

The Idea of an African University: Research Study and the Dissemination of Research Findings in African Universities

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to interrogate how research is conducted in our African universities paying attention to epistemological and paradigmatic issues. It seeks to problematize the issue of research against the background of a culturally rich African society which calls for a researcher to think carefully over the approach to be employed in the research study. The crisis in education in Africa could be tied to the nature of African culture vis-à-vis the approaches engaged by researchers in an attempt to come up with findings that portray a credible reflection of the issue at the core of a researcher's study. Whereas a lot of research has been based on positivist paradigms, and have yielded some great findings, I feel in my opinion and influenced by other scholars, that in Africa a lot of important information is not captured by such absolutist methods. The nature of African culture identifies a lot with relativist epistemologies which in turn call for qualitative approaches in research methods. It is imperative therefore that in African universities qualitative approaches to the research study be developed and elevated in order to give research the relevant profundity. Tied to the question on how research is conducted, is the dissemination of research findings in African Universities. As a scholar of Communication Studies I believe that a research study will not have met its objectives if great works of great minds are stored away in college bookshelves. This is discussed pertaining to issues of policy making and development in the education sector. A few questions are posed: what do African universities do with the research findings, (particularly theses) after they have been submitted by scholars in the various fields of study? Do governments seek to use the findings of research to influence policy making in order to realize development of institutions of higher learning? The role of communication is discussed pertaining to the above mentioned issues with the aim of establishing the genesis of the difficulties African educational systems face and whether it is truly justified to label African education systems as the weakest in the world.

Key Words: Epistemology, Paradigm, African Universities, Research Findings, Education Systems

INTRODUCTION

In this paper I seek to interrogate the idea of what an African University should be by looking at certain aspects of the research study and the dissemination of research findings. This will be discussed by examining the research study against the backdrop of Africa as a culturally rich society with its own distinct ways of looking at societal

matters. Opinions of various scholars both from Africa and the Western world will be looked at in an attempt to establish what really should constitute an African university.

The second issue to be discussed in this paper is the dissemination of research findings with the aim of establishing whether or not African Universities utilize the works of their own scholars and professionals to develop institutions of higher learning and consequently the society. This should enable us to try and understand what, really, the African Universities stand for as far as their quality of education is concerned and what more can be done to correct the grim picture that the rest of the world seems to have; that Africa has the weakest education systems in the world.

THE RESEARCH STUDY

Research in common parlance according to Kothari (2004) refers to a search for knowledge. At a more in depth definition, research is a deliberate, systematic, critical and purposeful process of inquiry that is undertaken to make a contribution to worthwhile knowledge within a particular aspect of life (Ong'ondo, Jwan, & Barasa, 2010). In order for African Universities to come up with research programs in various fields of academic study, it is imperative to understand various aspects of the nature of inquiry and thereafter discuss what could be way forward in research in the African context.

In the social science field, for example, there are four assumptions to the subjective – objective dimension of research according to Cohen *et al.* (2007). First, there are assumptions of an ontological kind. There is nominalist against realist ontological assumptions where the former view holds that there is no independently accessible thing constituting the meaning of a word. The realist view according to Cohen *et al.*, however contends that objects have an independent existence and are not dependent from it is the knower.

The second set of assumptions is that of the epistemological kind. This again according to Cohen *et al.* concern the very bases of knowledge its nature and forms, and how it can be acquired, and how it can be communicated to other human beings. There is the positivist epistemology where knowledge is viewed as hard, objective and tangible; and the anti-positivist epistemology where knowledge is seen as personal, subjective and unique and researchers have to interact with their subjects.

A third set of assumptions is concerned with the human nature in the process of research. The subjectivist approach is that of voluntarism where the human being is seen as initiators of their own actions with free will and creativity, producing their own environment. The objectivist approach is that of determinism where the view is that human beings respond mechanically and deterministically to their environment, controlled like puppets.

The fourth assumption is on methodology. The subjectivist approach subscribes to idiographic paradigm in methodology. In this approach, emphasis is placed on explanation and understanding of the unique and the particular individual case rather

than general and the universal. The interest is in subjective, relativistic social world rather than an absolutist, external reality. This approach will use the more recent emerging methods such as accounts, participant observation and personal constructs.

The objectivist approach on the other hand subscribes to nomothetic methods and in this case scientific investigation will be directed at analyzing the relationships and regularities between selected factors in the world. Investigators adopting this approach to the social world will choose from a range of traditional options such as surveys, experiments and content analysis among others.

