

Higher Education in Africa
EAD 882 Higher Education Policy
Tonjala Eaton
Michigan State University

The world is facing a new time in higher education, in which the demand for higher education is at its all time highest. Also, the global knowledge economy and environmental conditions are requiring a more skilled workforce in the United States and abroad. There are countless news stories that illustrate the growing global demand for higher education, such as China leading the world as the largest provider of higher education and the overcrowding of universities in Nigeria (www.universitywordnews.com). New realities of increased demand for higher education presents both opportunities and threats for current higher education systems throughout the world. Furthermore, the challenges of supplying additional higher educational opportunities can be limited by factors in the external environment, such as the political system, economic development and infrastructure.

Higher education in Africa is in a transformative stage as leaders rethink organizational structure and develop strategies to strengthen current systems. This paper focuses on a critical assessment of the chapter “Higher Education in Africa: Challenges and Strategies for the 21st Century” from the book *Higher Education in the 21st Century: Global Challenge and National Response* (Eshiwani, 1999) and the article “Shared Governance and Leadership in African Universities: Experiences from Mzuzu University, Malawi and Amoud University, Somaliland” (Nur-Awaleh & Mtegh, 2005). Both publications address the challenges of higher education institutions in Africa. From the book chapter, readers are given an overview of general issues faced by higher education institutions in Africa and the article provides insight to a plausible solution to governance in higher education.

The book *Higher Education in the 21st Century: Global Challenges and National Response* edited by P. Altabach and P. McGill Peterson is a collection of perspectives of higher education from various regions of the world (1999). Scholars submitted essays about the status

of higher education in their respective regions. The Institute of International Education along with the Boston College Center for International Higher Education compiled the various essays and published them in book format. Although the book is ten years old, it can now serve as a reflection tool to evaluate the validity of the projections given and the progression or lack thereof in rectifying the foreseen challenges.

In the chapter entitled “Higher Education in Africa: Challenges and Strategies for the 21st Century”, Eshiwani listed the most dominate issues in African higher education to be the ability to meet the population’s demand of higher education, the limitation of weak economies in providing quality educational experiences, and the lack of participation in knowledge production activities (1999). The demand for higher education was demonstrated by the increased number of students that sought higher educational opportunities in other countries such as the United Kingdom, India and the United States. Therefore, the author encouraged higher education institutions to position themselves for an influx of growth.

Eshiwani also listed research and development as an area of projected growth for higher education institution in Africa. The 1970s was seen a decade of growth in the area of knowledge development for African Universities, especially in Kenya. However, after the 1970 research activities declined (Eshiwani, 1999). The lack of research resources impacted the ability of higher education to create and transfer knowledge and contribute to the development of society.

The author is correct in his opinion that innovative thinking and concepts are required in the African higher education system in order to propel the system forward. Furthermore, he suggested that areas of improvement could begin with reviewing the accreditation process and make the programs more responsive to societies’ needs, promotion of university partnerships with the private sector and participate in more research development (1999).

Admittedly, these areas all need attention, but perhaps the most crucial concerns would be for institutions to remain relevant. Developing more research opportunities and private partnerships are the most effective means to ensure graduates have the appropriate employability skills. Also, the creation of knowledge will assist the universities in establishing more credibility. As previously mentioned, these issues were projected to occur over a decade ago.

Media coverage of the United Nations University Priority Africa confirmed Eshiwani predictions. In June of 2008, higher education administrators representing various African countries and universities along with non-governmental organizations agreed that there continues to be a need for African institutions to produce knowledge that can be used to influence economic development and create new infrastructure. Knowledge production is the result of research and development (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t8GwESg40ao>).

While this article provides great insight and historical data, the conclusions are not supported with empirical evidence. It is difficult to have strong command of the issues without sufficient evidence that these were indeed the most pressing concerns. As a researcher, the author failed to sufficiently support the stated claims. It is also important to demonstrate to the reader that the topic is well investigated through the use of multiple sources; the author only referenced one source. While the chapter is an easy read, the quality of the research makes it come across as a narrative as opposed to a research article.

“Higher Education in Africa: Challenges and Strategies for the 21st Century” outlined the expected challenges for higher education leaders and listed governance as an area of concern. The research for *Shared Governance and Leadership in African Universities: Experiences from Mzuzu University, Malawi and Amoud University, Somaliland* was produced during the ten year time span from 1999-2009 (Nur-Awaleh & Mtegh, 2005). Therefore, this article aligns with the

recommendations given in the chapter and gives more specific information about governance, which was identified as a priority in the previous publication.

