University education and the crisis of leadership in Malawi

Steve Sharra asks whether the time is right for a complete overhaul of African universities.

Upon attaining independence, African countries' expectations were that universities would be the primary institutions to produce leaders who would propel their countries to prosperity. According to Ghanaian scholar Professor Akilagpa Sawyerr, Africans expected their universities to build capacity "to develop and manage their resources, alleviate the poverty of the majority of their people, and close the gap between them and the developed world." African countries hoped that universities would achieve these goals by providing a "home-grown leadership in areas in need of rapid material and social development." The way to think of these goals was through what Sawyerr calls a "developmental university", an institution of higher learning that was expected to contribute to a country's development.

African universities suffered from World Bank anti-tertiary education policies in the 1980s

Five decades since independence, what have African universities contributed to the leadership of their respective countries? In this article, we will turn this gaze onto the Malawian leadership landscape and assess the extent to which our universities have produced, or failed to, the kind of leadership Malawians have always desired. Regardless of the fact that none of the four presidents Malawi has had thus far has been a product of a Malawian university, graduates from our institutions of higher learning are in various leadership positions in the public and private sectors. We discuss why the universities have fallen short of expectations, and what solutions are being suggested by some of Africa's most prominent intellectuals.

As far as educating a new generation of Africans, Sawyerr argues that African universities have succeeded in fulfilling some of these expectations. He says had it not been for these universities, it is hard to imagine where African countries would have been today. But while African universities have made remarkable contributions to the addressing of African problems, these institutions have also failed their respective countries, particularly in the area of leadership both in the public sector as well as in the private sector. The causes of the failures are to be found in the political economy of dominant global ideology, within the institutions themselves, and in the political leadership of African countries.

Sawyerr has discussed the failures of the African university in the broader context of the global influence exercised by international financial institutions and their neoliberal prescriptions ("Challenges Facing African Universities: Selected Issues", *African Studies Review*, Vol 47 No 1, 2004). He singles out the World Bank's Structural Adjustment Programmes of the 1980s, which he calls the "lost decade," for causing "enormous social costs, including the deindustrialization of

national economies and the substantial loss of national control over economic and social policymaking.

Professor Thandika Mkandawire, a world-renowned Malawian development economist, has also written extensively on this very topic. He has argued that the anti-tertiary education policies that the World Bank adopted, and has since disavowed, robbed African countries of opportunities to educate a professional class of technocrats. The structural problems African economies experience today have their origins in that era of missed opportunities.

The death of Intellectualism in African universities

In a 2003 lecture given at the University of Nairobi, Professor Ali Mazrui decried the death of "intellectualism" in the African university. He argued that for a university to help develop its society, first the society has to help develop the university. He identified three crucial relationships that mediated the role of the university and its dealings with the wider world: political distance from the state, cultural closeness to the society, and intellectual links to wider scholarly and scientific values. He argued that it was possible for a university to be funded by the state and still maintain its political distance, as is the case in North America, Europe and elsewhere. He cited the example of Kenyan President Mwai Kibaki whom he said had surrendered his chancellorship of six public universities.

Mazrui said African universities were "colonial in origin and disproportionately European in traditions," adding "African universities are the major instruments and vehicles of cultural westernization on the continent." This was where the African university faced its most formidable challenge in its attempt to be of relevance to its society ("Towards Re-africanizing African Universities: Who Killed Intellectualism in the Post Colonial Era?" Lecture given at the University of Nairobi, published in *Alternatives: Turkish Journal of International Relations, Vol 2 No 3&4, 2003*).

In a more recent lecture, which we discussed at length in *The Lamp* (September-October 2011), Ugandan intellectual Professor Mahmood Mamdani echoed Mazrui's characterization of the African university. Mamdani said the Western university system on which African universities modeled themselves was out of touch with African problems. He said the African university did not prepare students for the conditions in which they would work, conditions they would be expected to have a good grasp of if they were to make meaningful contributions to development ("The importance of research in a university", *Pambazuka News*, Issue 526, 21st April, 2011).

Academics versus politicians

But an important factor in the failures of the African university has been the relationship between African academics and African political leadership. In Malawi, the relationship between the University of Malawi (until recently the only university in the country) and Malawi's political leadership has always been a testy one. Although the establishment of a national university was one of his major dreams upon the attainment of independence, founding president Dr. Hastings Kamuzu Banda detested a university that exercised intellectual autonomy. In his 2003 book *Rethinking Africa's Globalization: Volume 1: The Intellectual Challenges,* Malawian intellectual and economic historian Professor Paul Tiyambe Zeleza has described the brand of African leaders in the mould of Kamuzu Banda as having been "suspicious and dismissive of academics."

One tragic consequence of this relationship was, argues Zeleza, the reduction of scholarly work to "sycophancy." Academics competed amongst themselves to outdo each other in singing praises of the political leadership and concocting subversive plots to bring each other down. One Malawian academic who bore the brunt of this brand of politics of destruction was Dr. Jack Mapanje, a leading poet and then chair of the English Department in the 1980s. Mapanje has described, in his 2011 memoir *And Crocodiles Are Hungry At Night*, the circumstances that led to his betrayal by his superiors at Chancellor College and his detention without trial for three and a half years.

Zeleza points out that the authoritarianism of the state meant that universities were also ran in authoritarian ways. The state appointed senior university administrators who appointed heads of units, who made recommendations for promotions based not on merit but on levels of sycophancy. But Zeleza apportions part of the blame for this state of affairs on the African universities themselves. He writes: "Besotted by opportunism, careerism, parochialism, factionalism, and ideological intolerance, intellectuals have often weakened their collective defense against state assaults." In the case of Malawi, "intellectuals not only conceded political space to the state, but sometimes assisted in authenticating its authoritarianism."

