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## Conclusion: Challenges and Prospects for Private Higher Education in Kenya as regards Equity, Research and Knowledge Production

### Introduction

The privatisation of public universities and the entry of private higher education institutions in Kenya constitute critical period in a strategy for the development of higher education in the country. The institutions and programmes are important in inserting Kenya's presence and contribution into the global knowledge economy. This is possible if the institutions and programmes are founded on missions that integrate a vision of social responsibility and research into their operations. The drive for the privatisation of higher education and the growth of private university institutions have not developed out of a policy context initiated by Kenya. Public universities were forced to privatise their programmes largely through structural adjustment measures imposed by donors. These measures reduced the share of government subsidies going to higher education, and forced university administrators to admit private students who pay full tuition fees to generate money to run the universities. The public universities also integrated a business model into the conventional mission of the university to run most of their programmes profitably. Universities for their part have taken time to formulate policies that guide the operation of the private programmes. Strikes over the distribution of income from the programmes between lecturers and non-teaching employees in all the public universities continued during the period of this study. Financial and administrative governance of the programmes has also created tension in all the universities. Issues related to student admissions versus their academic profiles, teaching and assessment have occasionally fuelled student riots.

The private universities have been established in the same context. Globalisation, as the ideological project of economic liberalisation, opened most sectors that were previously dominated by public provision, to private providers. This coupled with increasing demand for higher education forced Kenya to start the process of

chartering private universities. The issue of expanding access to higher education was however one that the government had always wanted to pursue. By the 1990s, the thinking within government policy circles was that such expansion should be undertaken with strict government regulation, and in any case through the public university system. In this respect, under the universities investment project (UIP) proposals of 1990, the promotion of private universities was supposed to complement expansion that was to take place in the public universities (Wandiga 1997). The privatisation of public universities and the promotion of private universities were therefore supposed to meet targets that government wanted to achieve through higher education, that is, expand access while addressing equity issues, and improve quality through research and teaching. Any assessment of the challenges and prospects for private higher education should therefore gauge the extent to which privatisation and private universities have addressed the above concerns. This section briefly recasts some of the challenges private higher education in Kenya has to overcome to facilitate its growth and expansion. The prospects that would facilitate this expansion are pointed out.

### **Private Higher Education and Equity Considerations**

The demand for access to university education in Kenya is still enormous. About sixty percent of students who qualify for university entrance are not obtaining places either in public or private universities. There are also many working Kenyans who missed their first chance of university education and are in need of second chance admission. The increasing demand for higher education from all social groups reflects the influence of economic and political globalisation that is going to be around for some time. The option for developing countries like Kenya is therefore to expand higher education and strike a balance between increased access with the research and service mission of the universities. Both public and private university institutions will have to do these to be relevant as contributors to the global knowledge economy.

Data analysis for this study shows that private universities and programmes in public universities have considerably increased access to higher education for a group of students who would otherwise have been shut out by the rigid admission regulations of public universities. In so doing, some pressure has been taken off the government in terms of financing expansion of higher education. However, the role that privatisation and private higher education institutions have played in addressing equity objectives should be analysed in a broader perspective. This is not to demean the role of private higher education. Rather the intention is to identify existing challenges and seek to marry the goals of private higher education providers with the aspirations of the society in which they operate. Opening access to students from all social groups and increasing the share of qualified students admitted to private university institutions are key challenges that private higher education in Kenya has to address.

As the field data in Section Three of this study show, private universities and programmes in Kenya have opened a second alternative to students from the middle and upper social classes that were always certain to access it, either locally or abroad. Rarely have they offered a first chance to students from low socioeconomic backgrounds who are excluded by financial limitations from accessing higher education. The private universities operate student financial aid schemes, but the schemes target those who have already registered. Their 'needy' situation is therefore a question of fractional differences among students who already have some financial capacity. Those who are poor do not have a chance if they cannot raise tuition fees for initial registration before they are considered for any financial aid. Private higher education institutions have not integrated equity policies into their operations. The perceptions about private universities are that they are institutions that target students from elite backgrounds. There are no efforts made to distribute access among social groups. The profile of most students in private universities lacks diversity. This presents a contradiction of sorts. In the context of the globalisation logic upon which private higher education has been founded, diversity is supposed to be a key factor and measure of their quality. By concentrating opportunities on those who are able to pay, private higher education will increasingly accentuate socioeconomic differences in Kenyan society, thus negating most indicators of social development.

