

Research and Publishing in Academia: A Prerequisite for Assuring Quality in Higher Education

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Abstract: Academic research and publishing, particularly at the higher education level, are activities that do not only complement effective teaching but are also sine-qua-non for the achievement of academic excellence. However, due to myriad of factors, many academics in Tertiary Institutions have a myopic belief that universities are meant, essentially for teaching and not so much for research, hence, the lukewarm attitude towards engaging in research. This process may lead to some devastating consequences, such as the deficiency in the quality of the final products from such higher institutions. Universities are expected to serve as repositories of knowledge, the think tanks for their varying governments and the overflowing tanks from where the society is expected to drink.

This theoretical paper therefore, posits that in order to avoid the process of compromising quality and academic standard, the academics in academia should serve as excellent role models for their students. This can only be achieved if the university lecturers engage in meaningful and consistent research and publishing activities in their different fields of specialization. This will lead to the production of knowledge bank, through the improvement in the quality of their performance.

Key words: publishing in academia quality higher education

1. Introduction

By traditional right and common practice the world over, the universities are basically known as the exalted institutions responsible for and recognized to award degrees to their heterogeneous clientele. This exclusive right and recognition are however being openly and competitively challenged by many industries and private organizations which now run degree awarding institutions. Therefore, to be able to stay on in business, Braimoh (2001) noted that the hallmark which universities should always strive to achieve is the production of high quality graduates and the maintenance of academic excellence as opposed to the promotion of mediocrity, lest, such citadels of learning will automatically degenerate to the state of glorified high schools.

Suffice it to state, therefore, that the universities, ipso facto, stand at the apex of the education system, not

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only as centers of inquiry into socio-economic and geo-political developments but also for the dissemination of truth and knowledge aimed at solving societal problems. In the same vein, Gultig (2000) opines that higher education core activities include the production of knowledge and developing the capacity for high level problem-solving and innovation, which are paramount for a country's economic development and survival.

The essential focal responsibilities of any tertiary institution include among other things, teaching, research and the provision of community service. In essence, universities are expected to be catalysts of change as they should serve as viable machineries for knowledge production. It is therefore, not an overstatement to emphasize, albeit, without being immodest, that academia are not only repositories and depositories of knowledge bank, but they are also the "think tank arenas" for the government and the tanks from where the entire society drinks. To corroborate this view, Gibbons (2000) stresses that universities are not only a source of scientific ideas and information but also the institutions that generate the flow of scientific, technical and other professional manpower that will fill in numerous roles that keep the economy running and drive it forward. With the march of globalization and the growth of the knowledge economy, universities are now more widely perceived as the key players in economic development.

2. Problem Statement

Education no doubt upgrades our knowledge in realms of cognitive, affective and psychomotor domains and it re-orientates our world view correctly in meeting with the challenges of our daily lives. In essence, from the adult education perspective, we can safely say that education, though starts from cradle, transcends the grave. In other words, educational process does not even end with the acquisition of degrees or diplomas obtained from any recognized tertiary institutions, but it continues to shape and reshape our lives endlessly as long as we are still living.

Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in most countries have, according to Reddy (2000), undergone profound changes in recent years. Significant expansion of the system in order to admit an increasing cohort of school leavers, adult learners and generally a more diverse set of students than in the past, has been a central part of this change. The progression from elite to mass and universal higher education is becoming a reality in an increasing number of countries. While we are not opposed to the process of achieving mass education through enhanced accessibility, we should however, note that this should not be done at the expense of maintaining quality. This is noting that a university's goal to provide quality education will be achieved, according to Henrick (1997) by the competence of its teaching staff. A university not only selects the best it can attract in order to deliver the goods of producing the best output but also tries to ensure that teaching staff develop professionally. The basic distinction between the competence level of university lecturers on one hand and the primary and/or high school teachers on the other is the capability to generate new knowledge at a higher level for the overall benefit of the society. This could only be achieved if the university teacher engages in deliberate, consistent and meaningful research and publishing activities. The Editorial of South African Journal of Higher Education (SAJHE) noted that universities without research activities ran the risk of becoming glorified secondary schools. This is because they will be unable to generate new knowledge for themselves let alone for the academia and the country at large. They will be unable to produce the stream of suitably qualified academic staff candidates necessary for the university enterprise while consequently being handicapped to impart to students, meaningful knowledge that constitutes analytical and problem-solving skills. In essence, capacity building in academic research is therefore, a sine-qua

-non for the revitalization, of Tertiary Institutions.

