



Philosophical analysis of University Education in Tanzania Today: Challenges and Prospects

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Abstract

Academically, it is asserted that, the higher level of education is acquired at the University, and so, its role in every society can never be underestimated. Thus, the unceasing efforts of establishing many universities at various places, reflect this zeal. Nevertheless, the fundamental role of University and the reason that underlies its establishment have become the subject of debate and further academic conundrum in our contemporary societies. Graduates are the Product of the University; but the nature of this product whether reflects what is actually needed by the society as Common good, or rather a mere product that only await to be employed, have been the philosophical Problems which got different responses. Sadly, many universities in our times have seemed to deviate from the purpose of their existence. From such a loss of *telos* there arise a serious loss to the nation. In this article, the author by using phenomenological method unveil the essence of universities and following the ideas of Julius Kambarage Nyerere, presents the ideal function of universities in Tanzania as a way forward to rediscover the noble *telos* of universities, especially in the developing countries like Tanzania.

Keywords: University, Critical thinking, Phenomenology and philosophy of education

1. Introduction

Defining “*University*” as just-a-term, may seem quite simple, but comprehensively and especially in a modern times, it is definitely not an easy task. The complexity encountered in offering such a definition is that the nature of a university differs from one country to another. For instance, in Britain a university is considered as an academic institution that has the ability to offer its own degree while excelling in research (Allen, 1988) ^[3]. However, in some countries, research is undermined as a core aspect of a university.

The term ‘university is sometimes used interchangeably with the phrase ‘higher education’. However, Sintayehu (2018) ^[3] brings to our notice that both are not synonymous. In his conception, higher education consists of all post-secondary education. Thus, university is a subset of higher education. According to Assié-Lumumba (2005) ^[6], university differs from other institutions of higher education in different aspects such as mission, goal, functions, the requisite qualification of the faculty, admission criteria, programs duration, and the type of certification awarded. Sintayehu (2018) ^[3], on the other hand, thinks that the peculiar feature of university is research.

University education is receiving more attention especially in developing continents like Africa. This development can be perceived positively but can as well present a challenge. According to Alfred North Whitehead (1927) ^[2], “the growth of universities, in number of institutions, in size, and in internal complexity or organization, discloses some danger of destroying the very source of their usefulness, in the absence of a widespread understanding of the primary functions which should perform in the service of a nation.”

Applied in the context of Tanzania, have the growth in university education been able to withstand this danger articulated by Whitehead? Before responding to this question it might be more interesting to see the purpose and functions of a university and then contextualize them in Tanzania.

According to American Council on Education (1949), the purpose of higher education institutions is to prepare students for lives of public service and advance knowledge through research. This implies that the public good sits at the center of education. But what was the purpose of founding the university in the first place? To properly do justice to this issue let's briefly explore the historical origins of university education.

Enough arguments have been presented to argue for the conclusion that university education *per se* started in the medieval ages in Europe. According to Sintayehu (2018) ^[3], "European scholars consider the medieval Bologna University and the Universities in Paris as the first models of modern universities in Europe and the world." Following this line of argument, Pekin argued:

All advanced civilizations have needed higher education to train their ruling, priestly, military, and other service elites, but only in medieval Europe did an institution recognizable as a university arise: a school of higher learning combining teaching and scholarship and characterized by its corporate autonomy and academic freedom. The Confucian schools for the mandarin bureaucracy of imperial China, the Hindu gurukulas and Buddhist vihares for the priests and monks of medieval India, the madrasa for the mullahs and Quranic judges of Islam, the Aztec and Inca temple schools for the priestly astronomers of pre-Columbian America, the Tokugawa Han schools for Japanese samurai - all taught the high culture, received doctrine, literary and/or mathematical skills of their political or religious masters, with little room for questioning or analysis. Only in Europe from the 12th century onwards, did an autonomous, permanent, corporate institution of higher learning emerge and survive, in varying forms, down to the present day (Perkin, 2007, p. 159) ^[20].

In support of Pekin Ruegg (1992) asserts: "the University is a European institution; indeed, it is the European institution par excellence. ... No other European institution has spread over the entire world in the way in which the traditional form of the European university has done" (Ruegg, 1992, p. xix). Nevertheless, enough evidences have been presented to indicate that prior to medieval era some sort of higher education institutions existed (Kotecha, 2012) ^[16]. Philosophically speaking, in 387 BC in Athens Plato founded the *academy* which is sometimes perceived as the very first university in the western world. Looking at Plato's academy, what exactly was the central focus of the academy? Knowledge acquisition and dissemination for the good of all was clearly prioritized by Plato. In fact, it is maintained that at the very entrance of the academy is the inscription, "Let no one enter here who does not know geometry (Kenny, 2000). Arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, music, and philosophy was genuine explored in Plato's academy.

It is worth mentioning that the knowledge sought by Plato's academy was for society growth and not personal aggrandizement. This can clearly be justified when one looks deeply into the philosophy of Plato. Plato's political philosophy is centered on the nature of an ideal society where he discredited democratic Athenian society in favor of Oligarchy. It can be argued that the central aim of Plato's philosophy ranging from his cosmology, ethics, metaphysics, epistemology, psychology, politics, and astrology, is human betterment both mentally and physically.

In the medieval era the first institutions identified as universities were erected. The University of Bologna built around 1088 is often identified as the oldest University in

Europe. Talking about universities in the medieval era, Sintayehu (2018) ^[3] maintained: "in the medieval period, the purpose of universities, with constant changes of emphasis, had been learning, virtue, and utility. It was to produce learned men, to educate in virtue, or to satisfy the material need of society".

