Full Length Research

Management of University Curriculum in a Rapidly Changing Environment: Challenges and Prospects

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Political and socio-economic changes sweeping across societies together with globalization, scientific and technological processes are creating an increasingly competitive environment for universities in Africa. Therefore, the centralized system of curriculum development and management adopted by most universities in which university committees and senate have to approve curricula does not allow universities to adapt fast enough or even be the focal point of curriculum reforms. The rapidly changing environmental milieu of today and tomorrow necessitates that universities develop a mechanism and capacity for curriculum change at institutional level that will enable them to sustain their relevance and continue playing unique roles. This is a challenge that requires a system of leadership and governance that is sensitive to societal expectations and elastic to such changes so as to generate a sustainable mechanism of curriculum design and development that is equally responsive and relevant to the expectations of the individual, the society and the labour market

Key words: university, leadership, governance, curriculum, management, reforms

INTRODUCTION

Towards the last decade of the twentieth Century, many African countries were deliberately engaged in significant re-examination of their university education. Among the key points of focus were administrative structures, funding mechanisms, increasing student enrolments due to increased demand, and the relevance and quality of programmes and delivery. These concerns were prompted by global trends in technology, changes in the labour market patterns, the dynamic and ripple effects of free primary and in some countries, secondary education and the anticipated increase in the demand for university education in the near future. This paper discusses the issue of the process of developing academic programmes in the context of transformation and the responsiveness to addressing emerging socio economic interests of societies and countries.

The Context

The UNESCO sponsored 'African Ministers of Education Conference' that took place in Addis Ababa in 1961 marked an important beginning point of discussing about critical issues concerning education in Africa. This was at a time when most of the African

countries were gaining self-governance. Then, the discussion topics largely focused on how African countries and young African governments could be supported and what they needed to do to achieve high enrolment rates, improve access and quality of delivery and make education relevant to the needs of its people and spur national development (UNESCO, 1998). The focus was on basic education, and to some extent, secondary school education and training. Today, the shift of attention is turning to university education with topics centered on relevance of curriculum and programmes, quality of programmes, delivery and staffing, management of students and financing, equity, access and quality of graduates (UNESCO, 1998; Chacha, 2006).

The increasingly competitive and rapidly changing university environment has prompted the heightened interest and attention on university education, especially the curriculum, or academic programmes offered. This environment is made up of but not limited to developments in the social, political, economic milieu, government structures, technology, labour and commodity markets, the university structure, culture and resources and the research market (Vossensteyn, 2007). Changes in these areas are likely to impact and subsequently result in changes in value systems, resources mix, diversity, students and programmes, knowledge, technology, stakeholders and the general economy.

These changes, largely brought about by among other factors, globalization and developments in science and technology, have consequences, which have serious implications to universities that do not adapt fast enough. Such consequences include losing recognition, loss of market and possible disappearance into oblivion. Yet, the clamor for industrialization and technological development has to be built on investing in a knowledge society, which fosters academic competitiveness, responsible and responsive research. African universities are expected to take on these challenges by recognizing globalization as a source of increasing competition and cooperation, and accept change through deliberate initiatives and efforts.

Change initiatives must begin from within to create systems of governance that can rapidly respond and adjust to societal expectations timely, the challenges of increasing costs, increasing student numbers against scarce resources and low research funding notwithstanding. This calls for strong universities that can change and initiate change so as to cope with the ever competitive global arena. At the center of the competition and cooperation are the programmes offered. Students, through peer pressure, the society and the market, are influenced to clamor for programmes regarded as competitive, which means training programmes for which jobs are readily

available. This situation has a derivative effect on the process of curriculum design and development in universities. The fundamental principle is that the process of developing curricula in universities will require significant review for curriculum development in universities to be effectively responsive to the changing environment, the challenges of national development and societies' needs.

