1 Expansion of University Education in Kenya: The Challenges and Issues in Balancing Access and Quality

Jeremiah M. Kalai (Ph.d)
Department of Educational Management and Policy Studies
School of Education
Moi University, Kenya
Email: jerekalai@yahoo.com

1 Abstract

If the levels of investment in education as evidenced by the number of people attending evening and institution-based programmes in universities is anything to go by, it appears that Kenyans’ faith in value of education has not waned, the levels of educated unemployment notwithstanding. The quest for education has reached unprecedented levels in the recent past with most of the evenings, Saturdays and holidays preoccupied with institutional-based learning programmes. The current flexibility of university programmes has afforded opportunities to individuals who had been hitherto locked out of university education. The flexibility in modes of education provision has witnessed the twin development of both careers and academic advancement thereby reshaping the academic landscape in many respects. While in the past universities were a preserve of youngsters, the scenario has changed so dramatically that the young, the not-so-young and in some instances the elderly mingle in the lecture theatres. Access to university education has come in many forms. The traditional approach of Regular Programmes Students who are based in university campuses has been increased to cater for more students than in previous years. Moreover, opportunities have been opened to individuals who are working either to attend Evening Programmes after work or during weekends. Other avenues have arisen through ODL and introduction of executive programmes tailor-made for the busy middle and senior managers who may find it difficult to leave their busy schedules to become full-time students. This phenomenon initially started at the University of Nairobi eventually spread to the rest of the public and private universities. The opportunity to access higher education was welcome by those who had been locked out of higher education for various reasons. However, some Regular Programmes Students have been reported to be averse to the programme on the grounds that some of the students admitted for evening and institution-based Programmes are allegedly less qualified than some of the Regular Programmes Students. In addition, allegations have been made to the effect that some lecturers tend to be more committed to teaching the institution-based students owing to the monetary benefits that accrue from teaching such programmes. Efforts to address these concerns have been reported in some universities where both groups have been integrated. The net effect has been that there are more university students in campuses today than a few years ago. This paper explores the implications of increased enrolment on the quality of higher education in Kenyan universities. Of particular concern is the effect of expanding higher education without the requisite infrastructural developments and the commensurate student-teacher ratios.

2 Introduction

2.1 Development of University Education

The Presidential Working Party on Education and Manpower Training for the Next Decade and Beyond, otherwise referred to as The Kamunge Report (Republic of Kenya, 1988:69) observes that the development of university education in Kenya started with establishment of the Royal
Technical College in Nairobi in 1956, as a constituent college of the University of East Africa. In 1961, the Royal Technical College was renamed the University College of Nairobi. In 1970, the University College of Nairobi, was established as University of Nairobi thereby becoming Kenya’s first university. Moi University was established by an Act of Parliament as the second university (1983) while Kenyatta University College, then a constituent college of University of Nairobi became the third university through an Act of Parliament in 1985. Egerton, another constituent college of Nairobi also became a university in 1987. Thereafter, other public universities have been established including Jomo Kenyatta University of Science and Technology, Maseno University and Masinde Muliro University of Science and Technology. Besides these fully-fledged universities, the universities have university colleges and campuses spread in different parts of the country. These institutions have made education accessible to many who would have otherwise missed out on such opportunities.

2.2 Increase in Demand for University Education

The exponential growth in demand for education in Kenya after the attainment of political independence in 1963 can be attributed to a number of factors. The Social Demand Approach holds that the society demanded for increased educational opportunities at all levels out of the perception that education could serve as vehicle for socio-economic advancement (Ayot, 1992 and Sifuna, 1990). This is closely associated with the understanding that the rate of return to education tends to be inversely proportional to the number of years spent in pursuing education. Another factor that greatly propelled the growth of education at all levels was the Africanisation policy that sought to replace the outgoing European workforce with Africans after attainment of independence in Kenya. This approach, referred to as Manpower Demand Approach (Human Resource Demand Approach) explains how developing countries like Kenya engaged in massive education programmes like the Tom Mboya and Jaramongi Oginga Odinga “airlifts” of the 1960s, whose objective was to provide suitably educated Africans to replace the outgoing Europeans personnel in key sectors of the economy and the Public Service.

