

STAFFING LEVELS IN KENYAN UNIVERSITIES: AN EMERGING THREAT TO TRAINING AND RESEARCH EXCELLENCE

Rael Wahu Gichara¹

¹Department of Quantitative Skills and Development Studies,
School of Human Resource Development, University of Eldoret, Kenya

ABSTRACT

Kenyan universities have experienced phenomenal expansion in recent years, which is a reflection of the growing demand for specialized skills to sustain the emerging industrial economy. This rapid expansion has not been in tandem with the recruitment of highly skilled academic personnel to service these institutions. Consequently, this rapid expansion has failed to address the skills gap required to sustain the socio-economic demands of the country. This mismatch in skills training is largely attributable to the inadequate resource mobilization and allocation to Kenyan Universities in terms qualified faculty. The poor staffing levels in most Kenyan universities is critical since it presents a serious threat to the training of qualified manpower required to drive the socio-economic development in the country. Recent studies have demonstrated that most Kenyan universities are manned by part-time lecturers who are generally less qualified and lack commitment to teaching and research excellence; which inevitably leads to the mass production of graduates who lack critical faculties required for functional utility in the labor market. It is arguable that poor staffing levels plays a significant role in the mass production of these semi-skilled and poorly trained University graduates. Rationalization of resource allocation with the aim of optimizing the inputs involved in University graduate training and more importantly the teaching faculty; is strongly recommended.

Keywords: University training, staffing levels, part-time lecturer

1.0 Introduction:

In contemporary societies, University training plays a significant role in socio-economic development by training skilled manpower, producing and disseminating the knowledge required for a knowledge-driven economy. This training should enable individuals to develop their capabilities to the highest potential; serve the needs of an adaptive, sustainable and knowledge-based economy and play a major role in the shaping of a democratic, civilized and inclusive

society (Okioga, 2013). To this end, African governments have recognized the significance of University training in enhancing socio-economic development (Teferra and Altbach 2004, Kauffeldt, 2009) and thus, invested heavily in this critical sector reflected through rapid expansion of Universities on the continent.

2.0 The Kenyan University Graduate:

In Kenya for instance, there has been a phenomenal expansion of University training which has largely been demand-driven. Currently, Kenya has a total of 53 fully-fledged chartered public and private universities and 14 public and private constituent colleges (CUE, 2017). According to the Ministry of Education (2012), the country's University training system is expected to create sustainable pools of highly trained human resources equipped with the skills required for the country to experience socio-economic development and to remain globally competitive in a rapidly changing and more diverse economy. However, there is a wide divergence between this noble expectation and empirical evidence as it obtains on the ground. It is doubtful that the quality of manpower churned out of most Kenyan Universities possess the critical competencies and wherewithal to drive the socio-economic agenda of the country. The lack of effective manpower training is exacerbated by the fact that the uptake of University graduates into the formal economy is woefully low. Only a minority of these graduates actually get an opportunity to secure gainful formal employment and thus, most of these graduates are actually excluded from mainstream socio-economic activities in the country. Therefore, the assertion that majority of current University graduates are shaping the socioeconomic destiny of the country is dubious.

Anecdotal reports from prospective employers have cited a mismatch in skills training at universities and current market demands. Why is this case? According to Harvey and Green (1993) the quality of a training system can be evaluated in terms of the fitness for purpose or the extent to which it is able to facilitate the attainment of the stated goals and objectives; in this case - by producing graduates who have the knowledge and skills to drive the country's socio-economic growth and development. Thus, the quality of University training is a function of input, processes and the output of the system (Cheng and Tam, 1997). The centrality of quality for the University sub-sector in Kenya is underlined by the sub-sector's vision of providing a globally competitive quality training and research for sustainable development (Ministry of Education 2012). Is this really the case? Carefully examination of inputs in terms of investments in infrastructure such as quality lecturer rooms, libraries, teaching laboratories; the process – curriculum delivery and more importantly the quality of lecturers and finally the outputs – the graduate; research outputs: inevitably leads to the conclusion that this vision is untenable. Previous studies have attributed this declining quality in University training to the irrational expansion in universities in the country without sufficient provision of requisite resources

necessary for the maintenance of high standards, quality and relevance associated with University training (Okioga, 2013). This has inevitably undermined considerably the quality of the training offered by the sector as well as that of the final outputs - the graduates and research (Kaburu and Embeywa 2014; Nyangau 2014; Odhiambo 2011; Okioga, 2013).

