Higher education and social justice and transformation: Contemporary and emerging challenges for universities in Kenya

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Abstract

This paper aims to explore some of the major issues that have cropped up in the public domain that may occasion the interpretation that universities in Kenya may be struggling with their imperative on social justice. Unfortunately for the Kenyan society there are a myriad of challenges that have remained unresolved over the years. Hence calling for universities as the beacons of knowledge to essentially be at the centre of mediating to help the country and society to overcome them. In the truism that is the knowledge economy, a country’s socio-economic well-being depends critically upon the state of her higher education. There is increasingly an ever changing role of higher education which entails a dual development imperative, i.e., not only creating knowledge but also transforming their nations. The paper establishes that the burgeoning of several issues, well highlighted in literature and in the Kenyan media and the discussions that emerge definitely point towards a systemic problem that require debate as to what role universities should play in taking the lead in the country’s transformation and enhancement of social justice. The constructivist paradigm forms the heart of the research and the study adopts a qualitative approach employing a combination of discourse analysis and critical narrative inquiry developed through documentary evidence gathered from various published sources and in the media about the state of higher education in Kenya. Qualitative approaches are the dominant state of the art in this kind of inquiry where a majority of the work range from exploratory to explanatory as well as conceptual to contemplative pieces. The paper seeks to stir discussions and debate amongst policy makers, practitioners and scholars within the country and at large on the role of higher education institutions in furthering social justice and transformation, particularly for developing countries, in the light of the four roles for higher education institutions as delineated in the book Rethinking knowledge within higher education: Adorno and social justice by Jan McArthur (McArthur, 2014). The study further ascertains an apparent weakness of the stewardship theory that has hitherto been used to direct the institutions and hence advances a thesis that comes from the agency theory thrust that calls for a more proactive approach which is arguably more malleable in this case to ensure the achievement of social justice.

Keywords  
Kenya, social justice, universities, higher education, higher education institutions, transformation.

Introduction

Within the modern knowledge economy, a country’s socio-economic well-being depends critically upon the state of her higher education, given that it plays a major role in the production, dissemination and preservation of knowledge (Singh, 2011; Skolnik, 2005). According to Subotzky (2005), the ever changing role of higher education entails a ‘dual development imperative,’ i.e., not only creating knowledge but transforming their nations. ‘Universities are now recognized as the primary source of the renewable resources – knowledge and discovery’ (Stiller, 2005, p.265) which are important tools for societal transformation. But this raises certain challenges for developing countries like Kenya. Kenya has witnessed varying levels of policy shifts in terms of HE legislation, access, operations, and funding; all primarily due to challenges of the neoliberal global economic reality and as well due to the local socio political dynamics. The main dictum of neoliberalism: freeing up the market, public expenditure cut for social services, deregulation, privatisation of higher education, disregarding the erstwhile concept of higher education as ‘a public good’ or even as the social contract with the community have all been experienced in the country in recent years (Wangenge-Ouma, 2012). Amidst all these, there has been a call for serious debate on the role of the universities in Kenya, particularly with respect to their part as transformative agents towards the achievement of the country’s long term development agenda, Vision 2030 (Owuor, 2012).

Trow (2007, p.243) delineated common HE priorities as ‘elite,’ ‘mass’ and ‘universal’ depending on whether it is geared towards the ruling class, middle class or just about everyone. This also depicts the shift in the HE realm over the years in many countries from elitist to mass HE, i.e. widening access where in some countries widening access essentially means it is no longer the preserve of the elite. But massification of higher education alone may not be the end in itself and may not be able to solve all societal issues, thus necessitating the debate calling for universities to be more transformative. For example in the UK, Craven (2012) says it has not done so much to the extent originally envisaged. In Kenya, its effect has been double edged leading to other issues of concern such as quality (Owuor, 2012). Unlike in England where according to Callender (2011) there are incentives for higher education institutions (HEIs) to grow their full-time programmes at the expense of their part-time provision, in Kenya the process of widening access is peculiar in the sense that the reverse is the case.

Therefore there is undoubted consensus without contention that ‘goals of higher education should contribute to greater social justice, within its own wall, and in the wider society,’ to the extent that the purpose of the university should be to enhance the economic and social standing of all members of the society at large more resoundingly (McArthur, 2014, p.2).

Kenyan HE landscape- why liminality?

In the past, the university in Kenya was mostly considered as the ‘ivory tower,’ an epitome of meritocracy and excellence. Access to university was a granted chance for upward social and economic mobility, especially for the poor and town trodden folks. In the recent past, however, that role has become increasingly remote. Quite agreeably it should not be seen just as ‘part of the normal, taken for granted experiences of the middle class’ (Furlong & Cartmel, 2009, p.1). In Bourdieu’s terms, access to education including HE is a major component of social capital for any generation. Therefore, this undoubtedly amounts to denial of basic social and economic justice.

