

WHAT KNOWLEDGE IS OF GREATEST WORTH?

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It is generally accepted that the central function of universities is that of creating knowledge. Such function is achieved in two major ways. First, through teaching and learning process, universities strive to cultivate the intellectual abilities that lie latent in the individual student towards the maturity of creative thought and action. Seen in this context, the intellectual nurture developed is intended to equip the individual with a wide and deep scope of understanding to be, to live among others, to know and to do.

Second, through research, universities are mandated to engage in further work of refining and making advances into new frontiers of knowledge. Inherent in the search for new frontiers of knowledge is the conviction that we live in an ever-changing and dynamic world where accumulated knowledge or techniques of today cannot adequately provide solutions for the individual or societal needs and aspiration for tomorrow. Knowledge is, therefore, a powerful tool for the transformation of any one society.

As centers for the creation and propagation of updated knowledge, therefore, universities are the lifeblood not only for their immediate societies but also for the global community. It is this central function of universities that makes this Conference on Transformation of Higher Education Management and Leadership for Efficacy in Africa vitally important to the present and the future citizens of the African continent.

In their task of creation and delivery of knowledge through research, teaching and learning, universities must bear heavy responsibility to tax payers by ensuring that their academic programmes are responsive to the nature, needs and aspirations of their parent societies. To do so adequately, universities must of necessity ensure that their curriculum designs are derived from the context of the cultural and historical realities as well as from

the emerging aspirations of the parent society as well as keeping in academic tune with the global community.

One of the under-guarding challenges in curriculum design is the question:

.What knowledge is of greatest worth?

In posing this question, we are attempting to get to grips with the whole topic of emerging trends in the teaching and learning process as one of the themes for this conference, particularly as it relates to emerging classroom issues. It is our view in this paper that the concept of teaching and learning encompasses the knowledge content i.e. curriculum and the methods of delivery.

The process of curriculum design must, in our view, take into account the cultural context as the bedrock on which all streams of societal life flow in terms of academic reference and from which curriculum content must be based and derived.

In any nation where universities are true to their calling, curricula designs and offerings have observed the need for strict adherence and reflection to the nature as well as to the needs of their cultural values, beliefs and identity.

In the United States of America, for example, educational programmes are geared towards the development of the nation and its citizens.

We quote:

Fresh knowledge, whether acquired through university research or through the pragmatic experimentation of the farm or the factory, does not lie sterile in the United States. It is quickly disseminated and harnessed....In the United States the institutions of learning, ignoring tradition and being less concerned about prestige, have organized knowledge and systematized the instruction. They have consistently related practice to theory and to general knowledge. The gain in effectiveness when applied to our industry is obvious. Our professional schools such as agriculture and engineering, through research and

education, have been leavening influences in technological development and the advancement of our standard of living (1).

It is interesting to note the high level of ownership, national pride, and the personal attachment with which the author identifies himself with this statement. It should be observed that the reader is carried by the writer's feeling that the U.S.A, as a nation, is highly committed the design and the transmission of the knowledge power as an effective vehicle for such national development programmes as are relevant to the prosperity of its people. In this respect, therefore, Higher education is not a mere exercise geared to the award of paper qualifications to students.

On the British front, it was Sir Richard who once wrote:

If you want to destroy modern civilization, the best effective way to do it would be to abolish universities:
The reason is that universities create knowledge and train the mind (2).

Arising from the above observations is the fact that the role of institutions of higher learning and that of the academics generally lies in shaping the direction towards the culture specific or culturally relevant curricula. There is therefore an ever pressing need in every nation to have curriculum designs that are holistically contextualized and in tune with the national cultural character and outlook as to redress the socio-economic imbalances and other related vices that inhibit human progress.

Implicit in these observations is yet another interesting pointer to the effect that universities and other related institutions of higher learning are not mere market centres for the manufacture of certificates or degree awards for the job market. While it is true that professional job seekers must possess requisite qualifications acquired from these institutions, it should be borne in mind that teaching and learning in a university

classroom are geared to igniting the intellectual aptitude of each individual student to the pursuit of lifelong learning and creative action in promoting human welfare. The lifelong learning engagement as an object transcends the immediate utilitarian ends that are pursued by the average undergraduate students.

This point was well captured by Michael Okeshott when he said:

A university will have ceased to exist when its learning has degenerated into what is now called research, when its teaching has become mere instruction and occupies the whole of an undergraduate's time, and when those who come to be taught come, not in search of their intellectual fortune but with a vitality so un-aroused or so exhausted that they wish only to be provided with a serviceable moral and intellectual outfit; when they come with no understanding of manners of conversation but desire only a qualification for earning or a certificate to let them in on the exploitation of the world(3).

The efficacy of universities' academic programmes should be validated, not on the number of those who graduate every year, but essentially, by the level of impact the graduates make as they apply their professional knowledge and competence in those life situations which promote human progress.

Turning now to the African situation, one is immediately faced with a saddening scenario. As it is well known, African education systems, including universities are still steeped in the colonial traditions in terms of their curricula design, teaching and learning. This situation has persisted, not just because the systems were inherited wholesale but mainly because their home governments have failed to effect any meaningful reforms.

It can be stated openly that African university education is largely, not only isolated from its cultural roots but that it is also lagging far behind other members of the academic community within the global village.

