

**THE COMMISSION FOR AFRICA:
A CHANGING LANDSCAPE FOR HIGHER EDUCATION AND CAPACITY
DEVELOPMENT IN AFRICA?**

**Kenneth King
Centre of African Studies
University of Edinburgh**

In six weeks' time, the Commission for Africa's ambitious recommendations are on the agenda of the G8 in Gleneagles, Scotland (Commission for Africa 2005); and for educators, ministers and policy makers, donor agencies and foundations concerned with higher education what makes this G8 unique is that Africa's universities and up to 30 centres of excellence in science and technology are potentially on the G8 draft communiqué. There is a recommendation for US\$500 million for 10 years 'to revitalise African institutions of higher education'. And there is a parallel recommendation of US\$3 billion over ten years 'to develop centres of excellence in science and technology, including African institutes of technology' (Commission for Africa 2005:138). These proposals will be by no means there on their own. They are part of an integrated set of recommendations on governance, aid, trade, growth, infrastructure, health - including HIV AIDS - and education and capacity building more generally - all aimed to kick-start sustainable growth in the continent.

What may prove timely for this NUFFIC conference is that we interrogate the rationale for the positioning of tertiary education in the Commission's findings and recommendations. What evidence from the state of African higher education has given this salience to universities and institutes of technology? What expectation of their crucial role in the larger vision for Africa's development has promoted them to such prominence in the Commission Report? Does this suggest that they are indeed part of a changing landscape?

We shall look closely at the specific text and the discourse about the role and potential of tertiary education in Africa. We shall also situate this within the wider environment of the education sector as a whole, including the case for education for all. And we shall examine to what extent the recommendations for higher education are dependent on the implementation of the other substantial demands made by the Commission. Finally, we shall seek to assess the implementation challenge for these uniquely positioned recommendations. In particular, we shall examine the draft plan, drawn up by the Association of Commonwealth Universities (ACU), the Association of African Universities (AAU) and the South African University Vice Chancellors Association (SAUVCA), which anticipates a positive outcome from the G8 meeting and has some specific implementation proposals.

The Commission and Higher Education in the Context of Capacity

What is refreshing about the positioning of higher education within the framework of the Commission for Africa's analysis is that, unlike so many development reports where universities might be included in a separate chapter on human development or education, the recommendations on universities and institutes of technology in the Commission Report are actually in a chapter whose central focus is Governance and Capacity Building. 'Capacity to deliver' is included in this particular chapter along with accountability, transparency, and corruption. Higher education is deliberately situated within the section on 'capacity to deliver'. In other words, higher education and the production of university graduates are not seen to have an independent, stand-alone effect. Rather, they are in a two-way relationship with greater accountability and transparency. And again, intriguingly, within this section's sub-titles on capacity, there is no explicit mention of universities. Instead, there are the following sub-sections: professional skills and leadership; incentives; equipment and infrastructure, including ICT; and monitoring of capacity building.

In other words, 'higher education' is not evident by name in the list of contents of the Commission at all; rather it is seen as part of the larger issue of capacity development not as an independent sub-sector. It is worth underlining this concern with capacity¹, since the role of higher education is inseparable from it. The Commission comments:

Weak capacity is a major problem in most African countries. All tiers of government are affected, and the problem is growing in urban areas, whose populations are already doubling, and will continue to double every ten to twenty years (Commission for Africa 2005: 137-8).

The Commission see capacity strengthening as central to everything else.

Tackling the huge need for capacity strengthening will have major knock-on effects for all the other areas of our report, whether by increasing security and the rule of law, reducing corruption, improving service delivery and the operating environment for business, or reducing the constraints which have limited government's ability to absorb higher levels of development assistance. (Commission for Africa 2005: 136)

The detailed evidence for the alleged crisis of states' institutional capacity is not immediately clear in the Commission Report. But the Commission's conviction about the absolutely crucial nature of states' effectiveness and ability to deliver is so central to everything else that, in effect, **capacity development is the fundamental recommendation of the entire report:**

Strengthening states so they are effective and able to deliver is, therefore, the foundation of our report. Unless Africa makes a concerted effort to do so, we

¹ See Wolhgemuth 2005 and Gustafsson 2005 on capacity development

believe that all other reforms, in international trade, debt, and aid – essential as these reforms are – will only have limited impact.....