African Ontology leans towards relativism and therefore in order to do meaningful research in African universities, it is important to consider the nature of reality as perceived by African societies. Kinchloe (2008) claims that knowledge is socially constructed, that the world and information co-construct one another. He further claims that knowledge is the self organized cognitive process of the human brain. That is, the process of constructing knowledge regulates itself and since knowledge is a construct rather than a compilation of empirical data, it is impossible to know the extent to which knowledge reflects as an ontological reality. In describing constructivist trends, Kinchloe explains that cultural constructivism asserts that knowledge and reality is a product of their cultural context. This therefore means that two independent cultures will likely form different observational methodologies. For instance, western cultures generally rely on objects for scientific descriptions, and by contrast native American or African cultures rely on events for descriptions. These are two distinct ways of constructing reality based on external artifacts.

RESEARCH AND CULTURE

Africa is largely a cultural society and many societal functions are centered on some element of culture. Looking at Cohen *et al.*'s (2007) assumptions on the nature of inquiry in the social sciences, a researcher would be better placed approaching research in African communities from majorly a relativist stance in agreement with Kinchloe's (2008) idea of constructivism. Methods such as ethnography would allow a researcher to do an in-depth inquiry which would consequently allow the researcher to understand, for example, why a community engages in a certain practice. Nomothetic methods which subscribe to realist ontology would not yield the same outcome because the researcher is often removed from the human subjects and acts as an independent observer looking from outside. It is not surprising that certain researches done in Africa have not yielded much in terms of findings as the real issues of the communities involved are not understood. For example campaigns against certain practices like female genital mutilation (FGM) are fairly misinformed. The surgical aspect of it may be crude and inhuman, but researchers have not necessarily looked at the cultural value of this rite of passage ritual. An in-depth inquiry would reveal a wealth of values that put the fabric of society together, that are passed on from generation to generation through these practices. And therefore amending rather than doing away with the practice would be at the core of any such campaign and consequently the outcomes would be meaningful to all involved.

Etienne Benson (2003) in the article —Intelligence across Culturesl in the Monitor Journal of the American Psychological Association (APA) expounds on why the issue of intelligence should be regarded subjectively. He notes that in recent years, researches in Africa, Asia and elsewhere have found that people in non – western cultures often have ideas about intelligence that differ fundamentally from those that have shaped western intelligence tests.

Etienne gives an example of a research done in Africa, Kenya, among the Luo in rural Nyanza. It was established that ideas about intelligence consist of four broad concepts‘ *rieko* which largely corresponds to the Western idea of academic intelligence but also includes specific skills, *luoro*, which includes social qualities like respect, responsibility and consideration, *paro* or practical thinking and *winjo* or comprehension. According to research only one of the four *rieko* is correlated with traditional Western measures of intelligence. Etienne’s report points out that lay theories of intelligence often lack the precision of scientific theories, but they can suggest new avenues of research, shed light on how people use intelligence on everyday life and highlight aspects of intelligence that scientific theories have ignored. Studying intelligence in different cultures can thus be a way of challenging conventional Western ideas about intelligence. African universities should develop curriculum that recognizes the various forms of intelligence and values of African societies so that studies that are done have relevance to development of both the institutions and the community.

Sawyerr (2004) a renown Ghanaian jurist and an authority on issues of higher education in Africa is of the opinion that there is a threat to local knowledge resulting from unrestrained importation and impositioning of foreign goods, services and cultural forms. Coupled with this is the gradual deterioration in quality of education of African universities due to less funding and sponsorship. Dr. Sawyerr underlines the fact that any strategy for reviving and building up the research culture in African Universities must insure the continued reproduction and revitalization of the academy in Africa by targeting the current generation of scholars in a decisive manner.

THE ROLE OF COLONIAL HISTORY OF AFRICAN UNIVERSITIES

Africa inherited a higher education system that was a carbon copy of that of the powers that colonized it. According to a report by Baty (2010) on —A Global Research Report on Africal, right from the beginning, Africa started on a wrong footing, way behind the starting line, so to speak. This means that the field has never been level if Africa is to be compared with the rest of the world. African Universities therefore need to re-think the fields and approaches to research that suits their needs. Baty also notes that Africa has more than fifty nations with hundreds of languages and ethnic diversities. These diversity should be seen as an opportunity that offers a diverse field of study, instead of continuing to view it negatively as a divisive tool that was perpetuated by the colonialist to meet the goal of ‘_divide and rule’ strategy.