The debate in many universities, according to Braimoh (1999), is that academics exist primarily to teach while others from another school of thought argue that academics should first and foremost be researchers, simply because effective teaching cannot be accomplished without active research. This is because, as Romenyi and Money (1996) put it, a key motivation for publishing is to contribute to a body of knowledge generally, the result of research that has been conducted in an attempt to solve a challenging societal problem. We are not saying that one should engage only in one of these two activities at the expense of the other. Rather, we stress that research and publishing precede and actually complement effective teaching. Even where a university is predominantly a research institution, for pragmatic purpose of testing the validity and reliability of a theory which has been propounded by an academic, the classroom setting must be the ideal laboratory, even if such an exercise is on a micro teaching basis. Conversely, the fact that a university is designed specifically to teach does not necessarily absolve its teaching staff from engaging in research and consequently publishing the results in learned journals not only for updating their knowledge but also to be in tune with the latest development in their varying fields. Failure to engage in research will render such an academic, incompetent, empty, shallow in thought, outdated and at best become a bureaucrat or an armchair philosopher.

This paper has therefore reviewed the factorial analysis responsible for the lukewarm attitude of academics in African Tertiary Institutions against the challenges now facing the universities vis-à-vis the current emerging issues in higher education. In addition, the paper attempted to suggest practical strategies of encouraging and mobilizing academics in academia to be involved in both teaching and research in order to improve the quality, integrity and their performance levels.

3. Hypothetical Questions

The expansion and differentiation of higher education is occurring at the same time as the pace of knowledge creation is dramatically accelerating. The categories into which new knowledge falls, according to the World Bank, (2000) are becoming increasingly specialized and a revolution has occurred in people's ability to access knowledge quickly and from increasingly distant locations.

Universities are strategically placed to stimulate socio-economic growth, particularly in the developing countries of the world because development in science and technology has their roots in the research efforts which are regularly undertaken in the universities. Hence, Davenport (2000) opines that education and research are thus at the heart of the new knowledge economy and investment in people should be the central policy of any country's long term economic strategy.

Even though generally in Africa, the quality of education and perhaps the standards are deteriorating at all levels due to many factors, however, our focus in this paper is on higher education at the university level and restrictively too, to Southern African Region. This is because it has been confirmed through research publications by many African scholars (Strydom, 1993, Mwamwenda, 1997, Braimoh, 2000) that there has been an alarming decline in the volume and quality of institutional research activity among academics in Southern African universities.

We have raised the following ten points as the probable hypothetical postulations responsible for the current inertial among academics in Southern African Region to engage in academic research.

1. Could it be as a result of lack of understanding of the role and expectations of an academic in the tertiary

institution?

2. Could it be because of the heavy teaching workload and administrative responsibilities assigned to lecturers thus leaving them with little or no time for research?

3. Could it be as a result of fear of the unknown to embark on research activity because of their weak academic research foundation?

4. Could it be an extreme lack of interest on the part of the lecturers to venture into research field because of the paradigm shift in the societal value orientation?

5. Could it be the level of ignorance of the lecturers about the implications of teaching for many years without continuously updating their knowledge by engaging in research activity?

6. Could it be for lack of mentoring process of the new and more inexperienced academic staff by the more experienced and senior academics as a form of initiation into the world of academic life?

7. Could it be due to lack of incentives to stimulate research activity and reward for research output for the academics in the tertiary institutions?

8. Could it be as result of lack of institutional research policy that stipulates the necessity for all academic staff to engage in continuous research activity alongside their teaching responsibilities?

9. Could it be due to lack of infrastructural facilities and financial resources to support lecturers to conduct research?

10. Could it be due to lack of adequate exposure of academic staff to research activity through sponsored participation at international conferences?

4. Discussion of Theoretical Concepts

While we do not intend to belabour our writing with extensive review of literature, we shall however, succinctly attempt a discussion of the concepts of QUALITY and RESEARCH in higher Education.

4.1 The Concept of Quality

The concept of quality is an ambivalent word on which there is hardly any academic consensus (Verkleij 1999). It is many things to many people, like the proverbial elephant that was being described by a group of visiting blind men, each truly describing what he perceived it to be. In Akinpelu's (1997) analysis, he stressed that, quality, to some people, is the defining essence of anything, the characteristics which makes that object what it is and without which the object will not be a good instance of it. For example, the essence of salt is its saltiness. To others (Booth & Booth, 1994, Fusco, 1994, Middlehurst, 1992) quality is the degree of relative worth of a thing, worth being determined by the efficiency expected of it. This is reminiscent of what the ancient Greek Philosopher, Plato, called *arête* (that is, excellence). For instance, the *arête* of a knife is to cut as sharply, neatly and economically as it is possible; and just as the *arête* of a disease is to kill its victims while the *arête* of medicine is to heal diseases. In education, the *arête* of education is to improve reform and make its recipients qualitatively better. Again, to some, quality is not necessarily excellence but rather the minimum performance which differentiates the acceptable from the grossly shoddy and disreputable. Bunting (1997) defines quality as relevance and adequacy for the ends in view, or in terms of meeting the expectations of consumers. In addition, it can be defined as non-quantified or non-numerical trait or aspect of a thing, just as when we talk of the qualitative methods in research. However, in conclusion, using Akinpelu's (1997) analysis, quality in university education and particularly research and publishing will mean relevance and efficiency of such activities to solving societal

