

Chapter 4

Contemporary Education Curriculum in Africa



Education in Contemporary Africa

Soon after independence, African countries began to invest heavily in the education sector. This was necessary owing to the very low literacy levels that marked most of the newly independent countries. The granting of independence was earlier delayed by the colonialists who advanced the reason that the uneducated Africans would be unable to effectively manage their own affairs. Soon after independence, therefore, African governments began to invest aggressively in the education sector. In *Political Values and the Educated Class in Africa*, (Univ. California Press: California 1978), Ali Mazrui asserts that at Independence in Ghana, only about 20% of the country's children were in school. In 5 years, this figure was raised to 85% (Mazrui 1978, 44). This desire to fund education attracted the attention of donors, such as, the United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). Most African governments could not afford the enormous funding needed to make education accessible for majority of their populace; the UNESCO was very forthcoming with funding in this regard. As described by the then Director-general of UNESCO, the problem of education in Africa is "far and away the biggest single task facing UNESCO" (Mazrui 1978, 44).

From the 1960s and onward, UNESCO's yearly budget gave priority to the funding of the expansion of education in Africa. Zaire (Democratic Republic of Congo) was the first to be allocated the "largest single amount ever devoted in a single year to a single country" (Mazrui 1978, 44). The former colonial powers of Britain and France especially, were also very much involved as donor nations in assisting their ex-colonies to build their education system. These agencies and bilateral relationships provided wider sources of assistance for Africa's deprived education sector, mostly through the provision of teachers, volunteers, shipping of textbooks and school materials and the granting of scholarships to brilliant African children. The United States for example, provided 300 scholarships as an "Independence present" to Zaire (DRC).

Mazrui asserts that the negative effect of this dependence on external agencies and governments for the funding of Africa's education is not far-fetched. Africa lacked the much needed capacity or even audacity to intervene and change the colonially bequeathed structure, and most importantly, program content of its education system. It was a case of "either you accept colonial tutelage or your educational progress will be retarded" (Mazrui 1978, 44). The immediate post-independence African leadership, eager to present the promised dividends of independence to the masses, went all out to solicit for, and accept assistance from all who offered. The question, unlike the case in India, ceased to be about what was being taught, but about how many were being taught.

As a direct response to the clamor by the recently decolonized people, who had seen the benefits of white collar jobs for the very few who were opportune enough to be educated under the colonial administration, the immediate post-colonial governments demanded increased aid in the area of education from the international community. The United Nations and the major world powers responded to this plea, not necessarily out of deep-seated feelings of empathy or humanitarian considerations, but more due to the unfolding global realities. The commencement of the Cold War, the resultant shifting of alliances and emerging re-alignment of interests, presented the reality that unstable governments and a disillusioned citizenry in any part of the world could pose serious risks to the rest of the globe. Through Western-styled education and training of the majority, the United Nations and major world powers sought to mitigate instability in emerging African countries. In his last annual report, Secretary-general Dag Hammarskjöld stated that education held "the key not only to material welfare of the newly independent countries, but also to the very stability of the new states" (Mazrui 1978, 44).

Part of the evidence of the heavy presence of external forces in Africa's education is that as late as 1978, up to 50% of the teaching staff of an appreciable number of countries in both English- and French-speaking sub-Saharan Africa were non-African. These foreigners, lacking in understanding of the local terrain in which the schools they taught existed, insisted on their own paradigm being reflected in the curricula. African teachers, on their part, did not fare better, since most of them were either educated in the West or were products of colonial education, and had no inhibitions about transferring the same type of education they received to the next generation of Africans. Table 4.1 shows the indigenous versus expatriate employment ratio in eleven African countries at the eve of independence, it can be seen that on average, expatriates filled about 70% of jobs requiring a post secondary education.

The foreign nature of the curricula did not go unnoticed in all cases on the continent. A good example is the student revolt against the Americanization of the law syllabus in the Faculty of Law of the University of Dar es Salaam. Although the new syllabus was presumably an improvement on the previously British colonially imposed one, and supposedly took local issues into account, the Law students would not even accept it, complaining that it was "an American intrusion into the academic process at Dar es Salaam" (Mazrui 1978, 205). Mazrui refers to African universities as "multinational corporations, with their headquarters outside Africa" (Mazrui 1978,

