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Introduction and Background to the Study

Introduction

The emergence of private higher education in most of Africa in the last two decades has been one of the remarkable transformations related to the provision of higher education in the continent. In the main, the private higher education sector is small compared to traditional public provision. The forces that have led to the emergence of the sector in the continent are two-fold. Internally has been increasingly demand that the weak economies of African countries were unable to finance through public provision. At the international level, economic globalisation necessitated liberalisation of social service provision in individual countries and the subjection of demand and supply of such services to market logics. Higher education in Africa has increasingly been subjected to this market logic. This study analyses how the developments are affecting higher education provision in Kenya in respect to equity and knowledge production. These two tasks have traditionally been critical mandates that higher education was to contribute towards their achievement. The scope of the study is limited to the university sector of higher education. This sector has not only been the dominant, but also new entrants are exclusively interested in offering university level programmes. The study is presented in five sections. Section one conceptualises private higher education within the current discourse and then analyses the push factors for privatisation and private higher education in developing countries. The research issues that these developments have posed to higher education in Africa generally and Kenya in particular are raised within the context of this study. The second section reviews and profiles the evolution and historical development of private higher education in Kenya. Section three and four respectively analyse the effects of privatisation and private higher education on equity issues and research in Kenya. The last section discusses some challenges and prospects related to the growth of privatisation and private higher education in Kenya.

Conceptual and theoretical issues in privatisation and private higher education

In both the developed and developing countries, a new paradigm in the offering of higher education emerged from the 1980s. The emergence of the new paradigm was closely linked to a changed policy environment at a global level where government as the guarantor of public interest ceded control and ownership of capital to the private sector. Higher education was conceived crucial both in energising the transition from a public to a private sector-driven economy and in terms of producing the human capital required to consolidate the process. Before this paradigm change, higher education provision in most of the world was a public concern, in terms of both financing and function. Conceived as a post-war development strategy, countries continued to spend huge financial outlays in higher education systems to produce the human capital required for reconstruction. For example, up to the 1980s, 95 percent and 80 percent of students in Western Europe and the United States attended public universities respectively, while in Africa and Asia, public provision still continue to dominate the university sector (Varghese 2004).

The coupling together of the processes towards privatisation of public capital enterprises and higher education has altered the core focus of the mandates of higher education institutions. While the post war imperatives on which universities laid claim to public resources required that they execute their mandates in response to the needs of the wider public, privatisation requires that universities respond to the skill needs of private firms and individuals. This has been captured in the pressure for universities to teach 'market driven courses'. Such demands have led to changes in the traditional liberal curricula of universities. Skills in Business Administration and Information Technology have been the most sought-after, making universities compete for students in these areas, to the disregard of skill needs in other areas like medicine where developing countries face critical human capital shortages.

In most of Africa, the growth of privatisation and private higher education has been more a response to the global pressures than tangible internal policy forecasting to embrace private higher education. The pressures of globalisation and the inclusion of higher education in the World Trade Organisation's list of tradable goods target to open higher education markets in developing countries to strong established providers from the developed countries. Whereas higher education institutions in developing countries cannot compete with those of the developed countries in terms of the investments needed to make their higher education systems attract international students, the entry of strong private providers has began to radically alter the culture and practices of university institutions of Africa. Non-self supporting departments are being scrapped; introducing programmes based on their capacity to attract students and generate revenue, and the outsourcing of services have become common in African universities, and to the extent that no pause is, being made to relate these practices to the development needs of the countries.

In a discussion on the development of private higher education in Africa, Varghese (2004: 6-8) draws a distinction between privatisation of higher education and private higher education. Privatisation refers to the application of private sector or market principles in the operation and management of private higher education institutions while their ownership remains in the public realm. Privatisation can be partial or total depending on the degree to which the operation and management of the institutions have been ceded to private control. Most public universities in Africa have adopted the partial mode that has entailed introduction of partial tuition charges for students on public subsidy and mounting of parallel programmes where some students pay full tuition fees. Other universities have established private companies to run their income generating units and sold out catering and accommodation services to private entities. These developments are what have marked the privatisation of services, introduction of cost sharing and corporatisation of university management in most African countries.

Private higher education on the other hand indicates the growth of new higher education institutions that are wholly owned and operated by the private sector. This sector does not depend on any direct government funding for its growth and expansion. There are, however, cases where the government indirectly funds certain operations related to the regulation of the private institutions to protect the public interest. In Kenya, the operations of the Commission for Higher Education (CHE), which accredits and regulates the operations of private universities, are financed by the public. The government also provides tuition loans to students in private university institutions. As Varghese (2004) notes generally on Africa, and Levy (2003), specifically with regard to South Africa, private universities can take on diverse forms. The two types common in Africa are the 'for-profit' institutions and the 'not-for-profit' institutions. The 'not-for-profit' institutions, especially in the case of Kenya, are religious based institutions but integrate a secular curriculum in their academic programmes. The impression created is that the first types of institution operate to generate profit while the second charge to recover operating costs without realising a profit. However as this study will show, both institutions engage in market-like behaviour which entails the generation of profit. This position is indicated by the almost uniform amount of charges that both types of institutions levy for their services.