University Education and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)

The eight MDGs were determined as challenge areas on which governments strategized to address in order to ultimately enhance national and global economic growth and development. These challenges were prevalent in African countries, as much as they were prevalent in varying magnitudes in other countries of the world. The rallying thrust was on countries' abilities to marshal their strengths and opportunities, such as large youthful populations that supply abundant human resource and market, improved governance, a keen international community and donor partners and globalization to mitigate their challenges and achieve the MDGs. A fundamental strategy of achieving this is breaking with the notion of business as usual, by initiating deliberate policy interventions which can enhance wealth creation at the regional level. Education has always been regarded as the panacea to spurring economic growth and socio economic and political development of societies. Specifically, the education system and the curriculum are the major determinants of education outcomes and impacts. A deliberate policy on education and curricular reforms define the knowledge and competency based economy. Universities are given the mandate to foster this drive to produce the human capital requirements for the country to create wealth and sustain economic growth and development

Transformation of University Education

Universities must take on the challenge. In order to do this, deliberate and concerted efforts will be directed towards focusing on specific, significant and relevant high education curriculum, quality education and training for industrialization, innovative high education research agenda, and private and public sector partnership. This implies that the entire set up of university governance structures, funding systems and government/ministry support functions will need a critical re-evaluation. Given that universities are designed centres of excellence in specific and various fields, and in view of the difficulties of state funding,

increasing irrelevance of some programmes, freezing of staff recruitment, and a disenchanted society, universities need to be allowed to be competitive to sustain their existence and survival. It also calls for each individual university institution and members of academic staff, to change not only in order to adapt, but also to contribute to the changes taking place (Weber, 2005).

On the basis of the necessity to initiate, embrace, adapt to and contribute to change, the following are important areas of reflection and adoption:

- The implications for the responsibility of public authorities for university curriculum
- The responsibilities of universities in curriculum design and management
- Governance and leadership in universities with respect to curriculum design and management
- The implications for faculties and faculty leadership
- Management of universities

The Responsibilities of Public Authorities for University Curriculum

University education is provided through public and private structures and arrangement. However, university education is a public responsibility. As a responsibility for public authorities, universities enjoy some autonomy and academic freedom. It follows then that university curriculum is also a public responsibility, and that the authorities entrusted with university curriculum have to be sensitive, or sensitized to this fact so that they are responsible to the public for the production of a curriculum that responds to societies' expectations. Given that universities enjoy autonomy and freedom, they can take this to advantage to design curricula that is relevant and effective in terms of student outcomes.

This observation is advocated on the basis that university education produces high private and collective returns on investment, and because of efficiency and equity reasons, it is a public good since the market may not be efficient in allocating benefits, and is not capable of accounting for the social benefits of university education to the whole community (Weber, 2005). The responsibility for public authorities is as stipulated in relevant government documents and in the university Acts and Government Charters/statutes of various public and private universities respectively (For example, Republic of Kenya, 1999). Accordingly, public authorities have the following responsibilities:

- Exclusive responsibility for the framework

within which university curriculum is designed and managed,

- A leading responsibility for ensuring that all citizens have equal opportunities for accessing relevant and quality university education and training.
- Mutual responsibility for ensuring that the education and training provided meets the expectations of the labour market and other sectors of society.
- Substantial responsibility for the funding and the provision of opportunities for partnerships, stimulating intellectual life, economic and cultural development of the society.

In addition, universities are expected to operate as autonomous institutions. This is an instrument university authorities can utilize to exercise their responsibilities exclusively and mutually to motivate and stimulate the development of university education – to help in generating scholarship, academic buoyancy and new knowledge as a long term objective of universities to society. It has been shown that highly controlled universities, especially in communist inclined states (especially in Russia and China) are characterized by intellectual and social stagnation, and low rankings (Weber, 2005). Autonomous universities have been known to be superior, since they are proactive and entrepreneurial in approach. Autonomy has the ability to break the vicious circle associated with state control and regulation – such as killing initiative, which would lead to more 'bad' regulation. The scope of real autonomy would cover vital components of the organizational structure that are likely to affect the process of curriculum design and management. These include, but may not be limited to:

- Internal organization, the decision making processes and the selection of leaders
- The study programmes, structure of degrees, and qualification framework (to what extent should this be decided and regulated by the state?)
- Choice of staff, academic and non-academic – a faculty matter?
- Funding mechanisms and expenditure, especially with respect to fees
- Choice of students with respect to national objectives on equity in access and opportunity

The matter of university autonomy and freedom cannot be exhaustively discussed here, but important is that the state as a public guarantor has responsibility of

ensuring that universities remain committed to national goals of education and development, hence maintain relevance in their curriculum and research agenda (Fall, 1998; Weber, 2005).