Table 4.1 Employment of expatriates in select African Universities

Country	Year of survey	Educational A	Level B	C	D	Total
Botswana	1967	–	94	81	19	42
Ivory Coast	1962	79	61			
Kenya	1964	77	25	54	18	48
Malawi	1969	58	48	36		41
	1966	64	10	14		18
Nigeria	1964	39	5			13
Somalia	1970	7	2	20	2	2
Sudan	1967–68	12	6	2	0	3
Swaziland	1970	80	74	57	23	35
Tanzania	1965	82	23	31	9	31
	1969	66	20	12	6	18
Uganda	1967	66	32	16	11	21
Zambia	1965–66	96	92	88	41	62

Notes A = university degree or equivalent; B = A levels or O levels plus formal training; C = O levels or secondary form 2 plus formal training; D = secondary form 2 or primary plus formal training (Hinchliffe 1987)

298). For instance, in several African universities, no African language is offered for study, but Greek, Latin, French, English, Portuguese, Spanish, German and other European courses abound.

Research and Development in Contemporary Africa

This study is focused on curriculum and for that reason, the emphasis will be on higher education in Africa. Higher education is the core of research, teacher training and curriculum development. Efforts at general education transformation begin with higher education, which is the bedrock of educational programs for other lower levels, and where choices are determined. African universities were established within an imperial culture. The major rationale for the establishment of higher education in Africa was to produce highly trained manpower capable of replacing expatriates.

Aside from colonial manpower replacement requirements, most of the colonies were bereft of universities able to cater to the demands for economic, political, and social expansions, which Independence was destined to generate. By the time Independence was grudgingly granted by colonial powers, the establishment of a national university became an obligatory sign of Independence, together with the national flag, the national currency and national anthem. In “Higher Education, the State and the Marketplace” Mahmood Mamdani (CODESRIA: 2008) opines that the smallest of the colonies in Africa, deemed too insignificant to be equipped with

one university all to themselves were lumped together and one regional university established. This was so in the case of Makerere University in Kampala, Uganda (Mamdani 2008, 2). In bigger countries such as Nigeria, for example, had only one university in 1961 with about 1,000 students immediately post-Independence (Mamdani 2008, 3).¹

The inevitability of Independence for colonized territories after World War II forced Britain to seek to establish institutions of higher learning to provide the, “kind of indigenous leadership that had acquired Western skills and a ‘modern’ outlook” (Mazrui 2003, 64). The universities that emerged were designed to provide bureaucratic support to outgoing colonial administrators and not necessarily to “help Africa close the technological gap with the more advanced countries” (Abdi and Cleghorn 2005, 26). Following this, the curricula advanced liberal arts and literary education at the expense of vocational and practical training, or technological literacy. By the time African universities were established, Africans themselves were all too eager to scramble for Western education and the culture it embodies without examining the foundations of its establishment.

The resultant effect is a university model that is rigidly foreign and more alienating, rather than integrating, of the African society—a system that has since been involved in churning out generations of graduates whose mindsets are geared towards imitation rather than originality.

Contrary to the wholesale assimilation of Western education by the African academia, Mazrui cites the instance of Japan, which after the Meiji Restoration, consciously emphasized the assimilation of Western technology, rather than its literary and verbal culture (Mazrui 2003, 65). The Japanese slogan was, “Western technique, Japanese Spirit,” which literally implies the retention of Japanese systems, practices, and processes. The new technological knowhow or scientific expertise so acquired were distilled through Japanese paradigms, analyzed within Japanese culture and used to produce the great industrialized country that Japan is today.

In the education systems of most African countries, the study of such areas of life that are central to African societies continue to receive marginal, if any, attention. African music or musicology is a good case in point. Although “dance and song in African societies continue to play a more important sociological role than they now play in the western world, yet the decision as to which kind of subjects ought to be given priority in Africa is reached as a result of examining what is regarded as important in the western world...” (Mazrui 1978, 299). Educational institutions in Africa have consigned the teaching and study of African dance and music to a peripheral endeavor.” In precolonial times, song and dance played prominent roles in the political, social, and economic life of the largely agrarian African societies. In times of agricultural austerity occasioned by drought or flood, dances and songs were used to boost morale and hold the community together (Mazrui 1978, 300). In a largely unlettered society, proverbs and songs were also very useful in enabling the young to memorize their civic duties and the history of their ancestry. With the

¹Thirty years later, in 1991, independent Nigeria had 41 universities with 131,000 students. And Nigeria was not an exception (Mamdani 2008, 3)

eventual missionary incursion into Africa, however, African music, dance, songs, and drama were dismissed as fetish, a ritual to some god, and therefore antagonistic to the dual mandate of Christianizing and civilizing the natives. Rather than the deeply philosophical, energy infused and high octane African drama, dance, and songs, ballroom dance, rock and roll, western-styled rendition of poetry, Shakespeare, and other European expressions became acceptable. For a long time, the African university championed this neo-colonial aversion for any expression of art that was authentically African.