Although the exponential growth of education at all levels was evident after the attainment of independence, the admission of students through the double intake of 1986/87 Academic Year served as a watershed in university admission in terms of the numbers. This exponential growth in demand for education continued unabated in 1980s, but the findings of The Kamunge Report (1988) points out that the Government could no longer adequately finance all levels of education and hence recommended cost-sharing at different levels of education. The cost-sharing element was introduced in university education in 1991/92 Academic Year.

2.3 Changing Market Trends Change Demand for Higher Education

A number of factors in the recent past contributed to the increase in demand for university education. While university education was perceived as a guarantee of life-long secure career at independence, this scenario has dramatically changed and the need for further training has become a sine qua non for professional advancement. Furthermore, unlike the previous generations that were content in pursuing a given career for a life time, we have a crop of employees who are daring enough to venture out and change jobs and thereby requiring further education. Observations abound where teachers have changed their professions to become human resource specialists, engineers who have pursued Business Management courses alongside their initial training, others who have pursued entrepreneurial courses in addition to their training and there are others who have opted to change jobs at different stages of their career lives. All these factors plus the desire to advance in current employment and create prospects for future careers have led to a demand for higher education. Moreover, individuals who had attained low qualifications are finding universities more flexible than the case was before when the only way to university education was through university entry examinations. This flexibility has made it possible for career people to advance academically without having to abandon their work stations through the institution-based programmes or the Evening Programmes.
3 Statement of the Problem

Access to university education was for a long time a preserve of some selected few who managed to pass the then Kenya Advanced Certificate of Education (KACE) (Bogonko, 1992). The competitive nature of the examinations locked out many candidates from pursuing university education. Other factors like university closures also aggravated the backlogs in university admission. This situation was however somewhat eased by the double intake of university students in the 1986/87 Academic Year. The demand for university education however continued unabated. The introduction of the Module II Programmes variously known as Parallel Programmes or Privately-Sponsored Students Programme (PSSP) seemed to have been a solution that was long overdue. However, laudable as the programmes are, a number of issues have been raised regarding some aspects of the programme has. Key among these is the qualifications of students who are admitted to the programme. Some unauthenticated allegations have been made to the effect that those admitted to Module II Programmes are less qualified than Regular Programmes Students. In addition, allegations have also been made that the increased enrolments have led to diluted quality of education. While very few studies have delved into these aspects, this paper raises questions regarding the effects of expansion of university programmes.

4 Significance of the Paper

It has been commonly observed that Module II Programmes have exposed a large percentage of Kenyans to university education, than the case would have been under the traditional Regular Programmes. The opportunity for access to higher education has also had attendant challenges that need not be wished away. Discussion of such issues as the quality of education after introduction of Module II Programmes, the student-teacher ratios, the quality of supervision for post-graduate students after this form of liberalisation, the possible strain on human and material resources demands that the affected parties engage in a discussion that would help to bring to the surface issues that have been discussed in a pedestrian manner. Students, teachers, university administrators, policy makers and Ministry of Education officials stand to benefit from this kind of a discussion. In addition, the presence of stakeholders is also likely to bring to the fore the status of university education after its expansion in form of Module II Programmes, upgrading of middle level colleges to university colleges, campuses and after universities have entered into collaborations with middle level institutions of learning. In absence of sufficient empirical data on whether Module II Programmes have led to decline of academic performance, discussions by stakeholders would be timely.

5 Objectives of University Education

The whole quest for university education might be better understood if national and individual perspectives are put into consideration. At individual level, any advancement in education is seen in terms of better career prospects, whether that is in terms of promotion or better still changing from a career that is perceived to be less prestigious or scaling the corporate ladder. At the national level, the objectives of university education have to do with meeting national socio-economic goals. These objectives have been aptly captured by the Kenya Education Commission, otherwise known as The Koech Report in Republic of Kenya (1999:174) and The Report of the Presidential Working Party on Education and Manpower Training for the Next Decade and Beyond, otherwise known as The Kamunge Report in the Republic of Kenya (1988: 69). The Koech Report regards university level education as the national “think-tank” in shaping and propelling national growth and development as follows:

1. To develop in students and scholars the ability to think independently, critically and creatively.
2. To adapt, develop, advance, preserve and disseminate knowledge and desirable values and to stimulate intellectual life.
3. To educate and train the high level human capital needed for accelerated development through industrialisation of the economy.