The Responsibilities of Universities in Curriculum Design and Management

Irrelevance of programmes, inadequate funding, increasing public pressure and increasing competition are pushing universities to a state of oblivion. Specifically, public universities are at cross roads – with most of their programmes declared unpopular and the few popular ones having very low absorptive capacities and expensive to operate. Similarly, against the issue of relevance, universities are expected to have programmes, or curricula that have impact on both the world of work and the world of no work, the process of industrialization and sustainable human resource development (Mungai, 1998). The challenge therefore lies in refocusing the purpose and function of university education as a basis for initiating viable and feasible curriculum reforms which will make the university a powerful instrument of preservation, transmission and transformation, and jettison its elitist approach to national and social issues. This means that reforms in curriculum are expected to be deliberate towards serving the needs of national development without necessarily compromising the universality of university education.

This notwithstanding, it is realizable that universities today are inevitably pushed into a conflict of roles and responsibilities of assuring on quality of services and programmes   against reduced state support. At the same time, universities are expected to be *responsive* and *responsible* to the short term and long term needs of the society. This is viewed against the background of the university as perhaps the only institution that has maintained its role in history, as one able to secure and transmit valued cultural heritage of society, create new knowledge and possessing the right status to analyze society's problems independently, scientifically and critically.

However, the two qualities have to be balanced carefully. Being responsive means that universities should be societies' watch dogs – receptive of what society expects. Oftentimes, responsiveness may be a short term stimuli that may be politically instigated to satisfy an immediate need that is likely to be partisan. Such case may be self defeating if adopted. Universities should be responsible as institutions that should be able to guide in reflection, public responsibility and policy making in society (Weber, 2005). Universities have the strength and freedom to pursue their search for knowledge away from the short

term and undue pressure but at the same time, to remain relevant in the curriculum they offer by being responsive and acting responsibly to the societies they serve. This balance is even more significant in continually changing environments, hence the necessity to articulate the requirements of responsiveness and responsibility.

Governance and Leadership in Universities with Respect to Curriculum Management

The Traditional System of Governance and Change Process

The greatest challenge to universities is to become strong institutions, maintain substantial autonomy and still be accountable to the public authorities on which they depend and all other stakeholders who constitute their clients. Seen in this perspective, it is even a greater challenge for universities to adapt to the rapidly changing environment, or even initiate the change. This will largely depend on the system of governance structures and the decision making process adopted by universities (Vossensteyn, 2007). One observation made out of experience and common debates on university decision making process is that universities are not changing fast enough to accommodate the rapidly changing environment. This is likely to limit the capacity of the university faculty to constantly renew their knowledge and to innovate, and subsequently inhibit the curriculum design process and the deliverance of society's needs.

The existing governance structures and the decision making processes of university leadership with respect to curriculum making are obscure, unnecessarily overlapping, questionable capacities of some of the decision making bodies and hence inability to produce clear and significant decisions. This is particularly significant when viewed against the constitution of some of the more important decision making bodies on curricula – the boards of undergraduate and post graduate studies, the deans' committees and the senate. Recently, one of the structural changes on governance in some African public universities was the restructuring of academic departments through creation of mergers for purposes of reducing administrative costs. The consequence of this initiative has been the compromising of professionalism and specialization in the growth of scholarship to an extent that even, perhaps the quality and quantity of research output may have deteriorated (Chacha, 2006)

The decision making process on university curriculum is often lengthy, cumbersome and disillusioning. The different layers of academic leadership and the committees or boards that are not carefully constituted

together with the centralized tendencies in curriculum planning make it difficult for universities to be responsive quick enough to the changing environment. This is the style of bureaucracy, or bureau-professionalism (Vossensteyn, 2007), which challenges and inhibits the universities' abilities to be effectively responsive to their own traditional roles and the dynamic nature of the societies they are expected to serve (Chacha, 2006).