The second consideration should be the extent to which access has actually been provided to the greatest number of students who qualify. Again, data presented in this study show a slow expansion of capacity in private universities. For example, in the academic year 1999–2000, public universities accommodated about 84 percent of all students enrolled in universities, while private universities accounted for only 16 percent. In the 2001–2002 academic year, public universities increased their share to 86 percent, while the share of private universities dropped to 14 percent. The percentage share remained the same in the 2003–2004 academic year. The percentage increase of new students to private universities has averaged from three to four percent over the years. Not that one expected private universities to overtake public ones in terms of numbers given their wide differences in terms of histories and missions. However, private universities entered the scene when public universities were near collapse. For some time before the public universities started privatising, private universities largely monopolised the market for students who could not gain admission to public universities. The continued unmet demand for higher education in the country should also be taken as an opportunity for the private universities to increase their capacities. However, private universities lost this opportunity to public universities, who relaxed their admission requirements, set up new campuses, and started admitting private full tuition fee-paying students. This scenario partly explains the stagnation in admission and expansion of private universities.

Private universities in Kenya count the admission of more female students as one area in which they have excelled. However, a rereading of the data in this study shows that this claim has not been a consequence of any affirmative action policy designed by the institutions. The number of female students registered in private

universities is a small fraction of the total population of female students who qualify for university admission. In addition, female students are registered in academic programmes that traditionally have been labelled 'female options'. Private universities in this respect have accentuated gender inequities in access to key professional disciplines. This compares unfavourably with the private programmes of public universities where more women are accessing professional courses such as medicine and law. At the University of Nairobi, the percentage of women registered in these professional areas is higher than those in the regular programmes. In the MBA private programmes, 45 percent of students were women while in the faculty of medicine the number of female students was slightly over 50 percent (CHE 2003).

The issues raised above again present certain contradictions about the operation of private higher education institutions in Kenya related to equity. The first relates to their status as demand-absorbing institutions. Literature on the growth of private higher education in developing countries cites their existence as testimony to their capacity to absorb excess demand for higher education (Eisemon 1992, Levy 1986, Geiger 1986). In this respect, private higher education is a complement and in some respects a replacement for public higher education. Private higher education in Kenya has not however expanded adequately to respond to this challenge. The expectation was that there would have been more students registered in private universities compared to those in the public and private programmes of public universities. The reverse however is the case in Kenya. This creates a real possibility of the public higher education system taking the lead in providing private higher education.

A related issue concerns the legal status of private universities as for-profit and not-for-profit institutions. These categorisations should have a bearing on the costing of the services in the institutions and the implied affordability and equity. Irrespective of the category, private universities in Kenya charge fees within the same range. The not-for-profit institutions quote tuition fees below those of the for-profits, but institute a range of other mandatory charges that raise the cost of their programmes considerably. Irrespective of their categorisation, therefore, private universities in Kenya operate in a commercialised fashion that limits their responsiveness to equity concerns.

The relationship between the curricula in private universities and the national context in which the missions of the universities need to be ingrained poses another challenge to private higher education in Kenya. As profiled in Section Two of this study, most private universities in Kenya have a limited range in the curriculum. The universities have focussed on areas that do not require high capital investment and which previously were catered for by middle level vocational institutions. In so doing, the thrust of their academic programmes has avoided areas critical to national development needs. Arguments in favour of private higher education point out the potential of the sector to provide a differentiated and diverse curriculum. Institutional and programme diversity is an important consideration in the measurement of equity as it ensures individuals are enrolled in institutions and programs on merit. This diversity has not been accomplished in the Kenyan private universities system. Of the 17 private universities operating either as accredited or non-accredited, only

four offer a purely secular curriculum. These are USIU, Kiriri Women's University of Science and Technology, Agha Khan and Strathmore. Other than USIU, the rest of these universities have not been fully accredited and the volume of their students and programmes is low. The rest of the institutions are religious based and their missions are aligned to their religious philosophies and traditions. Their curricula also contain a heavy dose of religious teaching. Besides, about two thirds of the institutions account for only about 16 percent of the total enrolments of students in private universities.

The results of this study reinforce the observations that markets cannot be relied to ensure equity in the provision of higher education (Varghese 2004:27). Public universities have also continued to expand their enrolment of private students more than purely private universities have done. The diversity of programmes in public universities and the integration of private students with those on public subsidy provide a stronger foundation for addressing aspects of equity in higher education. This is not only in terms of institutional diversity, but they have been able to increase the number of female students in competitive professional courses that are not available in private universities. Although this fact does not take into account students from poor socioeconomic backgrounds, it is a gain in terms of gender equity.

### **Private Higher Education, Research, Knowledge Production and Dissemination**

The generation and transmission of knowledge through research is a critical function of universities. At a country level, research is important for industrial transformation, economic growth and for overall poverty reduction. In the global arena, and as the World Bank's (2002) report on 'Constructing knowledge societies' notes, universities have to give their societies an edge in the global knowledge economy. New knowledge generated from research is critical to social and economic development. These assertions call for universities (both public and private) to allocate more funds for research, strike a balance between their teaching and research responsibilities, give equal attention to basic and applied research, and create networks for the dissemination of results from research to influence policy making.