4. To nurture the internalisation of universal knowledge, including technological advances with a view to harnessing these for national development.

5. To provide through basic and applied research, knowledge, skills and services that help solve the problems facing the society.

6. To help create a society in which both merit, based on diverse talents and equity in development are recognised and nurtured.

7. To inculcate entrepreneurial skills among the graduates, thereby enabling them to create employment for themselves.

The Kamunge Report (Republic of Kenya, 1988:69) captures some aspects that were not given a lot of prominence in The Koech Report. Notably among these is the promotion of cultural development and the highest ideals and values of society.

6 Challenges in Pursuit of Objectives of University Education

The realisation of the aforementioned objectives of university education requires an examination of what it would take to meet each of one of them.

1. To develop in students and scholars that have the ability to think independently, critically and creatively, it would be necessary that for students and scholars be widely read rather than confining themselves to teaching and learning that is geared towards passing of examinations. Observations do indicate that students at many levels of education are first and foremost concerned with passing of examinations and possibly very few are concerned about the development of the ability to think independently, critically and creatively. One of the crucial questions that we should consider regarding the kind of graduates we have is whether they would be inclined to read at all if they were assured that there would be no examinations. Given the existence of ethnic-based political parties, ethnic stereotypes and perceptions that associate economic and social advantages on communities, it puts paid our pride of intellectual objectivity. Moreover, the fact that party manifestoes are hardly talked about and we resort to ethnic enclaves may go a long way in explaining how much we are wanting in independent thinking. Even our very own professors tend to think using the ethnic lenses when it comes to party affiliation. In this regard, it appears that our universities will need to re-think what they teach if Kenya is to have individuals who are willing to be different regardless of whether it is going to be political and economic suicide for them.

2. To achieve the second objective of university education which is to adapt, develop, advance, preserve and disseminate knowledge and desirable values, and to stimulate intellectual life, we as a country will need a liberal kind of education. This calls for a society that will value education and the educated rather than bowing at the altar of materialism. To have a society that values and is willing to disseminate knowledge, such knowledge will need to be packaged in a manner that can be understood by the society rather than being esoteric in approach.

3. The objective of educating and training the high level human capital needed for accelerated development through industrialisation of the economy will require that the student-teacher ratios be re-examined. While mass production of graduates may be desirable, their quality may be in question. This will call for closer linkages between universities and industry so that industrial needs and academic programmes can be synchronised.

4. To realise the objective of nurturing the internalisation of universal knowledge, including technological advances with a view to harnessing these for national development, universities will require deliberate efforts in inculcating ICT skills. It is through such skills that university students and teachers will be able to showcase their knowledge as well as
gaining from others in their disciplines and other related fields of knowledge. In light of this, it is incumbent upon universities to move away from traditional ways of teaching and learning and adopt the latest trends that befit institutions of their status. By now, the use of lecture method, chalk and impersonal teaching need to be replaced with more interactive teaching methods that make it possible for the learner to appreciate the subject matter. In addition, the role of university lecturers needs to change from that of “purveyors of notes” that will be tested in an examination to one of facilitator of knowledge search and an analyst of obtained information. This, over and above other things, should include teaching students how to learn. Creation of learning organisations, as Senge (1990) notes, needs to begin at university level.

