

Community Engagement in African Universities

Perspectives, Prospects
and Challenges

Edited by

**Julia Preece,
Peggy Gabo Ntseane,
Oitshepile MmaB Modise
and Mike Osborne**

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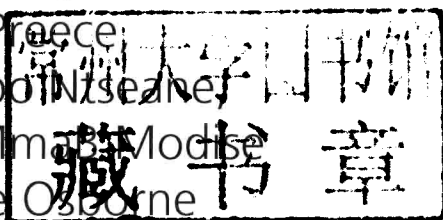
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The African university and community engagement in context

Julia Preece, Peggy Gabo Ntseane, Oitshepile MmaB Modise
and Mike Osborne

Introduction

In the mid-19th century, in the transition from the slave trade to the imposition of colonial rule, those who were asking for an African university saw the mission of the university as the mental liberation of the African from the shackles that slavery and religious dogma had imposed. Hence they wanted a secular university, emphasizing African and classical studies, science and technology. What they got were Fourah Bay College and Fort Hare. In the colonial period, they saw the mission of the university as the renaissance of Africa, emancipation from colonial rule and the establishment of African nations able to take their place in the 'comity' of civilized nations of the world. In the period of decolonisation, they saw the university as part of the effort to bring the nation into being, having the same mission as the nation, that is mental, economic and political de-colonisation. After independence, the university people found that they were no longer the ones defining the mission: the state did and universities took their cue from that to define their role. It was the state that crystallized the mission as Development. (Ajayi et al., 1996, p. 187)

The above extract summarises the changing fortunes of African universities over a period of approximately one hundred years. This chapter elaborates on that summary, contextualising the specific historical circumstances pertaining to higher education in African contexts and positioning the African university

within contemporary world debates that give rise to a renewed global emphasis on universities and the notion of ‘engagement’.

We start with the origins of the university in Africa and a reflection on the philosophical heritage of learning within the African continent. We move chronologically through some key milestones that have influenced the development, mission and fortunes of higher education in African countries before moving to the current context. We then discuss the different ways in which the authors of this book position and describe their selective experiences or perspectives of the university’s engagement mission in the current century. A section on regionalism and engagement places the book within debates around lifelong learning and the notion that universities have a role to play within learning regions or cities. Linked to that is an introduction to the notions of community engagement and service learning, which have become popular in southern Africa, followed by a brief discussion of some critiques of these concepts. Finally, this chapter outlines the structure of the book as a whole and how the subsequent chapters contribute to that structure.

Early beginnings

Only a handful of publications have traced the evolution of African universities (Ngara, 1995; Lulat, 2005; Ajayi *et al.*, 1996) though these can be supplemented by country-specific references, literature on lifelong learning in Africa, UNESCO and World Bank publications and more recent debates about higher education and globalisation (Teferra and Greijn, 2010; Association of African Universities, 2004; Zeleza and Olukoshi, 2004). The continent’s unique experiences of slavery, missionary interventions, colonialism, post-colonialism and externally imposed development discourses created a distinctly disruptive identity for African universities and populations at local, national and regional levels. The legacy of these periods in history continues to impact on contemporary efforts by institutions to position themselves on the global stage.

The oral tradition of learning in African contexts is now well articulated (Fordjor *et al.*, 2003; Amutabi and Oketch, 2009). It consisted of age-related, holistic and graded learning where all community members were socialised into cultural, philosophical, occupational and moral roles by various members of their community with the aim of serving the needs of society. Experts in medicine, science, religion and philosophy would travel between communities, thus creating a community of oral scholars with a designated status of

wisdom, based on their reputation and experience. But the epistemological basis of the learning was essentially spiritual, rather than following the Cartesian rationality of Western thinking: 'its epistemology placed emphasis not so much on rationality as on the deeper meaning and the power of words, particularly the names of things' (Ajayi *et al.*, 1996, p. 4). While such forms of knowledge construction are gaining more credence in current thinking (Ntuli, 2002), the colonial enterprise created a disjuncture between traditional African thought and Western thought, and destruction of any natural evolution of an African knowledge base in its own right, with consequences for African identity and scholarship.