Similarly, Odhiambo (2011) concluded that universities in Kenya produced graduates who are ill-equipped to compete effectively in a globalized economy. These observations are inconsistent with the anticipation that universities in the country would prepare a well-educated, highly-trained workforce for industrialization, modernization, and global citizenship (Nyangau 2014).

3.0 Teaching and Research Excellence in Higher Education Training:

Central to the success of higher education training institutions are the training resources (or inputs) available to them (Kauffeldt 2009; UNESCO 2005). These, in addition to buildings and equipment, include the people (staff), necessary to be able to offer well-designed academic programmes (Kauffeldt 2009). A sufficient, highly qualified and effective faculty and sufficient supporting staff are crucial for a quality University training. These should also have sufficient resources to support their efforts, including adequate classroom space, adequate and well-equipped laboratories, adequate library space equipped with current reading materials, access to the most up-to-date computer and other communication technology and access to adequate research funds. The Kenyan government is aware of this state of affairs and in an attempt to address this horrendous decline in the quality of University education set up a statutory regulatory body – The Commission of University Education (CUE) whose mandate is to streamline the University sector in the country by realigning these institutions to their core mandate - which is; delivery of quality teaching, research and innovations. The commission has a directorate of quality control that accredits all academic programs in these institutions after they have satisfied certain minimum criteria of excellence aimed at optimizing teaching, research and innovation in universities. Based on the CUE, the recommended lecturer-student ratio should be 1:50 for theoretical-based courses and 1:20 for practical-based courses (CUE, 2017).

Furthermore, to qualify to be appointed as a lecturer in Kenyan Universities, one must meet the following stringent minimum criteria: An earned PhD or a Master Degree with 3 years teaching experience at the University with several publications in refereed journals. In addition, candidates are expected to have attracted research/development funds. Moreover, in 2018 it is expected that all teaching faculty at Kenyan Universities will be PhD holders. Based on these assessments; how many of the current faculty in Kenyan Universities are qualified? In my view, based on CUE criteria a significant number of these institutions do not meet these minimum standards. Most of these institutions were set up to address political exigencies and thus political interference may be limiting the effectiveness of the regulator in maintaining standards. On the

other hand, it remains to be determined if these lofty standards are achievable in Kenyan universities in the foreseeable future. This notwithstanding, these aspirational targets although unrealistic at the moment, are useful in so far as they act as a beacon to focus the energies of all stakeholders in the sector to what quality University training entails. Thus, it can be inferred that the dramatic decline in quality University training has been outpaced by market dynamics – requiring certain minimum key skills and competencies that current University trainings are unable to provide. The focus on quantity rather than quality of University graduates, in my view; is a waste of resources and poor strategy, as it negates the very vision and mission of higher level training as principal drivers of socio-economic development.

4.0 Mismatch between staffing levels and University expansion:

From the foregoing, it is arguable that the fundamental reason for the incongruence in University training and market demands is primarily fueled by poor staffing levels. Kenyan universities have experienced tremendous growth in enrolments without an equivalent growth in staffing, thereby suffering severe deficiencies in the academic staff vital to deliver quality training. In Kenya, for example, the demand for teaching staff outstrips the supply in both public and private universities (Gudo et al. 2011). Furthermore, because of the funding crisis affecting Kenyan universities, a substantial number of lecturers are poorly trained and consequently not properly qualified (Nyangau 2014). These poor staffing levels are exacerbated further by significant brain drain (Teferra and Altbach 2004; Kauffeldt 2009; Effah 2003; Ngome 2003) that has involved the flight of well-qualified academics mostly to North America and Europe, and in some cases to Southern Africa, where remunerations are much better. Poor remuneration of academics, the undervaluing of faculty and non-conducive working environment make it difficult for universities to recruit and retain good scholars (Gudo et al. 2011; Kauffeldt 2009). This is where policy makers should focus their attention. Significant investments in faculty training at Master and PhD levels should be ubiquitous for all junior faculty. Furthermore, research funds should also be available through public-private partnerships to enhance research and innovation outputs.

