Turning Challenges into Opportunities: Prospects for African Universities

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Abstract

Internationalization has wrought transformations in how universities undertake their activities locally, nationally and globally. Its impacts have resulted into challenges in most aspects of university life. At the core of its contemporary manifestations are the challenges, risks and opportunities that it present to higher education in Africa. While the challenges are numerous, African universities could utilize some of the opportunities to enable them benefit more from internationalization and respond to some of the risks. This paper discusses how African institutions could respond to the challenges presented by internationalization. It provides some suggestions for navigating this terrain aligned to emergent social, economic and political needs. The task is complicated because of the place of transformations associated with internationalization and its far-reaching consequences.

Keywords: Internationalization; Globalization; Higher Education; Opportunities; Challenges Prospects

Introduction

In discussing internationalization, it is important to note the nature of the current global context in which there are deep inequalities in global and internationalization in higher education.

A few countries dominate global scientific systems, the new technologies are owned primarily by multinational corporations or academic institutions in the major western industrialized countries. This means that African countries find themselves dependent on the major academic superpowers.

With the ever increasing awareness of the importance of better education, institutions of higher learning find themselves facing greater demands in seeking ways and means to maintain high level teaching, research and service while preserving international competitiveness. Internationalization is currently a major trend and a worldwide phenomenon in higher education. It is also an ongoing and future-oriented process of integrating various international perspectives into higher education. The perspectives may be related to the curriculum, programs offered, top managers, faculty members, students, facilities and even the institution visions to suit the diverse and ever-changing environment and demands that are more global now (Ellingboe, 1996).

It is important for African countries to plan for development, consciousness-raising and technical as well as professional skills development (Zolfaghari, 2003). One of education development strategies is higher education development.

Due to the significant role of higher education in current societies, higher education came to serve the administrative and economic interests of the governments and became a necessary dimension of development. The higher education systems around the world have presented a propensity for internationalization. In this direction, higher education has become more international and subject to national culture and government (Marginson, 2006).

The new issues facing higher education, both nationally and internationally, are introducing changes, demonstrating new tendencies and displaying different challenges. According to Knight (1999), internationalization is part of the universities' effort to fulfill their primary functions, namely the teaching and learning process, research and scholarly activities and service to society. Questions commonly asked include:

1. What is internationalization?
2. What is internationalization of higher education?
3. What is the value of internationalization of higher education to the student, institution/faculty, and country/society?
4. What are the challenges of internationalization of higher education?
5. What are the suggested recommendations for the way forward?

Meaning of Internationalization of Higher Education

The term "higher education" is taken to embody all organized learning and training activities at the tertiary level. This includes conventional universities (i.e. those with conventional arts, humanities and science faculties) as well as specialized universities (like institutions specializing in agriculture, engineering science and technology). The concept also includes conventional post-secondary institutions (like polytechnics and college of education).

Under the umbrella of "higher education" come all forms of professional institutions (Assie – Lumumba, 2006).

In today's changing world, the idea of internationalization of higher education especially in developing countries has been deduced from globalization of education process. Globalization relates to the process of increasing interdependence between economies in various parts of the world. It is concerned more with issues, structure, production and distribution than with ideas and people. It takes a "worldwide" approach rather than an "inter-nation" one. It also refers to higher education that has cross-national implications. These include mass higher education, a global market place for students, faculty and highly trained personnel; and the global reach via the new internet-based technologies among others (Some, 2004).

According to Zelesa (2004) the impact of globalization of internationalization of higher education includes:

- **Corporatisation of Management -** the adoption of business models for the organization and administration of universities.
- **Collectivization of Access -** growing massification of higher education, continuing education or lifelong learning, and accountability to outside stakeholders.
- **Commercialization of Learning –** expansion of private universities, privatized programmes in public universities and vocational training.
- **Commodification of Knowledge –** increased production, sponsorship and dissemination of research by commercial enterprises, applied research and intellectual property norms.
- **Computerization of Education –** incorporation of new information technologies into knowledge activities of teaching, research and publication.

- **Connectivity of Institutions** – rising emphasis on institutional cooperation and coordination within and across countries.

The term internationalization covers different things, and includes different dimensions, with varied stresses at different levels of higher education (Yang, 2002). The definition of internationalization of higher education varies and depends on the stakeholder groups: government, private sector, institution, faculty member, academic discipline, and student. These differing perspectives result in several reasons for many program approaches to internationalization of higher education (Trilokekar, 2007).

