development.
- Reshaping response to on-going challenges.
- Strengthen research capacity
- Controlling expansion
- Improving the process of identifying and initiating reform. Innovative reforms: ERP. Transformative reforms: Modules
- Winning the support and collaboration of stakeholder groups. People here should give ideas.

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