Private higher education in Kenya however has been more focussed on teaching almost to the exclusion of any research. Data from fieldwork and a critical analysis of the academic programmes of private universities show that the research function of the universities has been submerged by a combination of factors. The lack of established postgraduate courses, the quality of students, the orientation of lecturers and the lack of funds from the government and the private sector combine to diminish research at private and privatising public universities. Of the four private universities covered in the study, only one, CUEA, is seriously involved in some kind of research and knowledge dissemination. The University allocates various research grants to facilitate the field work of faculty members. USIU, the largest secular private university, and endowed from secular financial sources, does not make specific allocations for research and dissemination. Overall, critical research and broad social

and economic needs of society have not been addressed by private universities. Their concentration has been in teaching commercial and vocational courses that enhance the career prospects of individual students, thereby providing more personal and fewer social benefits to students and society.

The other issue has to do with the level of postgraduate training. This is important if universities have to sustain a critical mass of human and social capital for purpose of research and development endeavour. Useful research is likely to come from a university that has a bias towards high quality training of postgraduate students. The privatisation of public universities in Kenya has increased the number of students registered in postgraduate programmes. However, the lack of rigorous teaching of research methodology courses has meant that they do not get an adequate exposure to fieldwork techniques required to generate new knowledge. Fieldwork has increasingly lost ground in favour of library desk reviews, and projects have replaced theses for postgraduate examination. These developments have been occasioned by the market demands that require quick alteration of a commodity to meet changing short-term trends. In this respect, desk reviews and project work have become fashionable for students who want to complete their studies quickly, and universities that want to admit more students for commercial purposes. The quality of training that such students undergo is rarely addressed.

Most postgraduate programmes are concentrated at the master's level. The development of PhD programmes at the private universities has not been prioritised. In the private programmes of public universities, the masters programmes are concentrated in commerce and business administration, education, and humanities. Competitive professional courses such as law, engineering and medicines have not attracted as many postgraduate students. The explanation for this trend was that in the competitive professional courses one is more marketable and can make money even with a bachelor's degree. In the other disciplines, since enrolments are high, more and more qualifications are required to have an edge in the market. The motivation for postgraduate training in a privatised university environment has therefore been higher monetary returns at a person level, not the quest for knowledge that may benefit the larger society.

The non-emphasis on quality postgraduate programmes in private universities has implications for a country's development paradigm. In a globalising world, new knowledge, especially scientific knowledge, is critical to social development. If the agenda for research in private universities is also privatised, then the public interest is obscured. Since developing countries like Kenya do not have a vibrant indigenous private sector, there is the danger that universities will miss their role as knowledge producers. Funding from private concerns may lead to research ventures that may not fit the goals of national development. The crisis over patents that the IAVI and KAVI occasioned at the University of Nairobi is a pointer to what is likely to happen in a largely privatised university sector. In this respect, the more higher education is privatised, the more the agenda of generating knowledge relevant to local conditions is diminished.

The alternative to privatisation of higher education will never be to offer it as a purely public concern. Purely public higher education is as inefficient to meet social needs as much as purely private higher education. However, as the cases of private programmes in public universities have shown, greater social benefits such as equity and programme diversity are better addressed through public universities. The likely scenario is that private higher education in Kenya is going to expand through the public university sector. This does not diminish the independent existence of private universities. However, the direction of growth would see a trend towards more public-private partnerships than private-public partnerships. Real prospects for the expansion of private higher education exist in Kenya. On the demand side, the market continues to grow. About 300,000 students qualify annually from high school to go to university. The public and private universities admit about three percent of these students. There is therefore a huge untapped market. One issue that the CHE may have to decide on relates to the need of chartering more private universities of low capacity or looking for strategies of assisting the existing institutions to expand their capacities first. On the supply side, the government continues to provide incentives for the expansion of private universities and programmes. The CHE has been given more regulatory and accreditation powers. The operations of middle level colleges that wish to twin their programmes with overseas universities have been brought under CHE. This will ease the issue of credit transfers and the recognition of qualifications that have hindered student mobility between institutions in the past. These arrangements have the potential to reduce the cost of some degree level programmes and enhance equity, especially for second-generation students. Lastly, reforms in the student loan scheme have allowed students in private universities to benefit from the government tuition loans unlike before. The government has also continued to cap the annual intake of students, whose tuition and other expenses in public universities are subsidised, at a total of 10,000. All these create prospects for enhanced student choice and enablement to take up university education in either public or private universities. The challenge is for the private university sector to tune their programmes to meet both national and international expectations.

### Conclusions

The challenges that confront the growth of private higher education in Kenya relate to their limited capacities in terms of both student profiles and diversity of courses. The limitations mean that the share of students who access private higher education is smaller in comparison to demand. The focus of the private higher education institutions has been on those students who can afford their charges. In the overall perspective, the operation of private universities and programmes has not integrated equity policies that are increasingly contributing to the determination of the quality of institutions and programmes. The institutions and programmes have also focussed on teaching to the exclusion of research.