5. The objective of providing through basic and applied research, knowledge, skills and services that help solve the problems facing the society demands a form of education that is not too theoretical to have any relevance to the society. Universities need to create linkages with local organisations to address issues that affect agriculture, livestock development, fisheries, marketing of local products like African songs, African art, and patenting of locally produced goods, among others. In addition, research should help us address matters of concern in education, health, water and irrigation, among other fields. Research should not be the preserve of the academicians but it should be done in collaboration with other stakeholders and particularly those who are direct beneficiaries of research findings. Njoroge (1994: 58) cites Stein (1981) who supports this conventionalist perspective that universities are established by the society to serve society’s purpose and not just to provide jobs for the faculty. Njoroge (1994) advances an extreme view that if in any instance universities fail to meet these societal purposes, they risk not being supported in whatever form. In explaining the role of the second university in Kenya, The Mackay Report observes that the main role of the university should be to train professionals and particularly professional manpower for the country (Republic of Kenya, 1981). Njoroge (1994) cites Kirk (1955) who advances a second view of the role of university. The view, referred to as the liberal perspective is contrary to the conventional view. While the conventional view holds that universities exist for the sake of the society, the liberal view holds that the endeavour of a university is constant search for knowledge and truth and in this continuous search, scholar cannot have a master. The scholar and the teacher are masterless men, rather like Cain and ought to remain so. It is in light of this that scholars and teachers are regarded custodians of knowledge and not traffickers in a market.

To help create a society in which both merit, based on diverse talents and equity in development are recognised and nurtured, the education system will require that definite mechanisms be put in place to identify talent and nurture the same. Since not all talent is academic based, learners will need to be exposed to diverse experiences from early stages. Role models and reputed artistes of integrity, athletes, comedians and professionals need to be regularly invited to schools and colleges to interact with learners and help them understand what it takes to pursue different careers.

To inculcate entrepreneurial skills among the graduates, thereby enabling them to create employment for themselves and others, universities can have some income generating activities managed by students in related fields. A case in point could be where students in schools of Agriculture create linkages with the surrounding community to offer some extension services free of charge while offering others at a subsidised cost.

The Kamunje Report (Republic of Kenya, 1988:69) captures some aspects that were not given a lot of prominence in The Koech Report. Notably among these is the promotion of cultural development and the highest ideals and values of society. To meet the outlined objectives, universities will need to rethink a number of aspects. These aspects revolve around access, quality, assurance mechanisms, employability of the graduates from our universities, students perceptions (as customers, clients) regarding the kind of education they are receiving or have received and possible remedial measures that can be employed to redress any possible shortcomings in the sector. The next section is a critical analysis of the issues that need to be addressed before the objectives can be realised.
7 Access to University Education and Attendant Concerns

Mwiria (1994:45) observes that one of the issues of concern in democratising Kenya’s public universities revolves around ethnic (regional), gender and class differences. At the ethnic/regional level, members of those communities which made earlier and more stable contacts with European settlers, missionaries and colonial authorities tended to have more access to formal educational opportunity – all through the education ladder – than their counterparts from those communities which did not experience such contacts. In the post-independence era, this early historical advantage tended to coincide with economic advantage, a factor of tremendous impact given that the factor to pay for education is increasingly becoming one of the key, if not the determinant of whether or not one proceeds to benefit from higher and more specialised levels of education.

Mwiria (1994:45) further notes that in terms of gender inequities, Kenyan women have always and continue to be conspicuously under-represented in the country’s universities. Hughes and Mwiria (1989) report that since 1981, only about 30 percent of Kenya’s university students have been women. In addition, most of the women who join universities enrol in poorly rewarding arts-based general degree programmes with only a small minority enrolled in science-based programmes such as engineering. Hughes and Mwiria (1989) further note that by then very few women had access to postgraduate in university teaching, research, administration and political leadership. Although the scenario has somewhat changed with more women having enrolled in postgraduate training programmes through the Regular and Parallel Programmes and many having gained access to leadership of universities, the overall picture remains that of inequities.

Another issue of concern is at the socio-economic level where students from low economic backgrounds are threatened by high education costs. The rising costs of living are making it difficult for students from poor economic backgrounds to remain in college. Even where they do, many of them have to engage in income generating activities to make ends meet. This point is further supported by The Sessional Paper No 1 of 2005 that notes that despite the rapid expansion of higher education over the past decade, challenges to access and equity remain. These include:

1. Inadequate capacity to cater for growing demand for more places in universities. The Report of the Public Universities inspection Board notes that the demand for university education in Kenya exceeds the capacity of local universities to accommodate all the qualified local candidates. On a number of occasions, public universities were pressurised to admit more students than they could accommodate. The demand for increased admission without expanding the universities resource base has been perceived by many stakeholders as having led to a significant decline in the quality of university education in Kenya. The underlying and the cross-cutting challenge is therefore, to balance the demand with the imperatives of maintaining high standards of education (Republic of Kenya, 2007:77).