It is for a fact that institutional funding has also diminished in the Kenyan HE sector, like in many other countries, causing a tumbling in the sector on various fronts. For their part, in a bid to survive, universities in the country have over the years embarked on a number of supposedly revenue generating activities that include among others the running of ‘parallel programmes,’ i.e. self-sponsored programmes. This is a scheme that is invariably replicated in every university in Kenya which involves mass enrolment of students in pursuit of commercialisation and marketization (Wangenge-Ouma & Nafukho, 2011). Even though as asserted by Filip (2012) the applicability of marketisation of in HE should not be in contention with the marketing theory itself. In deed HEIs operate in a very dynamic business and social environment which calls for the understanding of the various and diverse needs of various stakeholders; something that also aligns with marketing theory. However in undertaking revenue generation activities, as Amador et al (2015) indicate, universities have a duty not just ‘to promote education for profit making to the detriment of education for a more inclusive type of citizenship’ (867). As a matter of principle, I also believe that the country having adopted the neoliberal model, there is no turning back and that there is no problem with marketisation as such; but atleast there should be comparable value. That cannot be said to be currently the case in the country when all the universities seemingly care about is generating revenues and churning out numbers through the ‘parallel programmes’ even at the expense of the regard to what happens next to such large numbers of graduates like whether they even get employed or whether they end up having meaningful lives after graduation.

Not only that, certain acts of ‘mediocrity’ in the operations of universities in the country have also been called to question occasioning a serious loss of reputation to the institutions and even the whole sector (Kanyinga, 2016). Among the troubles that have plagued the Kenyan universities that have been exposed in the media and various platforms occasioning loss of reputation include commericialisation, corruption, tribalism and even nepotism. These have seriously tarnished the reputation of several universities, both private and public alike, and even the higher education sector in the country as a whole and hence calling for the debate on what kind of role the institutions must play in order to help transform the country. Against this backdrop even though Seyama (2015) argues for the amenability and possible integration of both stewardship theory and agency theory in HE, the situation in Kenya and the performance of universities in instituting social justice perhaps reflects that there is an apparent weakness of the stewardship theory hence calling for a more proactive approach via the agency theory. This is a position also taken by (Kivistö, 2005).

Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative approach, employing a combination of discourse analysis and critical narrative inquiry developed through documentary evidence gathered from various published sources and media in order to provide a snapshot and then investigates and analyses the contemporary and emerging challenges encountered by universities in the country. Qualitative approaches are the dominant state of the art in this kind of inquiry where a majority of the work range from exploratory to explanatory as well as conceptual to contemplative pieces. The use of narrative inquiry is also a common method with precedent in educational research (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). Therefore its adoption in this instance is plausible.

Research questions

The guiding research question is: What is the role of higher education in the pursuit of ensuring social justice and transformation? Answering this question is very important. As it helps to explain the role of higher education institutions as actors in supporting social justice and transformation.

In order to answer this main question, this research attempts to get to the bottom of the following other research questions:

1. What is considered as the value of social justice and what do the universities as important institutions perceive to be their role in mediating to achieve this? I.e., what do the universities in Kenya perceive to be their role in ensuring social justice and transformation?

2. What might be some of the challenges that the universities face in their pursuit of social justice?

3. How have the universities in Kenya tried to do in order to deal with these issues? Answering this question is important so as to assess the nature of their coping strategies.

4. What may be considered as the possible manner of giving way to a sustainable solution to the overall achievement of social justice and transformation in the country? The answer to this question helps to build a possible roadmap to the future in order to tackle such problems.

Theoretical perspectives on social justice

We see the expression ‘social justice’ everywhere these days even though what it really means might not be quite familiar to most people. According to Burchardt and Craig (2008, p1) ‘everybody is in favour of social justice, almost by definition. But what they mean by social justice, the priority they accord to it relative to other objectives, and the public policies they believe follow from it, vary widely.’ An understanding of what constitutes social justice can be drawn from Robinson(nd) in which he attributes its conceptualisation to two publications on the subject; one is John Rawls' 1972 book titled ‘A Theory of Justice’ from which his ‘Justice as Fairness’ theory was advanced. The book has defined academic discourse about social justice ever since and in it Rawls argued that justice meant ‘the way in which the major social institutions distribute fundamental rights and duties and determine the division of advantages from social co-operation’.

The other one is David Miller's 2003 book titled ‘Principles of Social Justice’ in which he posits social justice as a pluralistic and circumstantial theory that is built around those principles of justice which people actually hold.

Therefore ‘given the complex theoretical terrain of social justice and the tensions inherent in applying social justice frameworks within higher education,’ it is essential to make a deep reflection on key theories of social justice in order to understand their implications for higher education (Wilson-Strydom, 2014, p.143). The fact that social justice falls within the intersecting realms of philosophy, sociology, education, politics and legal theory, makes it a fascinating topic that has received attention from these various perspectives.