Although internationalization of higher education can be defined in many ways, but in general the definition should include the key elements such as Academic Program, Students, Academic Staff, Curricula, and Infrastructure and facilities (Tapsir, 2007). What are the benchmarks of internationalization of higher education? They include:

- **Program or Courses** – the program or courses of the program offered should be global in nature, accepted and recognized internationally.
- **Student Enrolment** – the acceptance of students into the institution should be country, region, race religion or cultural independent. In other words, students' acceptance and enrolment should be multinational in nature.
- **Multinational Staff** – the institution should be able to attract and gather expertise, especially teaching and research staff that is multinational in nature as well.
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- **Curricula and Co-curricular Competencies –** the co-curricular activities and informal non-academic training along with formal activities should be able to prepare students to meet global challenges and needs related to the subsequent employability and marketability of graduates.
- **Infrastructure and Facilities –** the institutions' physical and information must be at par with those used by top-rank. Resource centre (such as library and internet communication), classrooms, science and language laboratories are up-to-date with the latest appropriate facilities.

The accepted definition of internationalization of higher education in this paper therefore is Knight's definition. Internationalization of higher education, according to her is the process of integrating an international/intercultural dimension into the teaching, research and service elements of an institution (Knight, 2006). This definition is accepted given its emphasis on process and the three important dimensions of universities: teaching, research and service.

Strategies for Internationalization of Higher Education

Fulfilling and sustaining the benchmarks of internationalization need appropriate and workable strategies. The following strategies can be considered as universal in nature, and be applicable to any in trying to understand and effectively execute their roles and duties. Briefly, the strategies are:

Financing

Innovative approaches in achieving increases in the amount, and diversification of more stable sources of revenues to finance higher education and institutions.

Governance

Innovative processes and mechanisms adopted to improve internal institutional governance including the adoption of a participatory method of decision-making, professional rather than personal criteria for appointment, and election to office, increased sense of accountability and transparency.

Curriculum/Quality

New curriculum development and adoption of innovative approaches to delivery of the new and old courses with the possibility of using new technologies for teaching and learning as well as new means to monitor and assess teaching and learning to promote and maintain quality.

Staff Development

Design, adoption and use of innovative approaches to human resource development, whereby new policies or practices are consistently applied in training of new staff and retooling and upgrading of staff already on the job with the objective of improving and strengthening the quality of the teaching staff with the ultimate goal of retaining qualified and satisfied teachers in the higher education institutions and combating "brain drain."

Equity

Innovative ways to increase access and better living and learning conditions with the ultimate objective of improving performance and increasing retention towards parity based on general, national and local socially significant ascriptive (gender, race) and social/contextual (for example, economically disadvantaged people) factors

Relevance

Innovative response to the quest for external efficiency in the institutions' capacity to help meet social needs by providing courses that correspond to relevant areas of need; by producing research and graduates with the appropriate knowledge for improved quality of life and by providing services to the communities.

Student Life

Innovative approaches to the provision and maintenance of living and learning conditions that are conducive to improved academic performance and that enrich the socio-political and cultural experience of students.

The Rationales and Motives of Internationalization of Higher Education

Internationalization is a multi-dimensional process in which different stakeholders have different interests. The main stakeholders include governments, university institutions, staff, students (and their parents), business and industry.There are several and different reasons for internationalization of higher education. The reasons vary between and within countries. The motivation for internationalization can be categorized into four groups: political, economic, academic and socio-cultural (Knight, 1995). Knight (1999) has added that these four types of reasons are not entirely distinct or exclusive.

An individual's, an institution's, or a country's motivation is a complex and multileveled set of reasons evolving over time and in response to changing needs and priorities. According to Knight (1999) other reasons for internationalization are:

- Human resource development
- Strategic alliance
- Commercial trade
- Technical assistance
- Peace and mutual understanding

- National security
- Nation building and socio-cultural development
- Cultural identity
- Citizenship development and
- Economic growth and competitiveness

Hayhoe (1989) believes that international cooperative agreements, academic mobility, international scholarships, technical and economic development, international curriculum studies, cultural values, historical and political context are the most important reasons for internationalization of higher education.