Connected to the question of practicality of the courses of study in the African system of education is the issue of curriculum relevance of the more practical courses. In the field of medicine for instance, medical pedagogy in Africa is abstracted from the realities of the environment in which the medical student would graduate to practice. This is considering the tropical nature of the continent, and the existing realities of the patronage of herbal medical practitioners by majority of the populace. In the field of engineering, there is the tendency to imitate Western models instead of placing emphasis on R&D of the simpler technologies for rural development (Mazrui 1978, 306). In the field of history, Mazrui concedes that much progress has been made as “most African historians now are at least committed to the proposition that oral tradition are proper material for historical reconstructions, and could be regarded in some ways as no less valid than written documents” as laid down by European scholarship (Mazrui 1978, 306). Using linguistic evidence, archeological findings and oral traditions, historians of African extract have defiantly insisted on reconstructing their own history and, by that, have refused to continue with the tradition of the intellectual dependency of African history on European interpretation. The success of the African historian in this novel enterprise has caused their western counterparts who are working on African history to respond to the inclusion of oral tradition as valid evidence for historical reconstruction (Mazrui 1978, 308).

External Factors and the Role of Aid

The World Bank has contributed to the decline in research and development in sub-Saharan Africa by mandating governments across the continent to channel fewer funds into higher education. In a framed debate, the Bank placed the market and the public as competitors, rather than as contemporaries, in the funding of higher education in Africa. The resultant effect was that “rather than discuss the most appropriate relations between the two, this debate focused on which one of the (competing variables—public or market based funding) to emphasize...” (Mamdani 2008, 5).

The first attempt at micro-managing the universities in Africa came at the 1986 conference of Vice Chancellors of African universities, convened by the Bank in Harare. The conference was organized at the time most African countries—owing to economic frustration and excessive debt—were on the verge of signing on to the ill-fated, but much coveted, World Bank Structural Adjustment Program. At the conference, the Bank advised the gathered VCs that it would make more economic

sense if they close all the existing universities in sub-Saharan Africa and channel all the necessary human resources trainings to Western Universities. The VCs, uncomfortable perhaps, at the prospect of being unemployed, protested vehemently against the World Bank's proposition, forcing the Bank to change tactic. The granting of desperately needed economic assistance was then tied to conditions that drastically curtailed the research orientation of most of the universities in Africa (Mamdani 2008, 4).

The World Bank Education Paper for Sub-Saharan Africa (EPSSA) emphasizes a reduction of funding for higher education in sub-Saharan Africa. The EPSSA document expressly states that

to meet minimally acceptable targets for coverage and quality of lower levels of education in most countries, as a general rule the tertiary sub sector's share of stagnant real public education expenditures cannot expand further, and in some cases may have to contract. Some combination of efficiency improvements, increased private contribution to costs, constrained growth in some countries and fields, and outright cutback in production of graduates must be sought (World Bank 1988, 95).

The drastic reduction in funding of higher education emphasized by The World Bank is based on the Rate of Return on Education (RORE) (World Bank 2000a, b, 39). The RORE represents an attempt to employ a market based approach in analyzing state expenditures on higher education. Schugurensky summarizes this as "the commodification of knowledge, the redefinition of the relationship between the university, the state and the market, and a drastic reduction in institutional autonomy" (Schugurensky 1999, 283). Based on this approach, the World Bank projection on the social RORE of primary, secondary and tertiary education are 24%, 18%, and 11% respectively (Mkandawire and Soludo 1999). The lower the RORE, the more unworthy of further investment it was deemed. The major fields targeted were the arts and the humanities.

The case of the University of Dar es Salaam under the RORE was remarkable and worthy of note. At the end of Independence, Makerere University was one of the few African institutions to embark on massive education reforms, aimed at a decolonization of the school system. First the University started with a decolonization of personnel which was immediately followed by a decolonization of curricula. The emphasis was on the study of development from a standpoint of "broader historical study of imperial expansion since the 15th century" (Mamdani 2008, 3). It was mandatory for the entire student intake to take a full year equivalent course in Development Studies before graduation. In 1972, Edward Rugumayo, then Minister of Education, in a speech he made regarding the appropriate foundation of education curriculum in a post-colonial Uganda, stated that it is expedient for the students to be inculcated with "an independent mind capable of judging and analyzing problems objectively; the ability to live in a collective society with the major aim of serving it; one's loyalty to his motherland in a patriotic and nationalist way" (Mazrui 1978).