5.0 The Part-time Lecturer – a Coping Strategy:

To cope with the severe shortages in academic staff, Kenyan universities have adopted varied coping strategies. In some universities, survival tactics have included assigning graduate students and tutorial fellows full teaching responsibilities (Odebero, 2010). A second coping mechanism is increased workloads for faculty (Gudo et al. 2011). Moreover, the shortage of qualified academics has forced many Universities to fill existing academic positions with under-qualified (or incompetent) persons, including graduates from unaccredited universities in India and North America (Gudo et al. 2011; Kauffeldt 2009).

A more pragmatic approach has been the widespread recruitment of part-time lecturers to address the glaring academic staff shortage in Kenyan universities. Most institutions of higher learning are employing part time lecturers as a strategy to reduce labour costs (Alston, 2010) which in my view should not be the only overriding consideration in University training. I contend that a serious audit of the composition of Kenyan University faculty would indicate that part-time lecturers or ‘moonlighters’ as they are ungraciously referred to by their full-time colleagues - make an increasingly larger proportion of the lecturers. They have to be, this is the logical conclusion expected when the average rate of University expansion far outstrips the rate of faculty training - a situation that CUE is well aware of and needs to remedy urgently. This notwithstanding, University training in Kenya has witnessed an astronomical rise in the number of part-time lecturers *vis a vis* full time faculty. Additional empirical evidence is required to determine the actual contribution of part-time lecturers in University training in Kenya. A conservative estimate would predict more than 50% or more of current faculty establishments in most Kenyan Universities are part-timers. This can be attributed to reduced government funding (especially to public universities), and the increasing size and diversity of student enrollment (Muralidharan and Sundararaman, 2008). Rapid expansion in student numbers, the establishment of numerous satellite campuses, and lack of human personnel commensurate with student enrollment characterize the Kenyan academic landscape. In response, the institutions of higher learning have contracted a number of part-time lecturers who are probably as many full-time faculty or even more (Bryson, 1998) which is consistent with my observation above. The same scenario is replicated in private universities. As a matter of fact, most private universities tend to utilize more part-time teaching faculty than public universities (Mageto, 2001) as a cost-cutting strategy.

This recruitment of part-time lecturers is especially toxic to the delivery of quality University training for several reasons. For instance, part time faculties do not enjoy the same status as their full time counterparts. Furthermore, they are mistreated by their institutions. In addition, lack of job security is a prominent feature of their work environment due to the casualization of their jobs (Bryson, 2004). All these factors impact negatively on the quality of teaching, research and innovation in Kenyan universities

6.0 Emerging Human Resource Management issues in part-time employment:

In sound Human resource management practice, part-time employment is a cost-effective approach for organizations to meet their performance targets. However, this is not to diminish the significant threats to the individual and the organization that part-time employment presents. Part timers do not have job satisfaction since they lack an organizational career path (Allen-Collinson and Hockey, 1998; Bryson, 1998; Hey, 2001). Moreover, Barnes and O’Hara (1999)

identified hindrances, presented by the lack of promotion criteria for temporary employees, as being of fundamental importance to a review of part-time academic careers. Many part-time faculty are not given opportunities to develop professionally (Gappa, Austin & Trice, 2005). Furthermore, poor financial rewards and lack of promotion opportunities are among critical causes of discontent amongst part-timers (Feldman and Turnley, 2001). This discontent from part-timers impacts negatively on the ability of Universities to deliver on their core mandates of training, research and innovation. Part-time faculty are less likely to engage in research (and hence publish infrequently) and generally do not perform the full array of faculty work (Bataille and Brown 2006; Barnes & O'Hara 1999). In summary therefore, using part time staff is an inefficient system for training and maintaining a skilled research workforce (Allen- Collinson and Hockey 1998) since the use of part timers has a negative effect on the quality training, research and innovation and therefore negates the benefits of expansion of University training opportunities in Kenya.

7.0 Conclusion:

Poor staffing levels in Kenyan Universities is compromising quality training, research and innovation and thus, merits special attention from regulators, who should aim to restore Kenyan Universities as effective citadels of manpower training in Kenya. Deployment of sound human resource management principles should enhance staffing levels in terms of optimizing quality and quantity to address this emerging challenge to training, research and innovation in Kenyan universities. Particular attention should be paid to the role of part-time lecturers in compounding the declining standards of University training and research outputs. Since the deployment of part-time lecturers as a strategy to address poor staffing levels in Kenyan Universities has disastrous consequences on training, research and innovative excellence other innovative approaches should be explored.