The authoritarianism also meant that institutional decisions were top-down rather than democratic, which marred communication, and strained relations between lecturers and university administration. It is in this context that African universities strayed from their missions, and became part of the larger problems that impeded national development. Writes Zeleza: "buildings decayed, libraries and laboratory facilities deteriorated, and the culture of learning and knowledge production degenerated." This is the history that informed the academic freedom struggle Chancellor College lecturers fought in 2011, and continue to in their rejection of the proposed University of Malawi Act 2012.

In a personal anecdote that illustrates the extent of intellectual degeneration in Malawi, Zeleza writes about visiting Chancellor College in 1996 and discovering that the university bookstore had been closed, and the building was being converted into offices. Close to two decades later, the University of Malawi continues to operate without university bookshops in its constituent colleges. The implication of this situation is a pernicious type of intellectual deprivation that leads to students who graduate from university without adequate preparation for the roles society has carved out for them. Zeleza points out that failure to address problems of intellectual quality in African universities is tantamount to condemning "African students to intellectual backwardness and dependency, both of which constitute a monumental crime against Africa's development and future."

Do universities' mission statements matter?

Is it still possible for Malawian universities, public and private, to assume their rightful roles in fulfilling societal expectations and providing for the country a cadre of graduates who can contribute to national development in a more meaningful way? A cursory glance at the mission statements of six public and private Malawian universities reveals a common concern with providing a high quality education that meets the needs of the country.

Malawi's universities want to "advance knowledge, promote wisdom and understanding and provide services by engaging in teaching and research and by facilitating the dissemination, promotion, and preservation of learning responsive to the needs of Malawi and the world" (University of Malawi). They desire to meet the "technological, social and economic needs of individuals and communities in Malawi," (Mzuzu University), and to train professionals who manage the country's agriculture and natural resources (Lilongwe University of Agriculture and Natural Resources).

They want to "contribute to the integral development of the nation" (Catholic University of Malawi), and to equip graduates "with knowledge, skills and competencies that are necessary for service to God and mankind" (Malawi Adventist University). They aspire to "educate and inspire students to become principled leaders who will transform society for the glory of God" (University of Livingstonia), and to train "competent scholars with relevant skills such as problem solving, decision making, research and analytical skills to contribute towards the improvement of social economic development of the country and beyond" (Exploits University).

Blantyre International University talks of providing "high quality university education for this century," while Skyway University aims "to provide quality services in a professional and nationally-conscious manner, with integrity within a conducive learning environment."

Cultivating new leaders

It is one thing for universities to have elaborate visions and impressive mission statements, and another for them to live up to those lofty ambitions. In a paper titled "Learning and Leadership: Exploring the linkages between higher education and developmental leadership," Laura Brannelly, Laura Lewis and Susy Ndaruhutse of the Developmental Leadership Program (2011) argue that universities cannot adequately prepare leaders if they do not espouse the core principles of leadership in their mission statements, their curricular content and their classroom practices.

The three authors point out that there is a "symbiotic relationship between higher education and developmental leadership," and higher education institutions need to be clear about how their aims and objectives can promote good leadership amongst their graduates. Developing the next generation of leaders, argue Branney, Lewis and Ndaruhutse, starts with the types of skills and competencies universities teach and embrace. Teaching methods must demonstrate transformational qualities rather than perpetuate mechanical, top-down transfer of knowledge.

Teachers need to be mentors and role models to their students. Institutions of higher learning themselves need to embrace and practice governance and management models that they teach, as these are the competencies graduates will need to demonstrate as they take up leadership roles. This point was also made by Zeleza who observed that authoritarianism in the state reflected authoritarianism in the university.

Students need to be involved in the institution's decision making process, habits of practice that good leaders follow. A lot of the vandalism and violence that have come to characterize Malawian secondary schools and universities in recent years stem from a lack of meaningful and democratic involvement of students in decision making.

Passengers no longer

As Malawians debate the legacy left by the pioneering leaders, it will be instructive to keep in mind the plethora of causes that have led to the leadership crisis in the country. Some of these go back to the structures bequeathed to us by colonial history, while some have arisen from the global economic and political structures. The solutions, as suggested by all the scholars discussed in this article, lie in rethinking the governance structure of our universities, the curricula taught in these universities, and the pedagogical methods used.

Mazrui calls for a more Africa-centered curriculum with African languages given a prominent role. He points to the need to recognize African models of knowledge that have the same rigour and depth, outside Western models of science. Sawyerr emphasizes the "primary, irreducible responsibility of the state" in funding and maintaining high standards in the higher education system. Mamdani wants the next generation of African intellectuals to be trained in Africa so as to prepare them for African realities, while Zeleza looks to the "africanization" of global scholarship, and the "globalization" of African scholarship.

Writes Zeleza: "As intellectuals, we must articulate clear agendas for African societies and people, especially as the continent encounters new processes of globalization. These agendas must be rooted in the unfinished tasks of progressive African nationalism—development, democratization, and self-determination . . . Without strong, well-funded universities and research programs, we will continue being passengers."

This article first appeared in the March-April 2013 issue of *The Lamp* magazine.

Steve Sharra blogs at Afrika Aphukira.

June 17th, 2013 | Development, Education | 2 Comments