Privatisation and private higher education in Africa raise concerns related to how effective the private sector can be in executing the traditional mandates of higher education. Basically, the traditional role of universities can be categorised into three: the achievement of equity and the production of a high level workforce through teaching and learning; the development and application of new knowledge for the benefit of society through research, especially basic research; and the provision of public service to society (Mohamedbhai 1998). Ideally, public universities have been created on this logic. This is not to imply, however, that private higher education cannot encompass this function. It ideally depends on the extent that the logic of privatisation permits private higher education institutions to transcend social stratifications in their mandates.

Traditionally, as Adrianna Kezar (2004: 430) shows, the public role of higher education has focussed on educating citizens for democratic engagement. This entailed supporting local and regional communities, preserving knowledge and making it available to the community. This represented the social charter between higher education and society built on the communitarian philosophy of the public good. Transformations that have taken place from the 1980s have however introduced a new logic in the establishment of universities. The new logic emphasises the role of universities along the capitalist line of producing wealth and the success in earning it (Apple 1993). This latter logic, operationalised through the privatisation and marketisation of university education, leads naturally to the moral condemnation of those who fail to contribute to the production of profit. This logic has been applied in establishing private universities in most developing countries. The impetus for the application of the market logic in higher education has not been entirely the failure of public universities to respond to the traditional challenges, but rather, a response to changes in global capitalism. These changes have encouraged the entrepreneurial model of higher education where students are regarded as 'customers' and education a 'product'. The model makes universities good places for business, and requires less public funding. However, the implications for education may vary. These transformations may not necessarily be in consonant with the development challenges of developing countries, where increasingly, for profit higher education institutions are being established.

Privatisation and private higher education have been consequences of the broad influences of globalisation as a social, political and economic discourse. Underlying globalisation has been the neo-liberal argument about the role of the state in the economy, reduction of state expenditure, especially in subsidising social services, deregulation and liberalisation. Various practices and policies have been formulated in higher education institutions to have them conform to the new arrangements. These practices are referred variously as privatisation, commercialisation, marketisation, and corporatisation. All these terms put a premium on the organisational acumen of universities to generate their own operational costs and retain profit through engaging in business practices. Privatisation in higher education has therefore been marked by a gradual process of leaving the public sector of purely state supported services and moving towards greater self-sustainability (Johnson 2000:13).

With respect to Kenya, privatisation of higher education has taken four trajectories. The first has been the establishment of a variety of foreign and local private institutions to offer university level education. The second trajectory has been a variant of multi-nationalisation. This entails the linking of academic institutions or programmes of other countries with other institutions in Kenya. A student can be awarded a degree of a university in Australia, through a local institution that does not have a higher education 'status' but has entered into a twinning arrangement with the foreign university. The third is the investment of private resources often from corporate multinationals to fund and influence the nature of teaching and research both in public and private universities. The last and most controversial has been the semi-privatisation of public higher education institutions.

For developing countries, especially those in Africa, to benefit and participate in the new knowledge economy, their systems of higher education have to be more inclusive, and provide high quality training relevant to the needs of the local communities where they are located (Teffera & Altbach 2003, Mamdani 1993). Quality knowledge and training is a key component of competitiveness and crucial part of the country's development path. Since private universities, especially in Africa, have been established not in accordance with the public 'ideology' but that of the market, it is imperative to analyse how they respond to the challenges of national development. This is important because in several respects, the market logic goes against the developmental logic of the state. Preliminary studies from South Africa show that marketisation of university education and issues of equity are incompatible (Chachage 2001).

The practical operation of privatisation and private higher education differs from one country to the other depending on prevailing local conditions. Resources for investment in private higher education institutions can for example be generated from different sources. The origin and manner the resources are generated determine the direction the institutions develop in relationship to local issues affecting equity and knowledge production. Such resources can be provided by nationals and foreigners. The private sector can also denote an individual entrepreneur, a group of individuals or a private firm. The onus of a privatised higher education system is that public resources generated through taxation are not used to run these institutions, both in terms of financing recurrent and development expenditure nor in terms of being a source from where student can draw tuition support.

In discussing higher education privatisation, Ana-Maria Dima (2004) conceptualises the three concepts of deregulation, privatisation, and liberalisation as driving forces for globalisation within a local context. Deregulation and privatisation are conceived as forms of liberalising higher education markets (See also Dill 1997). By allowing private providers, governments have introduced higher education as a service on the market to be offered by those who seek profit and consumed by those who can comprehensively pay for it. The market rationale is a key logic in the liberalisation literature. Privatisation and liberalisation work in unison symbiotically speaking. Through liberalisation, a country permits providers other than the public to participate in offering higher education. It refers to a relaxation of various restrictions that limited the provision of higher education to the government. By liberalising therefore, a country logically privatises provision of higher education. Unlike privatisation that may be limited to nationals, liberalisation creates a scenario where foreigners can participate in providing education as a private good.