Improving the capacity of the state to design and deliver good policies and to manage its development partners, along with better accountability for how the state answers to its entire people for its policies and actions, are central. (Commission for Africa 2005: 134)

Within this framework of allegedly very weak capacity, there is a very strong recommendation that African governments should draw up comprehensive capacity-building strategies (Commission for Africa 2005:136). Donors are urged to invest in these with long-term and flexible financing. There are three specific areas which impact on capacity development: professional skills and leadership; incentives; and infrastructure, including both information and communication technology.

What is intriguing is that higher education is presented as just one source of the professional skills and leadership needed rather than the usual claim for higher education's special critical engagement with the state and civil society. These professional skills are 'essential for all forms of development' both in the public and private sectors. They are critical to the delivery of the MDGs in health and education, but equally such skills are essential to scientific and technical development, as well as to performance and monitoring. The sheer scale of the capacity challenge outlined in the Commission is reminiscent of the proposal in the Millennium Project Report for a global human resource training effort to be launched in 2005. The latter was also aware of the need for very large numbers of educated and skilled professionals, if the MDGs were to be reached and sustained (UN 2005a: 235).

We shall note later that higher education does not have a monopoly on the production of such professional skills but it is clearly a very crucial source of them. And particularly linked to higher education and research institutes, in the Commission Report, is their potential for the improvement of government accountability, and beyond their role in producing skilled staff, their independent research can support debate and in turn improve the effectiveness of government policy and the delivery of services. However, if Africa cannot retain the capacity it develops in higher education, it does not matter how many positive characteristics university graduates may potentially have.

Incentives to retain trained capacity: salary enhancement vs university expansion

But equally, as the Report keeps remarking as one of its core messages, professional skills development, to be effective, needs to be accompanied by other changes in the enabling environment. At the larger political level, professional leadership skills need to be embedded in an environment of accountable, transparent government. At the more instrumental level, these potentially valuable skills actually need to be retained in Africa. Hence the discussion about the production of skills and capacity development is

inseparable from a consideration of the brain drain and from recommendations about improving the incentives for graduates to remain in Africa.

In this latter sphere there are some very dramatic numbers to report:² that some 70,000 highly skilled African scholars and experts leave their home countries to work abroad; that the annual bill for some 100,000 skilled expatriates to work in Africa is of the order of US\$4 billion; that there are more African scientists and engineers working in the USA and in the whole of Africa (Commission for Africa 2005: 137-139). The Commission's answer to this challenge is a bold, and even provocative one: that, given the states' incapacity to find additional funding for this purpose, it should be considered by donors that over a period of 5 to 7 years, they shift resources from technical assistance to selective salary enhancement (Commission for Africa 2005: 139). What is being acknowledged implicitly here is that donors have all too often given salary incentives to those working on their own projects and programmes, and have thus been directly responsible for some of the internal brain drain within countries as well as for bringing in expatriate technical assistance. Arguably, it might be better if such funds were attached to key regular workers in line positions, and especially as many donors are in principle committed to moving their funding from their own projects to support of entire sectors or to direct budget support. The Commission illustrates the possible approach from technical assistance vs salary enhancement for Mozambique:

A UNDP/UNICEF expert group calculated that, for Mozambique, a shift of around US\$100 million per year from provision of technical assistance workers (around US\$350 million per year total) to national salaries would allow salaries to double on average and finance an incentive scheme. (Commission for Africa 2005: 406 [fn. 27])