problems. This is expected to be done by all categories of academics in higher institutions of learning and not just by a few and it must also be a regular feature, not just occasionally or on a once-and-for-all basis. The implication is that, if the quality of performance of the university lecturers is weak, sub-standard and poor, then, the overall end result of their output – the graduates produced – will be irrelevant, incompetent and unsuitable for the different consumers in society. In addition, the existence of the university as an ivory tower where knowledge is expected to be manufactured for the good of the government and for the consumption by the entire public will be redundant and of no positive effect.

4.2 Research in Higher Education

Universities are special places because teaching and learning process takes place in an environment of research and scholarly innovation. The views of World Bank (2000) with regard to the operations of higher education include the fact that public interest in higher education is a function of the benefit they stand to derive from a well developed system of research and the consequent generation of knowledge.

These could be achieved through the process of ideological neutrality in the selection of research topics, peer review and scholarly publications, close links between research and teaching as well as the facilitation of the exchanges of both academic staff and postgraduate students to participate in international conferences and research projects. The overriding goal of any university that wishes to achieve excellence through the provision of high quality education is that it must emphasize research accomplishment in the recruitment and promotion of its academic staff members.

Hay (2000) declares that not all higher education systems have the same human, physical, financial and research capacities to make the required changes. Nonetheless, South Africa as one of the developing countries, for instance, finds it difficult to compete with international research community, as many research proposals produced in Social Sciences and Humanities are below the international scholarly requirements. These weak features as analyzed by Stumpf (1998) include: sloppy proposal writing, lack of methodological rigor, poor research design, lack of depth and currency with the latest literature in their respective fields of specialization, poor capacity to conceptualize and difficulty in achieving a high level of intellectual rigor. Research is a noble activity for any worthy academics to be engaged in, but research will nonetheless remain an incomplete commodity until it is published in a referred journal or book, thus making such knowledge production accessible to other scholars on the globe. To corroborate this, Robertson (1990) indicates that whether a department or a university is perceived as a success or failure depends on the extent to which it is involved in research. He concludes by stressing that research and publishing are viewed as legitimate and complimentary activities of university's outputs and if university teachers should fail to make these two aspects as essential components of their functions, then they have no business being in academia.

5. Challenges to Universities in Africa

In the new millennium, higher education institutions according to Garbers (1998) and Gibbons (1998) will have to grapple with socio-economic, environmental, political and technological development issues. Not only will the needs of a changing student population, the impact of mass education, accessibility, equity, democratization, economic and technological issues including the demands of the world of work, force higher education institutions to re-assess themselves vis-à-vis their programmed offerings, in terms of relevance, effectiveness and coherence, they will also have to critically evaluate their research activities, practices and

policies.

Responding to this challenge, many African universities are currently involved in an ongoing re-assessment of their programmed offerings in terms of relevance commencing from departmental levels.

In a nutshell, the current challenges facing higher education institution in Africa can be summarized as follows:

5.1 Increased Competition:

Technological advancement and global economic recession are some of the energizing factors not only for the industries and private organizations to offer university courses leading to the award of degrees but also for some foreign universities who are now extending their course offerings beyond their national boundaries. World Bank (2000) noted that globalization of higher education can have damaging as well as beneficial consequences. It can lead to unregulated and poor quality of higher education, with a worldwide marketing of fraudulent degrees or other so-called higher education credentials as a clear example. Franchise universities have also been problematic, where the parent university meets quality standards set in the home country but offers a sub-standard education through its franchised program in other countries. The sponsoring institution, concludes the World Bank, mainly in the United States or Europe, often has a “prestige name” and it is motivated by pecuniary gains, rather than the spread of academic excellence to developing countries!

5.2 Demand Push:

Universities in the developing countries are currently inundated with explosive demand for higher education and majority of them are finding it difficult to cope because of many factors, such as insufficient space, lack of adequate facilities and qualified lecturers, dwindling financial support from the government as the major financiers of most African Universities and so on.

The other kind of pressure is from the society at large. Such include the issue of diversification of universities' program, so that relevance to the needs and aspirations of the society and those of the governments including the external donors can be achieved.

5.3 Underfunding of the Universities by the Governments:

Due to the global economic recession and change in the structure of the society, most African governments are inevitably shifting their focus of sponsorship from education industry, particularly the higher education, to the supply of other social services. Such new areas include HEALTH issues, arising from the problems of HIV/AIDS or high blood pressure as a result of social fatigue including diabetes and heart diseases. The other new aspect of government focus is SECURITY alert. We now have greater incidences of rape, armed robbery in houses, banks and so on, while car and plane hijacking occurrences have increased. These also include endless cases of civil wars and suicide bombing which are now in vogue. Therefore, since governments have limited resources to disburse, it becomes pertinent to apply economic theory of “opportunity cost” in the resource allocation process.