Developing a System of Governance Focusing on Change

A useful transition that would enhance curriculum planning to accommodate tangible and workable reforms would be a move towards having more flexible, fast moving performance oriented forms of modern organization – managerialism or the new public management as opposed to administration. The former denotes changes in the structure and processes of organizations that emphasize on results rather than the process, while the latter focuses on the processes rather than the results. In spite of its contradictions, managerialism is expected to strengthen the organizations' abilities to respond to the changing environment because of some of its in built advantages, such as multi faceted approach to issues (i.e. top down and bottom up), management freedom, empowered customers, flexibility and innovation, emphasis on better performance, reduced bureaucracy, staff motivation, emphasis on managerial accountability and reduction of internal scrutiny, improvement on programme coordination, and increased quality of service and product.

In addition to overcoming the complex decision making process, the faculty lecturers and professors, are known to be fairly rigid to change, conservative and often slow down the change process rather than accentuate it. They prefer the status quo, especially given the uncertainty of the likely benefits of any change. In institutions where the decision making process is heavily decentralized, and where the majority of the bottom hierarchy is composed of old faculty, then a new thinking might hardly emerge on the existing curriculum. However, borrowing from the economic theory of federalism, and using the principle of subsidiarity, decisions on curriculum changes should be initiated by faculty members as the lowest category in the decision making ladder. This is because, irrespective of the effect of the decision, there will likely be existence of externalities, potential economies of scale and the need for equals to be treated equally. This way, the professors and lecturers will enhance their creativity and improve on institutional loyalty.

The Implications for Faculties and Faculty Leadership

The organizational structure of most universities places deans of faculties as middle level managers in the hierarchy of university management. However, though they hold an important portfolio of being directly in charge of academic programmes in the university, they occupy the lower echelons of the decision making process. Faculties constitute stakeholders who contribute invariably to curriculum building and the general environment of the university which includes students, academic staff and deans.

Students as the major consumers of curricula should assist in defining their expectations and participate in giving feedback for improving the quality and relevance of the programmes they go through. University academic staff are the key human assets in curriculum development (Orth, 2007). They need to be facilitated with an environment that would spur their creativity, freedom in defining and reviewing their areas of specialization, creation of new programmes, and commitment to students, and participation in research.

Deans of faculties hold an important position between the senior university management and the academic departments. Though they hold a subsidiary position, they control all aspects of curriculum design, management, implementation and evaluation. They are also expected to initiate reforms and channel reforms emanating from the university management to the faculty members. However, in a traditional set up, deans are elected and represent their members. They therefore often and usually likely take a protective stance whenever issues arise and therefore may not be effectively proactive in advancing and supporting organizational changes. They may be the most conservative agents in the university's administrative hierarchy.

Management of Universities for Reforms

Schematically, universities are managed through a process of decision making ranging from council through senate, faculty boards, the department and the student leadership or congress. Each of these levels contributes to the process of curriculum design. Though the structure appears decentralized and all inclusive, it does present aspects of rigidity that can inhibit the responsiveness of curriculum design to emerging societal changes. In order to respond to the challenge, universities need to embrace a governance structure capable of adjusting to the requirements of the moment and the authority to implement decisions without compromising administrative controls. This implies that the prospects of universities in designing academic

programmes that are responsive to the rapidly changing socio economic and political environment will depend on the implementation of strategic decisions focusing on governance (Orth, 2007). These may include the quality of staff and staffing norms, faculty structures, establishment and revitalization of internal and external quality assurance and monitoring mechanisms and restructuring of senate and associated administrative boards.

1.   The day-today affairs and the strategic decisions of the university are made and guided by the vice chancellor/rector/president and an executive team of administrators. The decisions cover setting up broad priorities, such as the creation of departments, determination of the administrative structure of departments and the overall institution, and partnerships with other institutions. These decisions affect the curriculum offered. The competency associated with the decision making process plus the power to apply and implement the decisions are vital attributes in determining the curriculum innovations and the quality of the curriculum offered. The challenge has been on the pecuniary and non pecuniary incentives that accompany the decisions as a reward system to faculty members to facilitate effective and quality curriculum designs that can spur institutional relevance rather than the blunt use of rules and power (Weber, 2005).