Privatisation however can be total or a question of degree. This is true of most developing countries that have vested public interests in public universities and have therefore resorted to gradual privatisation. Various degrees of private higher education do exist and as earlier noted, range from purely private institutions, to quasi-private ones. The difference in degree is often marked by the extent to which the private/public dichotomy is maintained. Where there is a degree of fusion in the responsibilities, then a situation of quasi-public, quasi-private occurs. For example in Kenya, students in private universities now qualify for a loan from a central kitty funded by taxpayers. The private students in public universities are taught by lecturers paid by the central government and treat payment from parallel students as overtime. Purely private universities without staff training programmes depend also on lecturers from public universities, most of who have been trained through forms of public sponsorship. A very independent self-regulating private higher education sector has not therefore emerged in Kenya although the private universities tend more towards pure privatisation.

In certain instances, privatisation of public universities has resulted to service provision by private firms. The University of Nairobi, the oldest and largest public university in Kenya, formed a private company that manages its private academic programmes and other income generating activities. All these are forms and scenarios of privatisation that exist in Kenya. Last is the idea of marketisation; a process of subjecting higher education provision to the economic rules that regulate buying and selling in the market place with profit maximisation as the overriding motivation. In this respect, institutions that offer additional services compete for clients, in this case students. Competition however is not the only market condition. The nature of expectation on the demand side conditions the type and quality of education services provided. One of the most cited reasons for privatisation and liberalisation of higher education in Kenya is that institutions are trying to respond to market expectations. In this age of globalisation, the market can take the form of national private firms, multinational corporations, state enterprises, and individuals. It is also likely that the expectations of the different market players can be divergent. In principle, this will necessitate a diversity of higher education institutions each responding to specific market niches or diversified programmes within individual institutions. In situations where institutional diversity has not occurred, then the issue is how individuals have to meet the various expectations.

Two issues are of concern as regards the marketisation of educational services. The first is related to the safeguards of the public interest, especially in instances where public universities have privatised and liberalised their programmes. Given the various players and the heterogeneity of the market, it is possible that universities as public institutions will respond to the interests of the private market forces — private firms, individuals and multinational corporations — and abandon the public service mission, or the public expectation from their operations. Put it another way, in the era of globalisation, higher education institutions may increasing satisfy the narrow, but influential interests of private corporations and individuals to the detriment of national development imperatives. The second issue and one that this study addresses is the type of knowledge produced in private degree programmes. Most academic programmes that are offered in privatised higher education systems are of the 'executive' type that emphasise applied as opposed to basic knowledge and trans-disciplinary as opposed to the compartmentalised knowledge forged by traditional higher education set-ups. The traditional research and dissemination functions of universities are increasingly overshadowed by short-term commissioned applied research and consultancies. In the developing country context, this means that higher education institutions are going to be conveyor belts of knowledge produced elsewhere, which may well be suitable to the functioning of the multinational corporation regarding profitability, but culturally inappropriate to the sustainability of local firms.

The present study therefore conceptualises privatisation, liberalisation and marketisation as nation-state policies and practices that energise the processes of globalisation and internationalisation of education. The key concern is what extreme processes of globalisation will imply for higher education in developing countries like Kenya. Developing countries do not have strong universities of international repute to attract large numbers of tuition-paying international students. They also may not boost enormous indigenous capital that can be invested in private higher education. This means they will be net importers and consumers of education services from the western countries. Countries like Kenya have more than half of their population living below the poverty line. This population is unlikely to benefit from higher education offered on the market. These concerns cause reflection on the issue of whether globalisation and privatisation of higher education may not turn into the neo-colonialism of the twenty-first century (Altbach 2004).

From public to private higher education in developing countries

From the time of their inception, a marked feature of higher education institutions in developing countries was their structure and stature as public institutions. This situation still obtains to some degree at the level of financing and administration. Such features of higher education provision were not, however, unique to developing countries. They are a historical tradition that European colonialism transplanted to the colonies. To this extent therefore, the European model of a university, as a public institution tasked with a public responsibility, was institutionalised as a universal phenomenon. In most parts of the developing world, more especially in Africa, the European model of higher education provision largely reigns. This is manifested by the volume of public supported students in public, and of late, private universities, though such government subsidies have been declining. The public responsibility of the European model university, and therefore, the basis of their claim to public resources, is grounded in their task of providing training in specialised areas. They act as niches for discovery and transmission of new knowledge and as avenues for socialisation in social and political values. Such responsibilities provide parameters for gauging the relevance of universities to society, be they public or private.