But Commission's suggestion that for 'priority skills which are difficult to recruit or retain' there be targeted salary enhancement from external funds is one that will need to be closely analysed (Commission for Africa 2005: 139). The problem of low and uncompetitive public sector salaries – especially in comparison with the small, multinational segment of the private sector or with nationals working for donor agencies and international NGOS - is widespread across many sub-Saharan African countries outside Southern Africa, and touches all tiers of government. From police, to teachers, to nurses, and civil servants more generally, this phenomenon has led to second or third jobs, as well as to petty corruption through the exploitation of the public in one's primary job. Even though the so-called formal sector of the economy only contains about 10% of the economically active population in many Sub-Saharan African countries, this still constitutes many hundreds of thousands of employees.³ Thus, if the example of

² Wohlgemuth (2005) reports that in the University of Lusaka, through migration to Southern Africa and through leaving the continent completely, the number of Zambian teachers (senior lecturer and above) has been reduced from over 300 in 1985 to around 20 in 1995.

³ Kenya in 2003 had 230,000 teachers, and some 300,000 working in formal sector trade and industry, for example.

Mozambique above actually involves the doubling of all public sector salaries as well as an incentive scheme, this would be a huge undertaking, in terms of resource transfer, and it would raise issues of sustainability directly.

The Commission is obviously hopeful that if their wider package of recommended measures bears fruit in the form of renewed growth, and hence a larger tax yield, then these proposed salary enhancements can be phased out.

Of course it could be argued that in states such as Uganda and Rwanda where external funds are responsible for some 50% of the entire recurrent budget, then donors are already contributing to salaries through sector support or direct budget support. But that seems very different from targeting particular priority jobs with enhanced rewards across different sectors. What would that mean in the higher education sector, for example?

The exemplification of how the proposed salary enhancement could work in practice in different sectors is not teased out in the Commission Report itself. But behind the Commission's recommendations for the renewal of African universities is a 9 point plan drawn up by the ACU, the AAU and SAUVCA, which seeks, amongst other suggestions, to illustrate how salary enhancement could be operationalised in the tertiary education sector. In brief, it proposes a scheme whereby 100 selected, 'best academic' staff in each of the AAU's 179 member universities could be provided with an enhancement of US\$6,000, at an overall cost per annum of US\$64 million (AAU, ACU, SAUVCA 2005: 3). Even though no details are given, it could well be that a selective scheme of the sort suggested may not be the most equitable answer to the 'barely imaginable' conditions of work allegedly experienced by scholars in Africa. For one thing, selection would be hugely difficult, and for the majority not selected, there could be increased problems of commitment and low morale. For another, it is obvious that it is not just the academic members of staff that face these salary problems, but also those many other technical and administrative staff who run the university and maintain its facilities, from libraries, to laboratories, to finance and to regular departments.

None of the details of this proposed scheme for salary enhancement in the tertiary education are available in the Commission Report. There it is the general principle that is promoted, and the proposal is not related specifically to the universities at all, but to a series of positions where priority skills are needed. Indeed, it is anticipated that these could be filled either by local or by expatriates such as members of the African diaspora.

It must be remembered that the Commission's concern is with improving the capacity to deliver services in Africa; thus the incentive scheme is just one among a number of ways of improving provision. Others include increasing the pressure from local communities upon the delivery of public services, while a further approach is to diversify provision through non-state actors, such as religious and faith-based groupings.

Another approach to the brain drain, of course, is to deliberately expand the numbers of qualified individuals within the country who could fill these positions. Arguably, this has been the position taken by countries such as India and the Philippines, which have

anticipated large scale migration of skilled workers and professionals, but have expanded educational provision to take account of this. This option is not in fact discussed in the Commission Report.

Making the Case for the Renewal of African Universities

We return to the particular case for the renewal of African universities, recalling that this is primarily justified as part of capacity building in Africa. If leaders of the G8 countries are to take seriously in early July 2005 the recommendation for university support, it may be worth examining the evidence base for the proposal.

The case for university renewal is discussed in terms of the following elements. First, there are shortages of skilled professionals in Africa, a situation accentuated by the brain drain. Second, higher education and research institutes should be producing the critical analysis of government, and building a sense of participation and citizenship. But, thirdly, many higher education institutions are prevented from contributing to development in these ways because of a continuing 'state of crisis'. There are several dimensions of this crisis: physical and communication infrastructure is lacking – from libraries to laboratories, and from internet to regular classroom space. The human resources are also in short supply – from teachers to administrators and managers, and the age profile of staff insufficiently represents the next generation. Funding has been inadequate to meet the demands of expansion; and lastly the research capacity of Africa's institutes has declined.