2.   The senate as an assembly of academic staff is the most vital organ that determines university curriculum. Usually, especially in most universities in East Africa, the senate is the final body that vets academic programmes from departments and faculties. However, because of the manner in which senate is constituted; it has been established to be the most rigid obstacle to innovative ideas to modern curriculum designs. The problem is accentuated with the merger of departments, in which case the senate may completely luck the expertise and therefore the competencies necessary to vet certain specialized academic programmes. Oftentimes, due to strategic lobbying, or negative competitions by senators, poor programmes may sail through, or good programmes may be jettisoned respectively. In order to improve this situation, it is commendable to have an administrative board that comprises of all stakeholders to make strategic comments on university academic programmes through consensus and shared governance. This will have the advantage of having a group of individuals, who are competent, have shared interests in the future of the institution, rather than defending their positions or those of their friends.

3.   The organizational structure of the university

and the decision making process can affect curriculum making and management, and the extent to which it can remain relevant to societal expectations. There are three main administrative models in universities; the traditional model with faculties and departments; a flatter type of model with only one level of subdivision, such as schools, departments or colleges; and the matrix system (Weber, 2007). The latter is organized according to the two main visions of the university – teaching and research.

The importance of the universities' organizational structure is in the extent to which it facilitates effective and efficient decision making; the availability of the required critical mass of professors in various departments; the extent to which departments embrace interdiscipliniarity (Note that universities in Europe are reengineering themselves to promote interdiscipliniarity, have a critical mass and the capacity for change). This is because the breaking of traditional disciplines into micro disciplines and micro-specializations necessitates interdiscipliniarity since societal problems require joint input of many disciplines (Orth, 2007).

4.   Development of good governance as a tool for effective curriculum management. The responsiveness of the curriculum and responsibility of the university today requires a governance structure that supports strategic decisions required by the fast changing environment and secure the support of the academic community for implementation. In this respect, *governance will be defined as the set of bodies and functions, their respective competencies and the procedures by which they interact to make decisions at the level of and within the institution (Weber, 2007:8).* Management, on the other hand, *is the use of suitable tools to prepare and implement decisions and policies as well as to monitor their efficiency and effectiveness (*Weber, 2007: 15). A university that wishes to develop academic programmes as a priority management function must develop a strategic plan, a financial plan, maintain a culture of quality and generating periodic evaluation reports, make informed decisions based on core sets of indicators/data, and embrace a spirit of continuous communication and dialogue.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The key purpose of this paper was to highlight the significance of university governance and leadership in relation to curriculum management within the context of a fast changing socio-economic and political environment. The thrust of the argument is based on the importance attached to building a knowledge society as an emerging paradigm that is driving

modernist oriented economies. Fundamentally, it is the concept of knowledge society and the associated cognitive abilities and social skills, innovativeness, initiating and adapting to change that are contributing to economic growth through value addition. This constitutes the basis upon which there is growing interest on reforms in high education curriculum as it is in these institutions that:

1. Millions of students are trained who will drive the economies of the world
2. Responsibility for ultimate growth of the economy is determined
3. High quality research which offer solutions to societal problems is conducted
4. International networks and collaborations are maintained

It should be noteworthy, therefore, that the governance structures of public universities will be the driving factor in determining and influencing the dynamism and responsiveness of curriculum to the kinetic nature of societies they serve. This ideal may be realized through deliberate and strategic restructuring of governance structures; improving on management responsibility in developing an enabling working environment and initiating mechanisms for staff motivation. Further, espousing individual and institutional collaborations and networking; integrating ICT into faculty development plans; invigorating and diversifying funding sources and developing mechanisms for labour and society sensors as a basis for curriculum reforms. These are by no means not easy to achieve without a deliberate, conscientious, well integrated and coordinated mechanism involving the various governance structures relevant to and involved with curriculum design, implementation and job placement.

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