Petika Ntuli has aptly noted:

While western institutions of higher learning are frantically searching for new paradigms to fashion their lives, we as African people continue to be caught in western mirror of fascination (4).

The statement cited here above is totally in keeping with President Moi's constant caution to Kenyans against the inherent dangers of aping foreign culture blindly. It is ironic and totally incomprehensible that within a limited time span, a people can be so hypnotized through a historical experience such as colonialism, that they rather choose to be assimilated in a foreign culture than reclaim their own heritage.

The 21st century is now beckoning the African people, both those who live in the continent as well as those of the diaspora, to open a new chapter. This new chapter is what the South Africa's President Thabo Mbeki has called the African Renaissance; a clarion call for renewal, a process of self-reflection, self-realization, and an assertive reclamation of African identity.

According to Semou Pathe Gueye:

Renaissance implies positive transformation in all spheres of our Existence: culture (which includes mentalities and patterns of Thought and behavior), economic, social and political structures (5)

Just like Europe was during the Medieval period which is commonly referred to as the Dark Ages, the revival of classical knowledge, though antiquarian, was viewed as the foundation upon which civilization in the modern world of thought and practice would be built. Although the use of classical knowledge could not have been sufficient to make the European renaissance effective, the mastery of

its writings in various disciplines was necessary in the transformation process and as the starting point from which refinement could be made.

The process of mastering the various disciplines and the upsurge for reviving classical knowledge was accomplished by scholars who translated the Greek texts of different disciplines into various local languages. The knowledge acquired from these translations was the spark that triggered the transformation of European societies from Greco-Roman cultural domination.

It was now more effective to communicate ideas and concepts in a cultural context through the use of the languages of the people than through Greek which was a foreign tongue.

The African case is not different as Semou Pathe Gueye observes.

“We need as Europe did for our own renaissance to look at our past and to re-appropriate its greatest cultural achievements because it is vital to know exactly who we were, we come from and what we were able to do. That can help us to reach a better understanding of what we are today and what we can do and become tomorrow” (6)

The position taken in this paper is time has now come for us as Africans to assess our Africanness and to tell the world who we are in our own words and in our own way. In short, Africans must define themselves. For far too long we have been known through the eyes of the outsiders who have bestowed upon themselves the moral authority to define the African.

In the words of outsiders, Africa and its people have been described in all manner of distorted and derogatory fashions. Hegel, on his lectures on the philosophy of world history, holds the view that black peoples consciousness has not reached an awareness of any substantial objectivity on their thinking.(7) As such, and

according to his view Africans were unable to develop neither real history nor culture of their own.

Listening to such distorted views and such insulting language, Africans are bound to ask themselves for how long; how LONG can we continue to allow the world to define us just anyway they want? The continued distortion and denigration of the of the African image must be must viewed as an issue that demands redress by African universities in their teaching and learning programmes. Our universities must begin to inculcate the sense of self-worth, self confidence and personal dignity as a people with an identity of their own. This passion was well expressed by President Thabo Mbeki when he said

“ I know that none dare challenge me when I say I am African!... The great masses who are our mother and father will not permit that the behavior of the few results in the description of our country and people as barbaric. Patient because history is on their side, these masses do not despair because today the weather is bad. Nor do they turn triumphalist when tomorrow the sun shines.

Whatever the circumstances they have live through and because of that experience, they are determined to define for themselves who they are and who they should be.” (8)

In the above statement Thabo Mbeki is expressing his existential state of being unequivocally. This is as it should be. We are before we begin to learn or to do.

In line with Mbeki's thinking African universities should seek to inculcate in every student, the sense of being who they are as Africans. This is the cardinal starting point in the long journey and the process of learning to be: to live among others; to know and to do. In our view, there is no better method of initiating the African renaissance than affirming ourselves first. Further, as producers and transmission centers of knowledge, African universities must become more and more the dominant source of the light of society. They should then champion this noble task of African renaissance where knowledge must be viewed as the power and the force that must propel this process. The most important knowledge in this respect must be African civilizations of antiquity. It is from these sources where African scholars will derive the African authentic historical and philosophical backgrounds. Further, African academics must seek to translate knowledge from the various disciplines that exist. Initially such translations should be in local African languages which have regional application e.g. Kiswahili and Hausa etc. When some major local languages get translations covering various disciplines, Africa will be in a position to build the capacity to transmit modern knowledge in the cultural context among the masses of her people. Such an approach holds great promise in de-colonizing the mind and for the holistic promoting of human welfare. We will face great opposition especially where funding of such projects are concerned but we have no choice.

To achieve the intended results in cementing African renaissance scholars in African universities must be viewed with less suspicion by political leaders and given opportunity to play their central role in the formulation of policies related to

national development. The current trend of marginalizing academics in Africa is an unwarranted and drawback in respect to national progress and the pursuit of our vision for African renaissance.

As the 21st century unfolds, therefore, knowledge of the greatest worth for the African Universities to grapple with is this: That we are to begin a long intellectual march under the banner of African renaissance. We must define ourselves, revive our cultural values from antiquity and refine all these and other forms of knowledge in our own languages as effective tools for Africa's appropriate space within the global village.

FOOT NOTES

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