Social justice as a philosophical matter, more so ethical, can be metaphysically projected through the lens of different philosophical movements, i.e., ancient, medieval and modern. Even though these movements did not attempt to describe justice or even social justice for that matter, the meaning can be inferred from their various treatises on Ethics. Therefore the view from these movements’ various prisms such as Aristotelian, Marx, Hegel and Kant can possibly be used to explain it. These present important thoughts on the aspect of doing ‘right,’ an aspect that underlies what social justice is essentially all about.

For example in the Aristotelian view, through the various treatises on Ethics, it can be deduced to be a practical science which could be mastered by doing rather than just merely reasoning via what is commonly referred to as Virtue Ethics or Eudaimonism.

In the Kantian idea of moral philosophy it is seen as an observable empirical fact via the Categorical Imperative, which argues for a sacrosanct, absolutely universal, non-negotiable moral law which holds up regardless of context (Dahlstrom, 2008). A big contrast to utilitarianism where the rightness of actions may be relative and can be judged by the extent of impact; such that if serves the greater majority well then it would be considered good. The Kantian view is therefore normative or deontological (i.e. it emphasises on the rightness or wrongness of the actions themselves, as not on the rightness or wrongness of the consequences of those actions or the character of the actor, and holds that ethical rules bind people to an ethical duty) (Vaida, 2014). Thus in ‘the reasoning in Kant scholarship is best understood as reasoning from duty. As individuals we are obligated to do what is right, that they are moral laws that clearly define what is right and what is wrong’ (McNutt, 2010, p. 743).

As per the Marxist tradition, the increasing spate of injustice as has been witnessed in recent years can perhaps also be attributed to ‘the commodity fetishism’ element that defines capitalism and the alienation of human work that capitalism entails.

In the same length other theoretical perspectives drawn from other schools like sociology and education also provide important dimensions towards the understanding of social justice.

Discussion: The pursuit of social justice – implications for change for universities in Kenya

McArthur (2014) proposes four main ways in which higher education can contribute to social justice. These include:

1. The engagement with knowledge and enlightenment in its complex and contested forms.

2. Active forms of participation that recognizes the need of embracing risk and uncertainty the engagement with knowledge and enlightenment.

3. The provision of room and opportunity in which those engaging with knowledge can counter the status quo and thus promote change and thereby social justice.

4. The recognition and appreciation of the relationship between theory and practice that challenges the division in the academy.

It is not certain to what extent the universities in Kenya recognize or even appreciate these four imperatives. My purpose is therefore to highlight how these can purposefully be adopted by the universities in a manner that will enable them to help the Kenyan society to counter the myriad challenges faced.

Even though the country is touted as one of the fast developing economies in the ‘Africa Rising’ narrative, the reality however points to a completely different picture which suggests that it might only be a ‘paper tiger’ since there is quite a lot beneath the surface.

Some of the myriad of identifiable challenges that the Kenyan society has had to contend with over the years include among others: Poverty and inequality, poor infrastructure, unemployment, population explosion, climate change, tribalism, insecurity and the threat of terrorism, entrenched impunity and the lack of respect for the rule of law, erosion of democracy, and corruption.

I believe that these challenges are not insurmountable and universities as the beacons of knowledge should essentially be at the centre of mediating to help the Kenyan society to overcome them. But perhaps the problem then arises when the universities as currently constituted are themselves facing a number of challenges ranging from lack of meaningful engagement with the society right from their immediate communities, having a singular purpose i.e., teaching, minimal research, lack of innovation, budgetary constraints, ethnisisation and localisation as well as a disconnect between programmes offered and industry demand. Thus the universities have tended to eschew their role only to be engaged in intellectual vagrancy. It therefore calls for a serious paradigm shift so that the universities can appreciate their role better as transformative agents. Such transformation however begins with the understanding and recognition of the societal challenges themselves. Identifying and appreciating the modern challenges is important before they even imagine of ways to tackle them. At the moment the indication is that these have seemingly been ignored by the leadership of the universities.

Conclusion

Even though in current climate characterised by commercialization, commodification and the fervour of consumer culture within higher education it is easy and understandable to easily dismiss any link any economic imperative with the social justice goals of higher education. Universities are an important part of the process of change taking place in society. For a developing country like Kenya, a re-emphasis on community engagement and participation is even more crucial. However, it is evident that universities in Kenya appear to have appropriated for themselves the singular role of just imparting knowledge and have abrogated their role as change agents. For social and economic development to take place, the university should not be seen as neutral actors but active and transformative agents.

Therefore, drawing insights from theory and context it calls for self-reflexivity and implies that the government and universities should in the articulation of policy consider employing those measures that deliberately facilitate the achievement of social justice and transformation.

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