Makerere University was soon to be forced by the World Bank to adopt market-oriented reforms, through privatization and commercialization. Under privatization, privately sponsored fee-paying students became special targets of The University. Under commercialization, departments, faculties and institutes were mandated to

source for funding from different quarters and to generate majority of their budget (Mamdani 2008, 5). As an incentive, Departments that admitted fee-paying students were allowed to retain as much as 90% of these fees. The effect was that The University wide emphasis on a development based curriculum was truncated by individual faculties for more economically viable programs and courses that would attract private fee-paying students. Faculties began to bicker over who had more rights to teach certain more marketable courses such as secretarial studies, environmental management, conflict resolution, human rights, etc. These were, more often than not, Western-oriented courses introduced oftentimes by the “technical aid” expatriates sent by the World Bank to assist in remedying the dire economic situation of the African university. Within the faculties, financial considerations became the major determinant for the hiring and retention of staff, rather than academic considerations. Several adjunct professors were hired to replace those who had been asked to leave or who left for the West in search of greener pastures.

Within a decade of the introduction of market based reforms in Makerere University, research and development took a nosedive—two universities existed side by side within the institution. One was the ‘official’ university with tenured professors who must be Ph.D. holders, and were all appointed by officially constituted authorities. The other was an informal university, run by auxiliary teachers recruited by unit administrators on “an informal and short-term basis” (Mamdani 2008, 6). These second group of teachers were poorly remunerated and ill treated. Some of them taught for up to a decade without as much as a formal appointment letter. The World Bank market based reforms produced at Makerere a university of very low quality, where the independent indigenously developed curriculum, formerly built around knowledge needed by the erstwhile colonized people was sacrificed at the altar of capitalist preference for a lucrative education system based on Western curriculum. At Makerere as well as several other affected universities all across sub-Saharan Africa, fee-paying students became recipients of low-level irrelevant education in an expensive campus setting (Mamdani 2008, 6).

The result of the market-based reforms at Makerere was dramatic; student population increased from 3,000 at the start of the reforms to 30,000 in the first decade. Academic staff was paid by the hour instead a monthly salary with an average teaching load of about 20 h per week. Of course, the quality of teaching declined sharply while research became extinct. The successful courses were the ones deemed lucrative enough to attract a job in the tourism industry or with the several aid agencies who had flooded Uganda. Such courses include B.A in Tourism, Secretarial Studies, French and English languages. All of the development-based programs and courses were scrapped for lack of economic viability, and revenue generation took center-stage to research. To this extent, whatever little progress recorded in the effort by some African universities to break away from the colonial curriculum was reversed. Mamdani captures it thus:

What happens when local universities focus on teaching to the exclusion of research? When knowledge production is seen as mainly an external process, to be imported? The result of a failure to develop local research capacity is that both problems, and solutions, come to resemble ideologically defined, off-the-shelf offers. One result is that those interested in

research or dissatisfied with an externally-driven process of knowledge production began to move to overseas centers or simply out of the university. The tendency is to fill the university with mimic men and women. Research needs to be an integral component of higher education, particularly in countries with a recent colonial past, for the simple reason that without a capacity for research no one can be in a position to define meaningful choices. Even the imparting of a meaningful general education requires developing a curriculum that is responsive to local contexts and local needs, something that simply cannot be picked off the shelf (Mamdani 2008, 6).

Unfortunately, the RORE ignored the social implications of a university starved of funding for the wider African society. The continued dependency of Africa on the West for knowledge creation and national development is directly linked to the paucity of funds for African universities. Development theorists and practitioners have long presented the argument that universities are major actors in ensuring nation state led national development. Universities are looked upon to supply the human capital needed to ensure industrialization and other processes. In essence, the more graduates a nation produces, the higher its chances of attaining its development goals. In formerly colonized societies such as found in Africa, adequately trained university graduates are critical in ensuring the drive towards modernization. Unfortunately for Africa, this is not the case any longer. The declining capacity of the African states particularly since the 1980s has rendered the universities, who were 90% dependent on the state for funding, almost moribund. The de-emphasis on higher education in Africa would rob scholars of teaching and writing resources that are desperately needed to address societal problems, and would sustain the decline in all sectors of the African economy.