Although the Commission for Africa is in general extremely well supplied with bibliographic references and textual commentary throughout, there is very little in the way of an evidence base for these assertions about the state of university crisis. Apart from the references to the brain drain, the only other reference for the crisis is a speech by Aki Sawyerr, Secretary-General of the Association of African Universities on 'Challenges facing African universities: selected issues' (Sawyerr 2004) and the ten year partnership programme of the AAU, ACU and SAUVCA. The influential World Bank Reports on tertiary education are not referred to as part of the case for university renewal (World Bank 2000; 2002). Nor is the evaluative and analytical work associated with NUFFIC, NUFU, SAREC, and other bilateral bodies. There is no evidence either, in this chapter where higher education is considered, of the series of books on higher education in Africa, published by the Partnership for Higher Education in Africa in recent years.⁴ Instead, it is clear from the text that the case for US\$500 million a year for 10 years, to be put to the G8, is derived from the analysis and estimates in the AAU/ACU/SAUVCA document on 'Renewing the African University'. We shall turn to a summary of this, as the primary basis for the proposal in the Commission Report.

⁴ There is no reference either to the document *Revitalising universities in Africa: strategy and guidelines* which was prepared by the World Bank and the Association of African Universities in 1997 under the aegis of the Partnership for Capacity Building in Africa

Renewing the African University – a partnership proposal

There is doubtless a very much more detailed version of this particular 7 page partnership proposal, but it will still be useful briefly to examine this summary, as a source of the evidence of the crisis in the African university.⁵ There are in fact several dimensions of what the document terms the ‘barely imaginable’ conditions under which African scholars work. The most detailed of the nine short sections covers library provision and ICT infrastructure. There is summarised in this section the by now well-known situation of the scarcity of printed books and journals. Equally, the lack of adequate internet connectivity and bandwidth is discussed, with their severe consequence for collegial academic exchange and access to essential resources.

There is also a short section on HIV /AIDS and the impact of the pandemic on Africa’s universities. The report comments that ‘the scale of the crisis needs no elaboration’ (AAU/ACU/SAUVCA 2005, section 6). Hence there is no quantitative detail on the impact of the disease on staff depletion, though it is evident that the ravages have been severe.

The only section where there is discussion of cost is on attracting and retaining staff which we have already alluded to. It is admitted that in a small number of universities – presumably including several in South Africa, Namibia and Botswana – professors have salaries of US\$ 1000 a month. Most earn far less, it is claimed. Given the importance of the case for salary supplementation, it would have been valuable to have provided some indication of what salary and allowances currently amount to in many of the ordinary public universities of sub-Saharan Africa. Such data must be readily available to the AAU.

What is missing in the summary of nine points is as telling as what is present. First and most obviously missing is any indication of whether there is a crisis of quality in African universities. What has been the impact on student learning of the combination of student overcrowding, and of the shortages of books, journals and internet connectivity? There is very little discussion of whether there is significant absenteeism of staff due to their undertaking second or third jobs. Nor is there any discussion of the quality of teaching-learning, especially in situations where there are very large classes, and few library resources. Nor is there discussion either of what has happened with post-graduate masters and doctoral level supervision. Anecdotal evidence suggests a reluctance of staff to become involved in these long term commitments, with serious consequences for building younger capacity. Finally, there is no indication of student performance. Of course this is notoriously difficult to judge in comparative terms, but even so, in a document making the case for renewal of the university, it would have been natural to expect some commentary on what is learned. It is particularly surprising, given that the AAU had co-authored a publication with the World Bank in 1997 on *Revitalising universities in Africa: strategy and guidelines*, which had made it clear that **the** current challenge of the time was declining quality:

⁵ It is presumed that a much more detailed document would have been presented to the Commission for Africa than the summary paper on the 9 points.