Conceptually, higher education comprises various post-secondary education and training institutions. In Kenya, the institutions include a range of middle level colleges. These colleges are important training grounds for vocational skills. They feed the economy with a workforce equipped with skills that do not require the long-term professional training as is given at the universities. The extent to which these colleges have been affected by privatisation of higher education is varied. There are those that were quasi-private such as the Harambee Institutes of Technology established by community efforts. Others, such as the training institutions under various ministries, were purely public. Yet others were purely private, run by either religious bodies and or private concerns. Kenya also has four national polytechnics. These are at Mombasa, Nairobi, Eldoret and Kisumu. They offer academic programmes up to the Higher National Diploma level. The polytechnics have resisted attempts to suck them into the national university system but want to evolve to university level institutions on their own. The middle level institutions have however been sucked into the privatisation frenzy through mechanisms of accreditation, collaboration and twinning programmes with public and foreign private universities. The many colleges constitute the non-university sector of higher education in Kenya. The focus of this study does not include this non-university sector. It is limited to the public and private degree-awarding universities in the country. This is because of their status in terms of setting trends in higher education.

The model of a pure public higher education system, more in terms of financing but less in its function, has been eroded over time. The reasons for these are not exclusively limited to financial explanations. Universities serve social, economic and political purposes. The logic of internationalisation towards the end of the twentieth century dictated that such ends could be better served if knowledge production and dissemination were managed as a private enterprise. In the developed world, trends towards private initiatives in the provision and management of higher education institutions grew alongside the expansion of the industrial middle class in the nineteenth century and the acceptance of private enterprise as a driving force for economic development. The history of the establishment and operation of universities in these countries is long. Universities here have grown into diverse and complex institutions. There are systems of pure public and pure private universities with varying degrees of public support in the continuum. These ensure that their responsibilities converge to the extent that they contribute to greater public good regardless of their sources of funding. In the developing countries, especially those of sub-Saharan Africa, universities are still few compared to social demand. Institutional diversity is also limited as much as sources of their funding. It is not therefore possible to establish universities in terms of specialisations as either purely teaching or purely research institutions. Even when they have been set up as private institutions, the expectations have been that they strike a balance between teaching, research and public service. These are the expectations that made most African countries reluctant to embrace private higher education in earnest.

Privatisation of higher education gained momentum in most of Africa from the 1990s. This was due to circumstances that the political elite could not circumvent. These circumstances were both internal and external. The internal dynamics relate to the increased demand for access to higher education, and the lack of expansion of higher education institutions. Demographic and developmental imperatives fuelled a desire for increased access from hitherto excluded groups, and the continued expectation for higher education to provide trained personnel for economic development (Banya 2002, World Bank 2000). Having achieved mass primary and secondary education in the 1970s and during part of the 1980s, the political elite in Africa had to expand higher education as part of fulfilling the dreams of independence.

Concomitantly, those who had gone through mass primary and secondary education had come of age and wanted more education at higher levels for social mobility. In the Kenyan context, the number of students admitted to universities under government sponsorship, and the increase in the number of public universities from one institution at independence to five in the early 1990s, was often cited by the political leadership as a credit to their nationalist vision.

The perceived role of higher education in socioeconomic development, particularly, justified government funding of university expansion (Altbach 1992). For their part, universities were expected to reciprocate by providing advanced education, fostering research and scientific development, and participating in the creation and transmission of knowledge through research networks (Saint 1992, UNESCO 1998). These mandates became the yardstick by which relevance and the quality of higher education was measured. Expansion in the number of public university institutions and the volume of students was however short-lived. In the 1970s, both internal and external factors influenced continued investment in and expansion of higher education. Internally, universities were seen as key to the development of work force resources and knowledge needed for the development of the new nations. Externally, the idea of the university as a focus for socioeconomic development received financial support from international organisations, notably the World Bank and OECD countries. However, this optimism waned in the 1980s. The economic crisis discussed of this decade saw public recurrent expenditure per university student fall from US$6,461 in 1975 to US$2,365 in 1983 (Samoff & Carrol 2003). From the mid-1980s, most African economies were too weak to support any expansion of public institutions and even to support existing ones efficiently.

The weak position of sub-Saharan African countries should be understood within a context, which for purposes of this study had a direct impetus for the growth of private, higher education. The context was the world economic recession of the 1980s that was occasioned by the 1973 'oil shocks' and the collapse of the international coffee agreement in 1989. The rise in the price of oil forced African countries into borrowing from the international market to meet internal shortfalls. The collapse of the coffee agreement that had controlled coffee marketing reduced the price of coffee — a major source of foreign exchange earnings. The resulting balance of payments deficit led many countries to increase external borrowing, and hence more debt. By the mid-1980s the option for most of these countries was to default in payments, or to implement Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPS) developed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to continue servicing their debts. For the international community, the African problem was diagnosed not as economic but political. This political problem was rooted in the workings of the one-party state. It was in attempts to cling to a one-party structure in the face of the insistence of western donors to dismantle it that quality higher education and other social services became casualties. While African governments reduced funding to higher education to beef up their political structures, donors diverted funds to institutions and groups that best contributed and manifested their values of 'good governance'.