5.4 Demands for Greater Autonomy vs. Accountability:

Tight control mechanism which is external to the university may no doubt be detrimental to the effective and efficient management of the universities, hence the cry by the different academic unions for greater autonomy of the institutions. This is necessary if there is any plan to achieve a uniform goal. However, autonomy cannot go on without accountability process. The university management must show accountability to the government for the judicious disbursement of the annual financial allocations as well as for discharging their responsibilities adequately to the staff members and students alike. It is only with this kind of checks and balances that there will be no abuse or misuse of powers as well as mismanagement of university resources, by the Chief Executives of

the Universities in cohort with some of their management teams.

5.5 Brain Drain Syndrome:

Due to unattractive conditions of service, poor pay and inadequate provision of teaching and research facilities, there is a high rate of staff turn-over in some universities in Africa. Academics compare notes and consequently engage in the search for greener pastures, essentially to cushion the effects of their battered economies. Brain drain may also result from the repressive management style which is more often than not adopted by the chief executives of many universities in collaboration with their aides. Such management style which sometimes, is devoid of human face may merely exacerbate the staff turn-over situation, especially among the solid and quality permanent and contract staff members and such may have devastating effects on the maintenance of quality assurance within the university.

6. Emerging Issues in Higher Education

As a result of the analysis of the above challenges which African universities currently face, the following issues are now emerging in higher education context.

- Higher Education Institutions are now run as business enterprise;
- Internal revenue generation is mandatory to avoid over dependence on the current dwindling government subventions to the universities;
- Adoption of strategic planning through transformation process to achieve institutional relevance and programmed effectiveness;
- Introduction of distance education for the offering of university credit programmes thereby creating wider accessibility and equity.

Hence, regular staff performance audit should be introduced to maintain quality assurance and to avoid the maintenance of pseudo-academics in the university system. In addition, promotion criteria should comparatively be standardized and be all-inclusive. This process will take into account research and publishing activities, teaching and administrative responsibilities, community service, including students' assessment of teaching effectiveness of each university academic staff irrespective of status.

7. Strategies to Improve Quality of Research Output in Tertiary Institutions

Going by the unique features and problems that characterize the low research effort among the academics in Southern African Higher Education Institutions, the following suggestions could be taken into consideration in mobilizing positive involvement in enhanced research activity.

- Break the endemic myth surrounding the assumed notoriety of research as a plague among the inexperienced and junior academics by deliberately operating an academic mentoring paradigm within the university system.
- Formulate a university-wide research policy which will outline the expectations of each academic staff to be involved in research as a condition for enjoying certain university benefits and privileges.
- The university should make an adequate financial provision, through annual subventions, grants and so on, to stimulate research activities on a continuous basis among the university academics.
- Provide monetary incentive/reward of a fixed rate, not below R5,000 (tax free) to any academic staff who has a publication, either in any reputable international journal or as a chapter in a book published by any

recognized publisher in any given year, as a motivating factor for the university lecturers.

- Develop analytical research skills of all cadres of academics by exposing them to different research methodologies through the regular organization of in-house training workshops.
- Encourage intra-faculty and inter-disciplinary collaborative research activities as a process of capacity building in hands-on-research endeavours.
- Sponsor academics to attend international conferences, where such sponsors must present a paper as a matter of requirement to facilitate professional development.
- Engage in cross fertilization of ideas in faculty academic seminars through the willingness to criticize the work of their peers and to be criticized by them, therefore providing the opportunity to learn how to learn.
- In order to remain current as university lecturers in both teaching and research, all academic staff, whether at the research institutes or teaching departments, should as a matter of policy and practice, engage in research and also carry a minimal teaching load in each academic year in their respective areas of academic specialization and competence.

8. Conclusion

It is high time that universities created awareness in the minds of their academic staff, during this 21st century, particularly with regard to the challenges to revolutionize higher education programmes, not only for them to be relevant to the needs of their societies but also to be able to withstand the present global competition. This can only be achieved through the enviable quality of the faculty members which must be outstanding. The era of inbreeding, favoritism, reward for length of service rather than academic performance, for appointment and promotion in the university has gone to oblivion. Instead, effective teaching coupled with consistent engagement in meaningful academic research and publications are the essential hallmarks for any academic worthy of maintaining his/her position in academia. Otherwise, higher education institutions will lose their credibility of ivory towers and therefore, become obsolete monumental archives, for stocking old books rather than being centers of excellence, where knowledge is manufactured for the consumption of the public!

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