The essential problem confronted by university managers, academic staff, government policymakers, graduate employers, students, and their families is that the quality of university education in Africa has declined significantly. This is true regardless of how quality is defined, e.g. student performance on standardised tests, academic staff credentials, student exposure to current knowledge and information, relevance of learning to labour market requirements, or academic expenditures per student. The primary cause is well-known: declining resources during a period of growing enrolments, without a capacity to keep the two in balance (AAU & World Bank 1997: 2-3).

Another serious gap in the presentation of the nine point programme is that there is virtually nothing on the socio-economic composition of the student body. Given the very strong interest of the G7 industrialised countries in poverty reduction and equity, it is surprising that there is so little reference to the changing landscape of private participation in public universities. Arguably one of the biggest changes in several of the East African universities in recent years has been the 'quiet revolution' whereby private candidates have secured access to public universities in the afternoons and evenings, in parallel degree programmes (Court n.d.). The downside of these innovations with private access is that there is evidence of very small numbers of students from poor families reaching higher education (Palmer 2005).

Centres of excellence in science and technology: India and Africa

There is a second strand to the building of higher education capacity proposed by the Commission Report. The proposals for centres of excellence, like their counterpart for higher education, are justified in terms of the ambitious programme of investment in infrastructure, not just linked to the MDGs but to kick-starting economic growth. Naturally, therefore, the investments are planned to impact on 'health, water supply, sanitation and energy' as well as on urbanisation and climate change (Commission for Africa 2005: 138). These centres are conceived as regional hubs for scientific research and innovation. They appear to be deliberately patterned on the example of the Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs). These were aid projects originally, but for several decades now they have been leading institutions in their own right. They are seen by the Commission as having made 'a crucial contribution to India's scientific and industrial development' (Commission for Africa 2005: 138).

Here, too, the origin of the idea about learning from the IITs appears to have come directly from one of the 9 points in the AAU/ACU/SAUVCA:

We believe that the Indian Institutes of Technology offer a model of excellence which can, with appropriate modifications, be replicated in Africa (AAU/ACU/SAUVCA 2005: 7).

Concluding remarks on research evidence and policy impact

To educators concerned with African development, two of the more startling – but very welcome – recommendations of the Commission for Africa are these we have briefly reviewed – on renewing the universities, and on developing excellence in science and technology. Of course, it could be anticipated that there would be a very powerful commitment also to education for all (EFA). Indeed, one of the most ambitious funding proposals – 7-8 billion US\$ annually - is that concerned with EFA. A close reading of the text should make clear that that is not all earmarked for primary education alone; but is for ensuring a quality basic education for all children, but with half of the cohort continuing to secondary education. The Commission has a comprehensive and sector-wide approach to its proposed investments in education, because it views upper secondary, vocational and higher education as the logical extension of basic education, provided they are linked appropriately to the demand for skills in-country. ‘All elements are part of a complementary and mutually reinforcing system’(Commission for Africa 2005: 182).

We have examined such evidence as there is for the proposals on higher education and on science and technology, and we would argue that there must most certainly have been a detailed case made by the partnership of AAU, ACU and SAUVCA to the Commission. Nevertheless, if the case for very substantial investment in higher education, science and technology is sustained in the G8 Summit this summer, it will probably be less to do with the detailed evidence base for quality decline, brain drain and crisis of teacher commitment, and more to do with the overall political vision of the Commission that Africa’s capacity to deliver on development is at risk.

Like the Millennium Project Report, the Commission have avoided a minimalist report, and have argued instead that only an integrated investment plan of continental proportions will succeed in supporting Africa’s own vision for transformation. The sheer ambition of the Commission’s package reflects multiple audiences and stakeholders both in Africa and outside. It would have been politically inconceivable that capacity building on this scale could have been contemplated without a massive role for universities and for institutes of science and technology. What we have, in a word, in the Commission’s concept of tertiary education is a new and revitalised version of what has been discussed in earlier NUFFIC conferences – “The Development University”. It is a development university with a difference. Not carrying research-based knowledge to rural and urban communities, but playing an absolutely central role in capacity development, governance and accountability.

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