Donor support for education in Africa in the 1990s was most concentrated in primary education. This was influenced by World Bank studies that now argued that investment at the lower levels of education generated more social returns than higher education whose returns were to the individual. These assertions caused a rethinking in policies for education support among traditional donors. The view that higher education in Africa benefited a few privileged students from elite backgrounds began to circulate. Arguments that resources spent on higher education did not rationally justify the economic criteria of social efficiency began to gain currency among donors. This climaxed during the 1990 world conference on education for all, where investment in basic education was touted to have higher rates of social return compared to higher education. In most of the 1980s and 1990s therefore, donor support to higher education in Africa was substantially reduced. Unfortunately, this was at a time when African economies were increasingly weak due to the consequences of SAPS, and the social demand for access to higher education was so high. Alternatives to address the demand for increased access to higher education had to be sought. Students in higher education institutions also became increasingly entangled in the political and social struggles of their countries, often supporting the opposition to governments of the day. This made governments view them as a threat to stability, rather than as an economic investment they were thought to be at independence. This confluence of internal economic weaknesses, social demand and changing international politics accelerated the development of private higher education. The fact that private institutions entered the scene when the attention of existing governments was focussed on political survival meant that mechanisms of surveillance were lacking. For example in Kenya, although the CHE had been established back in 1985 to oversee the development in the private university sector, this mandate was only officially spelt out in 1989. The operations of CHE as will be seen later have not been backed by adequate government legislation to date, especially with regard to the privatisation of higher education in public institutions.

The other external forces are those that constellate around the process of globalisation. Conceptually, globalisation has been marked by the massive developments in communication and technology, the restructuring of global capitalism, the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War during the last decade of the twentieth century. This development set in motion economic and social trends that stressed profits and market-driven policies as the new centres of power and influence. The trends have come to affect structures through which higher education was offered; the public logic within which higher education was traditionally offered was dissipated in favour of a market-driven private logic as the more efficient model for higher education. Private sector ideas and business practices have been entrenched in publicly funded higher education institutions. Global privatisation, quasi-marketisation and corporate managerial practices increasingly characterise the higher education sector in most countries now (Ntshoe 2003). The overriding principles of globalisation have been in the weakening of the state, the questioning of the tenets of the welfare state, especially with regard to its efficiency in providing social services, and the adoption of a corporate culture in the provision of such services.

Concerning developing countries, globalisation is associated with international competition in the provision of higher education and increasing internationalisation (co-operation) between countries, systems, institutions and individuals in its provision. It is in this respect that cross-border and transnational education have become the major purveyors of globalisation values. These values entail the application of market fundamentals in the provision of higher education and institutional, organisational and behavioural changes that facilitate the commoditisation of their knowledge production capacities. At the level of individual nation states, globalisation has forced a kind of paradigm shift in the manner that higher education has traditionally been provided. This shift has been of concern to developing countries. Douglass (2005: 6) has characterised this shift to include among others, the following: the rise of non-traditional for-profit and not-for-profit competitors to provide higher education, the repositioning of existing institutions into new markets driven by the desire to generate operational revenues and achieve cost savings, and change in the recruitment markets for students and faculty. The demand for academic programmes by students is motivated by their need to seek the academic quality and credentials of programmes offered by certain universities, or simply a desire for a different cultural experience.

Certain assumptions underlie the logic of globalisation. Kwiek Marek (2003: 19) groups these into three. First, there is the alleged collapse of the role of the nation state in social and economic development and of its vision of higher education as a treasure contributing to national consciousness. Second, there has been the reformulation of the functions of the welfare state, including a diminished scope of public sector activities to be funded by the state. Third, there has been the invasion of notions of economic rationality and corporate culture into social service provision worldwide. In the field of higher education, globalisation has occasioned a rethinking in the provision of higher education as a public good. The idea has been that since higher education services derive more private than social benefits it would be more socially efficacious if they were offered to those who could afford to pay for them. This logic has led to the increased privatisation of higher education institutions and programmes. Global internationalisation and multi-nationalisation of academic programmes have become critical avenues through which the privatisation of higher education has been induced in developing countries. Through this avenue, adaptations of academic programmes or institutions from one country to another become more prevalent (Altbach 2004). The consequent result has been the growth of private universities and the involvement of private interests in determining access and curricula as opposed to public interests. The offering of university education on market principles raises issues on how the 'university' has to carry out its traditional public mandate and act as a mechanism of achieving equity and socioeconomic development. This is especially so in developing countries where social and economic differentiation is an obstacle to overall development.