Higher institutions of education are the centres of training human resources needed for economies and good governance, which is the backbone of an organized society. They are major sites of research and production of knowledge that drives economies. Higher education and sustainable economic development are intricately interwoven. In recent years, organizations such as the World Bank and major donor governments have conceded that higher education may have a positive impact on economic development. Many scholars have also established that there is a major link between higher education and economic development and that higher education enhances development in many ways, including provisions of human capital and knowledge needed for production and good governance.

Internationalization of higher education can help economies gain ground on more technologically advanced societies, as graduates are likely to be more aware of and better able to use new technologies. Recent evidence suggests that higher education can produce both public and private benefits. The private benefits are well established and include better employment prospects, higher salaries and a greater ability to save and invest. These benefits may result in better health and improved quality life.

It can also enhance economic development through technological catch-up.

In a knowledge economy, internationalization of higher education can help economies gain ground on more technologically advanced societies as graduates are likely to be more aware of and better able to use new technologies.

Developing countries, Africa included could draw on international best practice to encourage more flexible, differentiated, networked and development focused higher education systems better placed to support economic growth. This is possible if measures are taken to improve the efficiency of education system, improve equity in attainment and ensure greater professionalism of academic progress.

There are three groups of rationales driving these processes, each with subcategories:

Political considerations

(foreign policy, national security, technical assistance, peace and mutual understanding, national identity and regional identity).

Economic considerations

(economic growth and competitiveness, the labour market, national educational demand and financial incentives for institutions and governments).

Social/cultural and academic rationales

(providing an international dimension to research and teaching, extension of academic horizon, institution-building, profile/status, enhancement of quality and international academic standards).

These rationales have been behind the internationalization of higher education in many developed countries. They also seem applicable to developing world, including Africa. Linkages in this case are intended to take advantage of expertise at institutions and provide the means for two or more institutions to address broad based problems, share resources and engage in joint activities related to their missions.

Overall, the reasons for internationalization of higher education are listed below in descending level of importance according to Wit, (2002):

- Mobility and exchanges for students and teachers
- Teaching and research collaboration
- Academic standards and quality
- Research projects
- Cooperation and development assistance
- Curriculum development international and inter cultural understanding
- Promotion and profile of institution
- Diversify sources of faculty and students
- Regional issues and integration
- International student recruitment and
- Diversify income generation

Challenges of Internationalization of Higher Education

The challenge to African universities is how to produce graduates who are well equipped for the international market while at the same time being well grounded to contribute to the intellectual, social, political, moral and material development of their communities. This calls for exploitation of the benefits brought about by synergies evolved from international institutional linkages. Internationalization of higher education is faced with multitudes of challenges that need to be overcome by major players (Moja, 2004). Knowledge of these challenges would ensure that local institutions are more prepared in planning and finding ways to neutralize and minimize the retarding effects. Some of the individual challenges or barriers are:

Lack of competency – Especially, the cognitive competence, whereby due to the lack of international experience and mindset, the faculty could not be able to connect knowledge to their teaching of international students.

Negative attitudes – Individual perception of internationalization is often correlated to their personal experience with people from other cultures. They may doubt the importance of global competencies through internationalization of higher education as compared to competencies in their own field.

Absence of incentives – Players for internationalization plan in an institution mainly are academic staff with teaching and research loads without appropriate incentives in financial, promotional or "equivalent time off" form, the individual may feel unappreciated by the institution in performing their international tasks.

Lack of personal knowledge and expertise – The willingness of an academician to engage with internationalization activities depends on his/her personal capacities and experience with other cultures and languages. Lack of this, will likely lead to opposition, unwillingness to participate or indifference towards internationalization movement.

Lack of financial resources – Finding sufficient funds to bear the initial cost of internationalization especially in providing the physical infrastructure, program development and review, traveling and accommodation for fact finding and promotional work is the main challenge of an institution. As for students, lack of financial support either from government or private sector is the main significant barrier to study abroad.

Scarce of human resources - This is related to the provision of international standard programs and curricula and promotion. Without competent human resources in the related academic fields, the intended program could not be developed. Without competent promoter, the internationalized institution will not be promoted effectively.