Ajayi *et al.* (1996, p. 5) provide the most comprehensive record of university origins in Africa, highlighting the continent's pre-colonial written contributions to international knowledge as well as its oral traditions for higher learning. They show that the roots of the university as a 'community of scholars' can be traced to the Alexandria Museum and Library during the third century BC in Egypt. A strong influence on early scholarship was the monastic life, which attracted teachers and religious guides to live together as contemplatives while, in the Islamic tradition, as Muslims moved across Africa, madrasas served similar purposes. These early traditions were severely disrupted from the fifteenth century onwards by European slave traders, who introduced highly selective Western-style elementary schools at trading stations to serve the slave trade. During the nineteenth century, further educational interventions by Western missionaries served the interests of spreading Christianity. An example of a higher education institution for this purpose was Fourah Bay College, founded in 1826 in Sierra Leone. Colonial expansion rapidly followed with subsequent education systems modelled on European institutions.

Among the anglophone colonies, the British Advisory Committee on Education in the Colonies established a more formalised education system in 1923, which included a few university colleges strategically positioned to serve the administration needs of the colonial masters. By the 1930s, selective higher education was identified as a strategy to undermine traditional chieftainship leadership under the hegemonic guise of responding to increased indigenous demand for educational expansion. In 1837, the British government, in anticipation of future decolonisation, sponsored the De La Warr Commission for East Africa, followed in 1945 by the Asquith and Elliott commissions, 'so as to produce an elite of good quality leaders' (*ibid.*, p. 55) for West and Central Africa.

Thus a number of university colleges were established under the parenthood of British universities and many of these introduced adult education and extra-mural departments. This followed the British tradition of outreach and extra-mural work as part of the university's mission to educate the wider public, including provision of literacy programmes (Amutabi and Oketch, 2009, pp. 78–9). The trend was to create one regional or national university to serve the nation. Early universities included Fourah Bay College in Sierra Leone; the University of Cape Town, founded in 1952; University College, Gold Coast, Ghana, founded in 1949; and the Nigerian University College, Ibadan, founded in 1948. Later additions during the 1960s included the University College of Rhodesia; the University of Kenya; University College, Nairobi; and the University of Zambia.

Similar initiatives took place in francophone and lusophone Africa, but with less emphasis on adult education. For instance, the Université Cheikh Anta Diop de Dakar (UCAD) was established in Senegal in the same period and linked to the University of Bordeaux with programmes that mimicked the French system (Crossman, 1999). In this book, chapter 7 makes reference to the Arabic and French influences in Senegal.

However, enrolments in these institutions were generally pitifully low and the number of universities was very limited. Benneh *et al.* (2004), for instance, state that in 1960 there were only six universities in sub-Saharan Africa, though Sawyerr's (2004) observation that 18 out of 48 countries had universities or university colleges in the same period suggests that many of the universities were serving more than one country.

During the 1960s, the height of decolonisation, a number of initiatives took place to promote the Africanisation of universities and the establishment of new universities or new campuses of existing national universities. Key milestones are outlined below.

In 1961, the Conference of African States at Addis Ababa was organised to plan for African educational development at primary, secondary and higher education levels (UNESCO, 1963). Each country was required to prepare higher education development plans with a focus on increasing enrolments. In 1962, a UNESCO conference in Tananarive on the development of higher education in Africa (UNESCO, 1963) focused specifically on the role of higher education for social and economic reconstruction, with an expansion plan up to 1980. Because of the need to share limited resources, the Associ-

ation of African Universities (AAU) was initiated in 1967 with a view to establishing regional cooperation in the promotion of Africanised universities and appreciation of African culture and heritage (Ajayi *et al.*, 1996). Chapter 8 in this book reports on recent collaborative projects that were funded by the AAU to this end.

The notion of ‘Africanisation’ essentially embraced two concepts – the transfer of ownership of curriculum and management of higher education institutions and also the redirection of mission to address national and regional development needs. The Africanisation process has become an ongoing project, largely because African nations have never really been in charge of their own development mission. A number of chapters in this book, for example chapter 5, refer to the African knowledge base as an issue in this respect.