The influence of globalisation in the private provision of higher education has been deepened through the inclusion of higher education as a tradable good by the World Trade Organisation (WTO). The WTO seeks to include education as one of the internationally traded services and to reduce national control over its regulation. In these respect there are negotiations to enact legislation such as the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS), to regulate the commercial exchange and trade in educational services (Altbach 2001, Knight 2003). The aim of GATS is to facilitate the import and export of educational services and institutions as private economic concerns. These developments have implications for the quality and relevance of private higher education offered in developing countries. Issues related to quality assurance, accreditation and recognition of credentials are subsumed under the logic that what comes from the 'international' market is good and relevant for developing countries. The broad implications of what GATS may mean for higher education systems in developing countries have not been fully examined. Indeed systems for the internationalisation, liberalisation and privatisation of higher education serve as the driving forces for this process, as they do for globalisation. As Douglass (2005:7) speculates, the application of GATS to higher education may rule out state subsidisation of public higher education as an infringement on free markets. Besides, such subsidisation would need to be extended to other private for-profit institutions. Aspects of this process are already happening in Kenya. Private universities have successfully lobbied for their students to receive tuition loans from the government. They are also campaigning to be considered for other government subventions like those extended to public universities. This is besides the indirect benefits they access such as teaching staff that have already been trained through public subsidies.

Indeed traffic in commercial private education is one-way, both in terms of the net flow of students and ownership of the profits generated. Even when private institutions from developed countries are established in developing countries, the tendency has been to offer their curriculum using the term 'international' as a brand to market their courses. This is not entirely bad. However if private institutions and programmes do not include content that is specific to the development challenges of developing countries, then they deepen processes of alienation and dependency. As Knight (2003:10) reveals, the rationale for importing or exporting, education services does not place developing countries at any advantage. The developed world has the capacity to both import and export. The rationales for importing include:

- limited domestic capacity to meet growing demand for higher education;
- provision of greater access to specific knowledge or skills based education and training;
- improvement of the quality of higher education provision by allowing market access to prestigious foreign institutions;
- the creation of a culture of political alliances; and
- the development of human capital and stemming the brain drain;
- the rationale for exporting on the other hand includes:
- excess national capacity in higher education;
- income generation;
- strategic cultural, political and economic alliances;
- institutional strengthening and innovation;

- a tool for further internationalisation of domestic institutions; and
- using education as a conduit to access trade in other services.

The cumulative impact of the foregoing developments has made the privatisation of public higher education and the growth in private universities issues that raise concern regarding the relationship of higher education to national objectives. Most countries of sub-Saharan Africa, perhaps with the exception of South Africa, have not been inserted into the global education market as equals. Of concern are fears that unfettered privatisation of higher education will erode the little capacity in national higher education systems and once again force African countries to spend scarce resources for overseas training of their work force. Hence, while the arguments propelling privatisation of higher education in Africa are persuasive, private higher education may turn out to be more expensive ultimately to the public if national development objectives are not qualitatively addressed by the sector. This is in instances where such education would lead to poor quality skill development among workers. Given Africa's peripheral position in global development, the privatisation and marketisation of higher education therefore leads to a questioning of the logic of the market. Markets assume perfect homogeneous conditions where clients are not only free to choose but also have equal capacity to benefit from what the market offers. Market rationality also assumes diversity in the products offered and opportunity structures to exercise the skills so gained. As will be argued in this study diversity in terms of the curriculum of private universities in most of Africa is a still limited.

The considerations above continue to pose challenges given the extent to which private higher education has been embraced in Africa. The challenges revolve around the traditional role of university education that characterised universities as institutions that promoted the wider public interest in the process of knowledge production and utilisation. This public interest role has been defined from the perspective of the wider society to which individual and institutional efforts are embedded and directed. The role of the university in this regard is evaluated concerning its contribution to social development, social justice and democratic engagement (Newman 2000, Kezar 2004, Rhoades, undated). The mandate of the university therefore to serve a public good and interest should be manifested in institutional commitment to national development, questions of access, equity, commitment to quality of the knowledge generated, and modes of instruction (Olukoshi & Oyekanimi 2001; Altbach 1992). Private higher education offered on the neo-liberal logic of market rationality is unlikely to address the public interest so conceived. This is because the neo-liberal logic re-conceptualises the public interest in terms of individual rights, in the belief that a weak state is better than a strong one and that what is private is necessarily good and what is public is necessarily bad (Apple 2001).

The stress on individual choice and the market forces institutions and faculty to focus too much on short-term revenue generating activities. This can be detrimental to institutional commitment to broader, more long-term and long-standing educational, social ,scholarly and public service functions (Bok 2003, Rhoades, undated).This is to the extent that the neo-liberal paradigm, whether presented as privatisation, commercialisation, or corporatisation, has affected all aspects of the university enterprise, including teaching, research and service (Zeleza 2003:165).

Privatisation and private higher education in Kenya: Research issues

The key research issues that the development of private higher education in developing countries raise are related to the logic of their operations and how they rationalise their operations in the context of the knowledge needs of society. The global surge for private higher education institutions is partly related to the emerging diversity of students and the skill needs of the 'globalising' economy. Private universities and programmes are mostly self-financing and this means they have to focus on students who are able to pay tuition fees. These operational imperatives necessitate that private universities operate more autonomously with respect to the kind of students they admit and the nature of the courses they offer. The orientation has been to offer vocational courses that are not capital intensive. In an era when the demands of the global knowledge economy require huge capital investments in research for national competitiveness, the focus of private universities in applied courses and programmes seems to place the societies where they operate at a disadvantage. This is more worrisome in countries like Kenya where private higher education may be able to enrol more students compared to those in public universities and programmes.