Conflict of Interests: None

REFERENCES

- Allen C. J., and Hockey J. (1998). Capturing Contracts: Informal Activity Among Contract Researchers. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 19(4), 497 - 515.
- Alston L. A. (2010). *Career Management Strategies of Part Time Lecturers in Humanities*. University of Pretoria Faculty of Education
- Barnes N., and O'Hara S. (1999). Managing Academics on Short Term Contracts. *Higher Education Quarterly*, 53(3), 229 - 239.

Bataille G. M., and Brown B. (2006). Faculty Career Paths - Multiple Routes to Academic Success and Satisfaction. Westport: Praeger Series on Higher Education.

Bryson C. (1998). More is less: Contract Research in UK Higher Education Institutions. EASST Conference. Lisbon.

Bryson C. (2004). What About the Workers? The Expansion of Higher Education and the Transformation of Academic work. *Industrial Relations Journal*, 35(1), 38 - 57.

Change Management Journal, 37(6), 32-39.

Cheng Y. C., and Tam W. M. (1997). Multi-models of Quality in Education, 5(1), 22-34

Daystar University, School of Arts and Humanities.

Effah P. (2008). African Higher Education. An International Reference Handbook. IUP, Indiana

Feldman D., and Turnley W. (2001). A Field Study of Adjunct Faculty: The Impact of Career Stage on Reactions to Non - tenure Track Jobs. *Journal of Career Development*, 28 (1), 1 - 16.

Gappa J. M., Austin A.E. and Trice A.G. (2005). Rethinking Academic Work and Work Places. *The Magazine of Higher Learning*, V37 N6

Gappa J., Austin A., and Trice A. (2005). Rethinking Academic Work and Workplaces.

Gudo C. O., Olel M. A., Oanda I. O. (2011). University Expansion in Kenya and Issues of

Quality Education, Challenges and Opportunities, *international Journal of Business and Social Sciences* 34-67

Harvey L. and Green D. (1993). Defining Quality Assessment and Evaluation of Higher Education, 18(1), 9-34

Hey V. (2001). The Construction of Academic Time: Sub Contracting Academic Labour in Research. *Journal of Education Policy*, 16(1), 67 – 84

Kaburu J. K. and Embeywa E. H. (2014). An Evaluation of Quality University Education in Kenya during the Massification Era. *Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences*, Vol. 5 No. 5

Kauffeldt J. (2009). The Commission for Higher Education in Kenya. A Case Study regarding the establishment, Role, and Operations of an Intermediary Body in the Higher Education System of a Developing Nation. PhD Thesis, University of Toronto

Mageto P. (2001). Corporate and Personal Ethics for Sustainable Development: Experiences, Challenges and Promises of Part - Time Teaching in Selected Universities in Kenya.

Mageto P. (2001). Corporate and Personal Ethics for Sustainable Development: Experiences, Challenges and Promises of Part Time Teaching in Selected Universities in Kenya. Daystar University. School of Arts and Humanities

Muralidharan K., and Sundararaman V. (2008). Teacher Incentives in Developing Countries: Experimental evidence from India. Working Paper 2008 -13.

Ngome G. (2003). Kenya African Higher Education. An International Reference Handbook. Bloomington, IN UP: Indiana

Nyangau J. Z. (2014). Higher Education as an instrument of Economic Growth in Kenya. Forum for International Research in Education. Vol. 1 issue 1

Odebero O. S. (2010). Crisis in Financing and Management of Kenyan Higher Education. Implication for Planning Reform Agenda. Presented at EMSK Workshop. Held at Migori Teachers College on 12th to 14th April 2010

Odhiambo G. (2011). Higher Education Quality in Kenya, a Critical Reflection of Key Challenges. Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management. Vol.36, Issue 2

Okioga C.K. (2013). The impact of students socio-economic Background on Academic Performance in Universities, a Case Study of Kisii University College. America International Journal of Social Science. Vol 2 No. 2

Quality Education: Challenges and Opportunities, International Journal of Business and Social Science, Vol 2, No 20, Pg203-214

Teferra D. and Altbach G. (2004). African Higher Education Challenges for the 21st Century. Higher Education 47:21 – 50

UNESCO (2005). Towards Knowledge societies. UNESCO Publishing

www.cue.or.ke. Accessed on 14, April, 2017

www.education.go.ke. Accessed on 24 July 2017