The African university and its mission

At the point of independence, the African university was faced with multiple challenges. First, many countries inherited extremely poor infrastructures. Botswana in 1966, for instance, had only 12 km of tarred road, 22 university graduates and 100 secondary school leavers (Obasi, 2011). Second, the colonial regime had divided and ruled African nations in ways that had fuelled tribal rivalries rather than supporting natural boundaries. Third, the education that was available had been modelled on Western academic curricula designed for the narrow administrative needs of colonial civil servants. This issue is referred to in a number of chapters but particularly in chapter 3 by Modise and Mosweunyane. Universities were largely staffed by expatriates and even those who were local citizens had usually been educated overseas. Fourth, African universities required international assistance to achieve their development tasks. Fifth, the newly constituted governments were keen to take ownership of their own institutions after being subject to so many years of external rule. Universities became parastatals. The indigenous academic population supported this aspiration in the face of opposition from expatriate staff who were keen to promote the traditions of academic freedom and keep the university in the British model of separation from the state (Ajayi *et al.*, 1996).

These tensions continue to be played out in the mission of African universities. For instance, most national university vice chancellors are appointed by governments based on political affiliation. Their chancellors are usually the national president or sovereign head of state and politicians continue to view

with suspicion any critical appraisal by higher education institutions of government itself. Many universities are therefore subject to government control over senior staff appointments, curriculum content, research and publications.

During independence, the African university focused on serving national development needs, contributing to building national identity and developing an African-based scholarship that would contribute to an African knowledge base. It was recognised, however, that the task was so large that universities would need to work cooperatively and required international assistance. Thus the UNESCO conference of 1962 made this commitment:

While wishing to make its full contribution to the universal stock of knowledge, African higher education must aspire to give African peoples their rightful place and to cement African unity forever. Towards this end, the African university must regard itself as the cultural centre of the community in which it is placed and the guardian and proponent of its artistic, literary and musical heritage ... in view of the fact that until recently education in Africa has been largely oriented towards the culture of foreign peoples, the African university must correct this imbalance by adapting the content of both its teaching and research specifically towards African problems ... by the progressive africanisation of the staff ... Far from becoming ivory towers detached from the society in which they are situated, higher education institutions in Africa must be in close and constant touch with society, both through their extra-mural departments and through all those activities which can contribute towards preserving the African heritage ... In order to perform their tasks effectively, African universities must enjoy traditional academic freedom to the fullest extent possible. (UNESCO, 1963, p. 12)

In many ways, therefore, the African university was positioned to respond to the very same mission of engagement for development that characterises today's discourses. Indeed, there are examples during the 1960s and 1970s of highly focused engagement activities where governments steered universities towards nation building. One of the most famous examples is that of Julius Nyerere in Tanzania, who recorded his development goals in the Arusha Declaration of 1967 (Ajayi *et al.*, 1996, p. 118). Nyerere's socialist approach insisted on direct links between the university and village communities. Academic and government staff were often interchangeable.

Students were required to contribute to community service during long holidays and village leaders' assessment of their behaviour would contribute to their academic qualifications. The university also provided a range of adult education opportunities for the wider population. Similar initiatives took place in Uganda with Makerere University, which is discussed in chapter 9.

Further international efforts within Africa attempted to promote a home-grown version of the African university. The AAU, for instance, organised a workshop in Accra in 1972, 'Creating the African University':

The truly African university must be one that draws its inspiration from its environment; not a transplanted tree, but one growing from a seed that is planted and nurtured in the African soil. (Cited in Ajayi et al., 1996, p. 91)

This resulted in 1973 in what came to be known as the 'Yesufu model' (Ngara, 1995), which attempted to formulate a mission for the African university:

It follows that an emergent African university must, henceforth, be much more than an institution for teaching, research and dissemination of higher learning. It must be accountable to, and serve, the vast majority of the people who live in the rural areas. The African university must be committed to active participation in social transformation, economic modernization, and the training and upgrading of the total human resources of the nation, not just of a small elite. (Yesufu, 1973, p. 41, cited in Ajayi et al., 1996, p. 112)

Yesufu identified six main functions of the African university, which included promotion of social and economic modernisation, intercontinental unity and international understanding, as well as manpower development. Ngara (1995), however, states that the mission was not formally adopted by African universities. He offers his own mission adaptation of the Yesufu model which includes, in addition to teaching and research, 'fostering moral values and raising social consciousness' plus 'consultancy' and 'other community focused activities' (Ngara, 1995, p. 31). Like Yesufu, he argues that the liberal ideology of pursuit of knowledge for its own sake was not enough in a development context; 'universities should ... be mindful of the needs of society' (*ibid.*, p. 40).