The development of private higher education in Kenya started just before independence. Three phases have dominated their evolution. The first phase that started at independence was marked by the development of middle level, non-degree religious institutions. The institutions that developed then as higher education institutions were not of university status. They were colleges that were set up by religious organisations for the purpose of training their clergy. Some of these institutions included St Paul's Theological founded in 1930, the Kenya Highlands Bible College in 1953, and the African Inland Mission's Scott Theological College in 1962. There were also secular private vocational colleges that developed after independence such as the Kenya Institute of Management. These colleges focussed on training for vocational skills especially in Commerce, Accountancy and Business Education.

The second phase started from the 1980s through to the 1990s. During this phase, there was a growth in demand for university education in the country. However, expansion of public universities was slow as resources from the government were dwindling. Attempts to increase intake to the few public universities led to congestion and serious erosion in the quality of programmes. It was during this period that some of the religious and secular colleges that had been established during the first phase were transformed into degree-awarding institutions and were given university status. These were the United States International University (USIU) established in 1970, the University of East Africa Baraton (UEAB) in 1978, Daystar Communications in 1974, and the Catholic Higher Education Institute of East Africa (CHEIA) in 1983. The last phase dates from the mid-1990s. This phase has been marked by the expansion and semi-privatisation of public universities, the expansion of private universities and an aggressive competition for students between all of these entities.

The Kenya government, in recognition of its inability to continue subsidising public universities, laid the foundation for the growth of private universities in the 1980s. A presidential commission that worked on mechanisms for establishing a second public university recommended the setting up of a council to regulate the growth of private higher education in Kenya. Such a council was set up in 1985, and was known as the Commission for Higher Education (CHE). The CHE however did not begin this task immediately because of government reluctance to privatise university education. However, due to pressure from donors and the growing number of applicants who were unable to secure places in public universities, CHE formally published rules for establishing and registering private universities in 1989. The activation of CHE's activities, the growing social demand and the loss of confidence in the poorly financed public universities, facilitated the development of private higher education.

At the time of the study, there were six chartered private universities, six registered private universities, and five operating with letters of interim authority. The accredited Universities category comprised UEAB, CUEA, USIU, Daystar University, Scott Theological College and African Nazarene University. The registered universities were the East African School of Theology, Kenya Highlands Bible College, and Nairobi Evangelical Graduate School of Theology, Nairobi International School of Theology, Pan African Christian College and St Paul's United Theological College. These institutions offered degrees even before the advent of CHE but have still not satisfied the requirements for accreditation as university institutions. The third category operating under letters of interim authority were established after the establishment of CHE. They are Kenya Methodist University, Kabarak University, Kiriri Women's University of Science and Technology, Agha Khan University and Strathmore University. These institutions come to a total of 17 private universities operating, despite their different levels of official recognition – a fast growth in a period of about ten years. The 17 private universities supplement the six existing public universities.

The rapid growth of private universities was facilitated by responsive government policy that came into being in 1991. This was a policy negotiated between the government and donors to enable the release of an adjustment credit that the country needed to revamp the public university system. The government's education adjustment policy focussed on mechanisms of expanding enrolments in higher education as a way of serving equity objectives by opening access to students from a wider range of socioeconomic backgrounds (Wandiga 1997). The issue of broadening access and equity were therefore central to the government's recognition of private universities. Encouragement of private universities was also aimed at diffusing pressure away from public universities and at addressing national work force imbalances. In addition to the private universities, the government encouraged public universities to start income generating projects to supplement government subsidies. This has led to the introduction of parallel (private) degree students in all the public universities. The parallel students are admitted separately from the regular students, pay fees at market rates and sometimes have lectures separate from the regular students. Their admission criteria are also much more flexible, in terms of previous academic qualifications, than the regular students. This scenario has resulted in the semi-privatisation of public universities in Kenya. The full private universities and the parallel (private) students in public universities therefore constitute the privatised market system of university education in Kenya.

There have been varying views on the capacity of the privatised market system to address the challenges of university education in Kenya. One view holds that private universities are of higher quality than public ones, are better organised, and have played a significant role in offsetting the demand for university education in Kenya (Mwiria & Ngome 1998, Murunga 2001). There are also studies that have interrogated private higher education in relation to the traditional responsibilities of universities. Such studies note tendencies towards social exclusion of those who are unable to pay, stratification of the scholarly community, a weakening of their collective capacities, the demeaning of academic freedom and a deterioration in quality (Chacha 2002, Zeleza 2003). Other views have been more dismissive, seeing private universities as offering narrow and irrelevant curricula, and having fewer beneficial implications for the socioeconomic development of the country.