2. Mismatch between skills acquired by university graduates and demands of industry.

3. An imbalance between the number of students studying science and arts-based courses.

4. Rigid admission criteria that excludes possibilities for credit transfer amongst universities and for graduates from post-secondary institutions.

5. Gender and regional disparities in terms of admissions and in subjects and courses undertaken. Since these concerns were expressed in 2005, there is no evidence as to whether the situation has significantly improved. It is therefore imperative for management in institutions of higher learning to engage stakeholders in searching for solutions to the aforementioned challenges.

8 Quality of Training through Collaboration and Institutional Affiliation

Although there has been a marked increase in the number of institutions affiliated to universities or working in collaboration with them, the quality of training in some of the institutions could be suspect. Although very few studies might have been carried on the benefits accruing from such collaborations and affiliations, it is highly probable that some of those institutions are in it because of a reputable university name and not because they are keen on the collaboration. Even where the
standards could be far from satisfactory. Other issues of concern include the quality of supervision in light of increased postgraduate students. Other issues of concern have been enumerated below as follows:

1. What are the effects of university enrolment increases on student-teacher ratios?
2. What are the effects of university enrolment on the quality of supervision provided to postgraduate students?
3. What are the effects of university enrolment on the quality of lecturers’ instructional materials?
4. What are the effects of university enrolment increase on facilities (lecture halls, libraries, and halls of residence, carrels and books)?

To what extent has university increase in enrolment affected students’ academic interactions in view of limited space within campuses? The aforementioned issues point to a possibility of strain on human, material and financial resources. The net effect would be increased workload, leading to decreased research output and dissemination of findings. In addition, limited quality assurance mechanisms are likely to lead to a decline in quality of programmes and learning at large. Even in cases where external examinations are used to moderate examinations, it needs to be taken into account that they can only moderate a small percentage thereby leaving a chance for major errors.

9 Staff Development Programmes for University Lecturers

The Kamunge Report (Republic of Kenya, 1988) observes that staff development programmes are geared towards training at Masters and Doctorate degree levels and other specialised studies or research to meet the staffing requirements of the universities. It is worthy noting that training at Masters level has ceased being a staff development programme with an exception of a few specialised areas. In this regard, staff development programmes need to focus on aspects of research that have potential to add value to those who undergo such staff development programmes. In addition, scholars need exposure through fellowships and post-doctoral programmes that avail them opportunities to learn latest trends in research in their areas of specialisation. In addition, staff development programmes need also to focus on basic aspects of teaching methodology and student supervision with a view to producing capable teachers who not only have mastery of subject content but also the knack for research.

Other university matters that need to engage the minds of scholars include the employability of university graduates as perceived by employers. This calls for regular tracer studies to establish the alumni profiles and matters of concern that could be addressed through curriculum review at university level for marketability. In addition, students’ perceptions regarding various aspects of university programmes need to be established as a way of ensuring satisfaction of students as consumers of learning services. Moreover, universities need to establish monitoring and evaluation mechanisms of determining the extent of syllabus coverage and their comprehension levels. Other emerging trends like teacher evaluation by students need to be embraced in order to provide feedback on certain aspects that teachers need to improve on. Since it would be difficult to do justice to all the issues of concern, a number of questions have been raised to point areas that may require attention in universities. The questions are.

1. What are the stakeholders’ perceptions regarding upgrading of middle level colleges to be affiliates of universities? Is this move being done at the expense of middle level education? Do we as a country risk training our human resources for management positions and thereby end up having no personnel to handle low-skill jobs?
2. What options as a country do we have in harnessing and maximising the highly qualified human resources that we have?
3. Other than individual initiatives of self-marketing in regional market and beyond, do we have specific policies that seek to market and negotiate for favourable terms for our growing university graduates who may not find placement within the country?
What are the effects of the increasing enrolment in universities on university lecturers’ ability to teach, research and disseminate research findings in referred journals?