In agreement with Baty, African scholars should use the rich cultural diversity in Africa to develop research paradigms that give African higher education identity. This diversity should also be a basis for developing befitting communication paradigms that promotes development and positive social change.

Another aspect of colonial history that affects research development in African Universities is the fact that for a long time, many of Africa's best students have been taking their higher degrees at universities in Europe, Asia and North America. Too few return because they get opportunities out there to make a fairly better living than back home where life is apparently still —behind. Consequently, the African Diaspora offers powerful intellectual contribution to research progression to other nations and nothing much to their countries of birth. Many return as they approach retirement and therefore lack the zeal to add worthwhile contribution to research in their local universities.

THE ROLE OF AFRICAN UNIVERSITIES

Sawyer (2004) and Baty (2010) are of the opinion that African Universities should have a mission to produce the appropriate manpower required for Africa's development, to undertake research that is of direct relevance to Africa. This may not necessarily compete with the best of the universities in the rest of the world, but at least the outcome should reach out and assist in resolving the myriad challenges facing the continent such as poverty reduction and combating disease.

African universities have a duty to serve their countries and region first before seeking global glory. The unfortunate, however, is the case. Many African governments are blinded by the prestige of global rankings and therefore go ahead and challenge their universities to be ranked without giving it profound thought and consultation. This forces universities to direct energies and resources towards inappropriate activities at the cost of other aspects of the universities development including research. Universities cannot all have the same mission. Priorities are different according to different countries and universities and therefore it would not make intellectual sense to conform to a single model of a world class university. African nations have a duty to come together and develop their own standards.

DISSEMINATION OF RESEARCH FINDINGS

Scholars at universities strive really hard to ensure their theses are completed and presented to the authorities for award of the relevant higher degrees. However, what happens to these theses can be a very sad state of affairs. They are often stashed away, and in some universities access is even restricted. This is not, however, only limited to African universities, it is a worldwide problem, but the African situation is more wanting.

Huberman (1994) in Hughes (2003) notes that the research community has not been responsive. Its dissemination work has remained mostly incestuous restricted to the academic community tempered with the occasional article speech, seminar or 'vulgarised book'. Hughes (2003) further expounds on this opinion by explaining the

fact that there seems to exist a schism on a division between practice and theory. According to Hughes researchers are critiqued for not doing enough to spread their ideas beyond their most immediate colleagues. They are seen, therefore, as not embedding dissemination in their research practices.

Anbu (2008) of the University of Swaziland on —The current state of research and development in African Universities! notes that access to scholarly information is the biggest problem in African universities. Access barriers to high priced scholarly literature and lack of quality research infrastructures have dampend the research spirit in African Universities. According to Anbu, the west centred scholarly paradigm and the high costs of scholarly literature have kept the intellectual output of Africa under check.

The ‘publish or perish’ motto is ironically another contributing factor to the lack of dissemination of information. Anbu notes that scholars who subscribe to this motto for their academic and professional advancement, try to publish their research findings in well circulated and highly reputed periodicals and core journals. In the end African scholarship is either unpublished or delayed.

The problems curbing dissemination of research findings are myriad but African universities need not give up, instead we should go back to the drawing board. First of all, the universities themselves need to develop sincere interest in their own scholars’ findings and strive to develop research by putting in more resources. Government and universities need to work in collaboration to develop research through adequate allocation of funding. Government institutions need to view universities as a resource from which information on policy development can be drawn. The establishment of a symbiotic relationship between the governments and their universities will lead to a spiral of development. Universities should also strive to assist researchers publish their work. The standards need not start from international levels; a starting point is always small and findings that relate directly to African developments should be embraced.

CONCLUSION

In order for African Universities to get an identity of their own, first the African scholar and professional need to redefine their identity and identify with their institutions in order to forge the way forward to developing an idea of an African university. In my view, African education systems are not in any way inferior to the other education systems of the world. As earlier brought out in this paper, African intellectuals have proven that they match any other of their peers by the fact that they do contribute immensely to the academic development of some of the best institutions in the world that they have worked for. Young scholars who have had to go to study abroad especially in elementary and high school institutions have been known to be forced, at times, to skip some grades because they are found to be ahead of the rest of the learners that they are supposed to be at the same level with. It is all a question of paradigm shift in attitude towards what African scholars can give back to their continent, that can we develop the idea of an African university. An African University should be one that first and foremost produces outcomes that meet the

developmental needs of Africa before coming out to compare with the rest of the universities in the world.

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BIO-DATA

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