Educational structure – Each country in the world has its own educational structure starting from pre-school, through primary school, secondary, pre-university and at terminating tertiary education. Mismatch between educational structures of host country to that of prospective international students' countries would create problems even in the beginning of study. The challenges will be even greater if students were inferior in the pre-university preparation in their own country. These challenges can be classified into two categories: individual and institutional (Sariolghalam, 1993). According to Saat (2007) the following are challenges of internationalization of higher education:

- The lack of financial facilities
- The greater number of applicants entering universities
- Limitation of universities in accepting students
- Problem of students' jobs
- Coordination of the textbook program of universities with the day needs
- Enough use from the informatics technologies in learning and teaching process
- Financial problems
- Resource safeguarding
- Structure coordination of higher education with international standards
- Migration of the prepared forces from a country
- Structure inflexibility of higher education and
- Specialized manpower

The Future of Internationalization of Higher Education

Universities have been international institutions from their medieval Europe origin, attracting students and faculty from many counties. The rise of internationalism and nation-state after the protestant reformation focused academic inward.

Later, the emergence of the Third World from colonialism in the mid-20th century stimulated the establishment of national universities. Now academe has regained its international scope and direction. Information technology; the knowledge economy; increased mobility for students and faculty; programs and providers and an integrated world economy propel internationalization.

Internationalism will remain a central force in higher education, though its contours are unclear. However, the long-term trends are strong and stable, but several uncertainties may affect the pace of internationalization.

Political realities and national security: - Terrorism may affect international higher education. Tightened visa requirements in the United States and other countries, security restrictions on the subjects that can be studied, and fear of terrorism expressed by potential international students may affect cross-border student flows.

Government policies and the cost of study:- Policies concerning the cost of tuition and fees for visas and other documents may affect international initiatives.

Expanded domestic capacity: - Interest in studying abroad or in enrolling in international programs may decline as countries increase access to higher education especially to master's and doctoral programs.

English: - The growing use of English as medium of research and instruction especially at the graduate level may stimulate interest in international programs offered in universities in English.

The internationalization of the curriculum: - Students may find international programs useful as curricula move towards models development in the United States and other industrialized countries.

E-learning:- International acceptance of degrees will lead to an expanded role for distance education, though it is unclear whether international e-learning degrees will become more widespread or domestic e-learning programs often located in developing countries or middle income countries will continue to dominate.

The private sector: - Private higher education is the fastest growing segment of higher education worldwide, though only a small part of this sector is international. It is not clear if private higher education providers will find the international market sufficiently profitable though some expansion seems likely.

Quality assurance and control: - Quality assurance a major concern with countries is greater problem internationally. Observers criticize many international higher education programs for low standards but fail to identify measures of quality.

European policies: - Will the European Union protect its "European higher education space", or will it welcome students and programs from the rest of the world? Will it impose tuition and other fees on non-European students?

Conclusion and Recommendations

This paper has discussed the aspects of internationalization of higher education in terms of definition, opportunities, rationales, challenges and prospects. These listings are by no means exhaustive. They are listed with the assumptions that each institution is an individual of their own right, they have their own strategies, and facing challenges peculiar to that institution only. In this presentation no specific solutions to the challenges are given. It is hoped that by knowing the possible barriers that they may have faced, the main players would formulate their own solutions, acceptable within the constraints of their institution.

African universities for example should formulate policies on internationalization that will give rise to innovation in higher education, strengthen the academic programmes and increase the contribution of institutions to the broader development goals of Africa. International higher education will provide substantial access in some countries and will be a "niche market" in others. We are at cross-roads. Today's emerging programs and practices must ensure that international higher education benefits the public and not simply be a profit centre.

This paper presents the following recommendations to promote the quality of higher education among the countries:

- Attention to the strategic planning to higher education management;
- Revision of textbooks and preparation of educational periods according to society's needs;
- Renewal of universities' manpower.
- Attitude change of scientific boards to use new technologies;
- Digitization of libraries and references with emphasis on preparation of informatics databases;
- Attention to English language as the international language;
- Use of new technologies to generate information and scientific stagnations of the world;
- Standardization of education programs to generate knowledge;
- Study of global markets of higher education for establishing conditions and suitable environment for universities accepting foreign students, execution of common projects, exchange of experiences and educational, scientific innovations;
- Reconstruction of higher education to use the new technologies cheaper and faster than before;

- Use of distance education and network-oriented education for development of higher education and

- Emphasis on cooperation and relationship internationally.

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