The above views have not been conclusively interrogated. Even where field data exist, there has been a tendency among university administrators to go on the defensive, in order to sustain their market niche. This is due to the competition for students between private universities themselves, and between private universities and the public and private degree programmes. In the case of Kenya, the introduction of parallel programmes has made the role of CHE in enforcing quality standards more difficult. Public universities are rather insulated from strict adherence to some quality assurance measures. This is because as long as they generate money and take away the pressure for budgetary support from the government, the government is likely to turn a blind eye to reported malpractices. These are the perceptions that have made private universities complain more often that CHE is unfairly strict on them. It may be that some of the claims being made about the attractiveness of programmes and the innovativeness of the new institutions are just marketing labels. Potentially, this conceals the total picture about the viability and implications of privatising higher education in developing countries.

It must be noted that there was a period of about ten years in Kenya when private universities operated exclusively without competition from the public universities. This was when admission to public universities was highly restricted. However, from the time public universities relaxed admission criteria and started admitting private students, studies have not been conducted to document the trends regarding access and expansion in the private universities. This is important if the claims of private universities to offer attractive, high quality programmes are to be validated and sustained. Besides, the views do not touch on the core mandate of universities; that is achieving equity through broadening of access to all social groups, promoting indigenous knowledge systems through research and dissemination, and producing relevant personnel for socioeconomic development of the country. The present study addresses the above issues as they relate to the operations of private universities, and to the introduction of semi-private programmes in Kenya's public universities.

The present study takes the position that systems of higher education have to be evaluated based on their responsiveness to a country's development imperatives. In the case of Kenya, such imperatives were pointed out by the Presidential Commission that looked into the establishment of the second university back in 1984. The commission stressed the importance of systems of higher education that focussed on scientific and technological disciplines, rural development, cultural values, and environmental issues. Indeed even at a global level, these are key issues that merit the attention of policy makers in relation to education. Studies should therefore provide indicators regarding the extent to which private higher education has been able to alleviate the problems of access, equity, and relevance better than public higher education. This study has attempted to address the above issues. The impact that privatisation and private higher education has had on access, equity and production of knowledge was thus part of the analysis.

Providing knowledge on these issues is important as university education remains an important vehicle for socioeconomic development, and therefore attracts much public interest. This public interest should obtain and be manifested in the structural workings of private universities. The study focussed on policies of access and admission and the research orientations of programmes in the private universities, and the public universities' 'private' degree programmes. Three broad objectives guided this study. These were:

- To provide an analysis of factors contributing to privatisation and the growth of private higher education in Kenya;
- To analyse the degree to which private universities and programmes addressed the issues of equity through various access policies;
- To analyse the extent to which privatisation and private higher education have enhanced or limited the functions of the university related to research, knowledge production, and dissemination.

Methodological orientation of the study

Data related to the evolution of privatisation and private universities in Kenya were collected through a critical review of the literature and through interviews with key respondents. Detailed information related to access and knowledge production was collected from four private universities and two public universities. The private universities were the United States International University (USIU), University of East Africa, Baraton (UEAB), Catholic University of East Africa (CUEA) and Daystar University. The four universities were chosen as they are the oldest in terms of private higher education provision and have higher student numbers. Nairobi and

Kenyatta Universities were chosen as case studies with regard to trends in the privatisation and liberalisation of public higher education in Kenya.

Three key instruments were used to collect data for the study. These were historical analysis of trends, survey questionnaires, supplemented with structured interviews, and the analysis of documents. Records related to the foundation and development of private higher education in Kenya were analysed. The analysis was useful in identifying the forces that have shaped their growth. Two types of questionnaire were utilised for the study. The first was a student questionnaire that was used to map the socioeconomic profile of students in private universities and in private degree programmes in public universities. The second type of questionnaire was administered to faculty deans and academic registrars in the various universities and programmes. The information from these instruments was supplemented by structured interviews of a sample of students and university administrators. These interviews were aimed at establishing admission criteria of students, policies of access and equity, tuition and other charges, and issues related to faculty research activities. Analysis of documents in the various programmes was carried out, especially with respect to research issues and protocols. The idea was to establish trends in research pursuits in private universities and degree programmes in public universities. The budgets of the universities, where these were available, were analysed to establish allocations for research and student financial aid schemes. This information has been interrogated in the light of the mission statements of the various universities to determine the direction in which privatisation is influencing research in higher education institutions.

Conclusion

The privatisation of public universities and the emergence of private higher education pose challenges to the role of university education in Kenya. On one hand, these challenges relate to the degree to which privatised institutions can address broad social issues such as equity and knowledge production. On the other hand is the dissonance of the legal status of private higher education institutions and the commercial zeal that underlies their operations. Another issue relates to the high demand for university places that drove the emergence of the private higher education sector and the percentage of qualified students that the sector absorbs annually. The subsequent sections of this study interrogate these challenges and their influence on access, equity and research mission of universities in Kenya.