“Shared Governance and Leadership in African Universities: Experiences from Mzuzu University, Malawi and Amoud University, Somaliland” is an exploration of the applicability of the shared governance concept in African Universities (Nur-Awaleh & Mtegh, 2005). Shared governance is defined as more than one entity contributing and influencing the decision making process of higher education institutions (Albach, Berdahl, & Gumport, 1999). The researchers of this study examined faculty and staff perceptions of organizational structure, leadership and working conditions to identify the occurrence of shared governance in Mzuzu University, Malawi and Amoud University, Somaliland (Nur-Awaleh & Mtegh, 2005).

The environment in which these institutions were established resulted in the development of two very different organizational structures. Mzuzu University was established as an Act of Parliament, which mandated that the University Council would be the governing body. The university was intended to be an autonomous institution that required students to pay fees toward their education. On the other hand, Amoud University, Somaliland was established as an extension of the government. The Somali government is the major provider and benefactor of services from Amoud University. Also students do not pay fees as a result of government subsidies.

Again the purpose of the study was to examine the appropriateness of shared governance in African higher education institutions. The research study was guided by four questions: To what extent does a good working environment contribute to job satisfaction of faculty and staff of Mzuzu and Amoud Universities? What is the relationship between teamwork, job satisfaction and administrative styles that exist at the Mzuzu and Amoud Universities? For effective

participation, leadership needs to ensure that constituencies work in teams. Do such teams exist at the university? How innovative is the organizational culture of the university? To measure the answers to the questions, a Likert scale questionnaire was given to faculty and staff at both institutions (Nur-Awaleh & Mtgeha, 2005).

The authors concluded that there are missing elements that would prohibit the development of shared governance as an effective governing strategy. Respondents from Mzuzu University were split with 42 percent reported favorable work environments and fifty-eight percent reported dissatisfaction with the environment. Participants from Amoud reported a very high 98 percent as content with the work environment. In terms of autonomy, 74 percent of Mzuzu respondents agreed that there is a significant degree of autonomy, in contrast to participants from Amoud reported 98 percent degree of autonomy (Nur-Awaleh & Mtgeha, 2005).

As a result the authors recommend the need for more democratic forms of decision-making processes. It is believed that a change in leadership from the antiquated hierarchical form of governance to more transformative models would position higher education institution to benefit from shared governance. It was also inferred from his text that African University leaders need to create an environment that encourages constructive criticism and adaptation in order to meet rapidly changing scientific and societal needs (Nur-Awaleh & Mtgeha, 2005).

The sophisticated research methods used in the project produced rich data to enhance the understanding of faculty and staff at these two institutions. Inquiring about the nature of teamwork and organizational culture does provide reasonable insight to the perception of the decision making process. However, more direct questions that specifically investigate how decisions about faculty hiring and institutional policies are made would have provided more

information about which individuals at various levels of the organization participate in the decision making process.

The universities chosen for the case study were quite different. Readers would have benefitted from more explanation and discussion around the differences in data. For instance, one may assume that because Amoud University is closely linked to the government there would be feelings of less autonomy than at Mzuzu, which was designed to be quite autonomous. The generality of the authors' recommendations did not build upon the specific inquiry of the research. This article could have given more revelations regarding the types of governing concepts that would best complement independently established institutions compared to higher education institutions that have strong relationships with the government.

The most promising aspect of both of these publications is that questions are being asked and higher education in Africa is a part of the global dialogue. Current and future challenges will be overcome through the continuous efforts of scholars to produce research and providing guidance on how to implement the recommended strategies gained as a result of the inquiry process.

References

- Altbach, P., Berdahl, R., & Gumport, P. (1999). *American higher education in the twenty-first century: social, political and economic challenges*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press.
- Eshiwani, G. (2005). Higher education in Africa: Challenges and strategies for the 21st century
In P. Altbach, & P. Peterson, (Eds.) *Higher Education in the 21st Century: Global Challenge and National Response* (31-38). Annapolis Junction, MD: IIE Books
- Nur-Awaleh, M. & Mtegha, D. (2005). Shared governance and leadership in African Universities: Experiences from Mzuzu University, Malawi and Amoud University, Somaliland. *Africa Development, Vol. XXX*,(1), 34-52.
- Priority Africa [video] (2008). Retrieved November 10 from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t8GwESg40ao>