The EPSSA also included a clause for “technical assistance” from the West to support the universities in Africa. The result was the excessive inflow of expatriate staff from donor countries as technical experts, whose often inflated salaries and emoluments were paid from the aid package extended to sub-Saharan Africa, to be repaid with interest. The intellectual nationals of these sub-Saharan African countries were sidelined in the scheme of things, and, in certain instances, made answerable to less qualified expatriates from donor countries. The result was a massive brain drain; “the outflow of national intellectuals, mostly taking up jobs in the West” (Mamdani 2008, 4).²

The donor financed reforms of Africa’s education has shifted all focus to teaching as opposed to research in higher institutions. Writing on Malawi, Mundy Karen, in “Externally Driven Reforms and Their Adoption during Democratic Transition,” notes that after protracted negotiations with the World Bank, the regime of Kamuzu Banda in Malawi agreed to freeze all funding for research and to focus on general expansion and improvement of primary and post-primary education. The World

²“Given the obvious difference between incoming expatriates who were securing jobs under monopolistic conditions and nationals who had to compete in open markets, economists are likely to tell us that those who succeed under free market skies are likely to be of superior quality than those who shelter under monopolies. If so, then the quality of intellectuals Africa lost at this period was surely much higher than that of the technical experts it welcomed as part of ‘technical aid’” (Mamdani 2004, 4).

Bank policy instrument in Malawi, which was designed almost entirely by expatriate technical expertise, focused on “developing new teacher training programs, building schools, and designing and creating new learning materials” (Mundy 2002, 45).

In the 1990s and at around the same time the World Bank was implementing its own reforms in Malawi, USAID established an overlapping reform agenda in Malawi targeted at the improvement of education for girls. Resources for this reform were channeled at “scholarships, social mobilization campaign, and gender sensitization of curriculum and public schools” (Mundy 2002, 46). The USAID reforms followed the path of the World Bank policy paper and had very minimal consultation with locals. Expatriates were flown in from the United States who were experts in educational planning and administration. The much publicized policy document which the reforms produced was highly prescriptive on girls’ education initiatives. In 1994, the government of Malawi attempted its own independent educational reform agenda, which did not differ in anyway from the externally funded and dictated reform efforts of the World Bank and the USAID. The Malawi government reform focused exclusively on the expansion of access to primary schooling, with minimal attention paid to funding for research and development. The reform agenda was prepared with very limited public consultation and was finally codified in a draft policy investment framework in 1995.

Although the 1995 reform was initiated by the government of Malawi, it was soon to be made apparent that it was funded primarily by external assistance. The funding agencies insisted behind the scene that their projects and policy instruments be made the core of the policy document (Mundy 2002, 40). Between 1995 and 1998, the most comprehensive curricular review in the history of Malawi education was implemented. Funded exclusively by donors, the reforms did not take indigenous knowledge into much consideration as the expatriate staff was not well informed about situation on the ground in the country. The curricular reform of 1998 was a mere follow up to the World Bank initiated and funded reforms of the primary school curricula in the 1980s and the “new gender and social studies/civics curricula” sponsored by USAID.

In the case of Guinea, the most comprehensive education reforms commenced in 1989 under the Education Sector Adjustment Program or *Programme d’Ajustement Sectoriel* or PASE (Welmond 2002, 119). The project relied almost entirely on donor funding for its implementation and, according to the dictates of the donors, the aim was to “substantially increase primary school enrollment and public expenditure for primary education” (Welmond 2002, 119). The PASE implementation strategy consisted primarily of the provision of conditional budgetary support and technical assistance by the donors. PASE advocated for an increase in funding for primary education and education administration, with a concomitant decrease in funding for secondary and higher education. The second and third phases of the reforms in the years 1995 and 2000 were not drastically different from Phase I, expanding the initial focus to include increased equipment and supplies and direct financing of training by donors. Donors totaling about six in number, were in charge of drafting the curriculum for the reformed Guinean education sector. At some point, these donors lost coordination and each came up with a different idea and project, all

within the larger reform initiative of the government of Guinea. In 1997, the World Bank, USAID, French Cooperation and the African Development Bank decided which textbook was needed, and financed most of the textbooks purchased for school children in Guinea from preselected suppliers in the international market (Welmond 2002, 135).

The African university system suffered as a consequence of the World Bank and other donor's insistence on certain policy framework. More recent World Bank publications and pronouncements on education in Africa, however, suggest a radical re-thinking of its anti-university orientation of the 1990s. In recent times, however, the Bank now seems to present a conviction of the central role and crucial place of higher education in development discourses in Africa, although there has been no formal or open admission of the error that was its earlier position, which it promoted with all its donor might. (World Bank 2010, 2018).

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