Given the market forces, how can we stem the tide of commercialisation to strike a balance between quality and access?

Given the increasing enrolment numbers, what measures have been put in place to ensure adequate syllabus coverage and that meaningful teaching and learning takes place?

How can universities make use of emerging and existing technologies to support learning?

Since Module II Programmes have been entrenched in our universities, what measures can be taken to erase suspicions by the Regular Student that the other party gets better treatment? What efforts have universities undertaken to integrate the two programmes?

There has been a perception that Parallel Programmes are a preserve of the rich in the society. Is this supported by research findings?

What needs to be done to ensure quality in university programmes in light of increasing student enrolments at this level?

What are the effects of collaborations between universities and institutions of learning? To what extent would universities be said to be in control of the quality of academic programmes offered in such institutions?

What are the employers’ perceptions regarding the graduates of the universities particularly when lecturers are shuttling between one lecture theatre and the next?

What measures are being taken to for strike a balance between need for access and the need for provision of quality education in an environment that is conducive of academic pursuits?

These issues, among others, require intellectual engagement in order to come up with plausible solutions that can help address management of universities in this country.

10 Conclusions

1. Although the upgrading of many middle level colleges has afforded many Kenyans the much sought-for university opportunities, this paper observes that many university programmes are duplications from other universities. While every university seeks to showcase the programmes and package them as market-driven and timely, this paper observes that in some instances, the quest for novelty of course titles leads to extremes where course content remains the same save for the change in course code and course title.

2. In addition, the expansion of university programmes seems not be commensurate with expansion of facilities and the number of teaching and other staff. While it can be argued that technology may dictate fewer members of staff than before, it needs to be borne in mind that most of the teaching aspects still require manual operations like marking of scripts, and preparation of lesson notes, among others. This therefore means that the increase in students’ enrolment needs to be made in due consideration of teaching staff available and where enrolments have to be increased; an appropriate recruitment of staff needs to be done.

3. Much of the comments that get aired tend to emphasises on the negative effects of expansion of university education. This paper, however, observes that there is a lot of good that has not been brought out regarding expansion of university education. While it would be understandable for us as a country to criticise ourselves, it would be more plausible to engage in empirical search of the issues surrounding expansion in university education and come up with objective recommendations rather than besmirch programmes without objective data.

11 Recommendations

1. Given that there is paucity of literature and data on effects of expansion of university on quality of learning in the Kenyan setting, this paper suggests that a survey be undertaken to determine
the perceptions of students, lecturers and university administrators on both Regular and Module II Degree Programmes in terms of quality. In addition, the same study can explore student-teacher ratios and their possible implications on supervision, time taken to provide feedback to students, and depth of responses given to students’ questions, among others.

2. This paper suggests that specific quality assurance mechanisms be put in place to ensure that university learning programmes are of the required standards and that syllabus coverage is not done with a view to passing examinations.

3. Since one of the objectives of university education is to develop independent, critical and creative thinking, this paper suggests that besides subject mastery, undergraduate and postgraduate students be assigned tasks that are practical in nature that nurture the aforementioned aspects. This can take the form of the defunct Advanced Level General Paper (ALGP) that used to have broad-based issues of learning that would require application of knowledge.

4. Since the mandate of any university is to research, teach and disseminate knowledge, expansion of university programmes and enrolments needs to take this into account. Teaching should be juxtaposed with research and dissemination of knowledge that has value not just for its esoteric nature but its application to the challenges of the society.

5. This paper recommends that before an institution can be affiliated to a university, its facilities, human resources and the capacity to handle university training be assessed by CHE and thereafter be re-assessed to determine whether the quality of staff, learning programmes and facilities are in line with CHE’s specified standards.

6. In conclusion, staff development programmes need to be central to any expansion of university programmes. Such programmes need to bring on board the latest technologies for learning and teaching as well as exposing lecturers to what other premier institutions within and outside the country do in matters of research, development and application of research findings to social concerns.

12 References