The twelfth and thirteenth centuries witnessed the rise of some powerful universities that were very vibrant in the academic world and beyond; the University of Paris and the University of Oxford. They played a significant role in the advancement of scholasticism whose influence was beyond the academic arena. According to Sintayehu (2018) ^[24] "they were and still are agents for the growth of knowledge that has the power to change the world". Anthony Kenny (2000) supported this view when he maintained: "universities, like parliaments, are legacies of the Middle Ages from which we continue to benefit".

Looking at the modern times, one can still sense the societal orientation of universities. Looking at the oldest university in America founded in 1636, known then as "New College" and in 1639 renamed "Harvard University". Though this institution was mainly dedicated for educating the clergy, it still managed to play a significant role in the early history of United State. From being a camp for the American army during American Revolution to producing up to eight alumni whose signatures appeared in the copies of the Declaration of Independence.

Up to the 19th/20th centuries the purpose of universities were still perceived to be the common good of the society. John Dewey clearly had this in mind when he noted: "Democracy must be born anew each generation and education is its midwife" (Dewey, 2008, p. 139) ^[8]. The education Dewey is referring to is arguably not the primary/secondary education but higher education and in particular university education.

Coming to the 21st century with its pompous rise in the education sector, higher education institutions especially universities began to shrink away from its accustomed bearing. The desire for private benefit threatens the quest for public good and many scholars has been quick to point this out (Abowitz, 2008; Brighouse & Mcpherson, 2015; Dungy, 2012; Levine, 2014; Shapiro, 2005) ^[1, 7, 9, 23]. Thus, many university institutions prioritized private benefit over public good and this is gradually becoming a very big challenge of the 21st century (Filippakou & Williams, 2014; Pusser, 2006) ^[10, 21]. The consequence of this being the gradual decadence of university education portrayed in the claims of Arum and Roksa (2011) ^[5] that undergraduate education is beginning to "make little difference in students' ability to synthesize new knowledge and put complex ideas in writing simple". To sum it all, a study carried out by the Gallup-Purdue University (2015) reveals that around 38 percent of alumni who graduated between 2006 and 2015 sees less value in getting a college degree.

University education in Africa at large has been on the rise in the last few decades. Tanzania in particular has experienced a very big growth in this aspect from a total of 30,759 enrollment in 2003 to 220,238 in 2020. However, has the speed of this growth in the university education affected the purpose and function of university institutions in the country? Quite unfortunately, many things indicate that universities in Tanzania today can surely not escape from the allegation of sacrificing the common good. My ultimate purpose here is to stimulate the stakeholders of university education in Tanzania to rethink about the proper purpose and function of

a university education in the country. In carrying out this task, the method that will be employed is phenomenology, with this method the object will be unveiled as it is.

2. Universities in Tanzania Today

The focus of Tanzanian universities today is no longer on the ability to train graduates that are capable of generating revolutionary ideas that can bring changes to the society. Instead, the target is to train students that can be employed after studies. Thus, the private good of the student is prioritized against the public good of the entire society. This point will be clearly justified with the following claims.

2.1 Reading and Critical Thinking Culture

One of the consequences of the deviation from public good orientation to private benefit is the production of graduates who lack reading habit as well as critical thinking mindset. This is because the system has revealed to the students that the purpose of studies is to be employed. This kind of thinking enables the student to imagine that since it's a matter of obtaining good grades for me to be successful then the best thing to do is to find a shortcut. The shortcut here include malpractices such as examination leakage, cheating during exams, plagiarism, and other irregularities before and after university exams (Leopard Jacob Mwalongo, 2017) ^[17].

2.2 Publication and Research

The fact that contribution to the growth of the society is no longer the priority of most universities in Tanzania is clearly manifested in publication and research. Though not much effort has been devoted to this topic to clearly testify to this claims but in many universities in Tanzania there are some academic staffs that who have served for 5-10 years without publishing even a single paper. How then can the problems of the society be tackled if they are not researched and published?

2.3 High Level of Irresponsibility

High level of irresponsibility from both the academic staffs and students is one of the consequences of today's prioritization of private good by Tanzanian universities. On the part of the teaching staff, weak academic tutoring and guidance especially for undergraduate students is one of the biggest challenges facing some universities in Tanzania today (Kazoka, 2020) ^[20]. The logic we can assume behind this behavior is that the teaching staff are also prioritizing their own private good at the expense of training minds that have the capacity to transform the entire society.

Since the institution is not focusing in public good, they are in no way putting pressure on the lecturers. On the other hand, lack of pressure from the lecturers on the students leads to the irresponsibility of the students. Hence some students are hardly seen in class. Since they know that some lecturers do not take time to read the assignments, they simply plagiarize. Some that do not plagiarize end up submitting the assignments after the deadline without being penalized. This high level of irresponsibility both from the university staffs and students is rooted mainly in the prioritization of private benefit and not public good.

2.4 Lack of Contribution to Local Communities

If education in Tanzania targets public good then there is no way students after graduation will not be able to make an impact in their respective local communities through the

skills acquired from the education. However, this is not the case. This can be backed up by pointing to the fact that most graduates today lack the requisite skills to contribute in their respective communities. Commenting on this, Lyata (2016) ^[18] maintained: the Tanzania's higher education institutions have not raised much of expectations the graduates lack the skills required by the labor market and this trend results in mass graduate unemployment, otherwise this would have assisted them to be more self-reliant".

3. The Way Forward: Nyerere's Notion of University Education in Tanzania

In a speech presented at the General Assembly of World University Service held in Dar es Salaam University College in June 1966, Nyerere stated clearly the main major function of a university when he maintained:

In fact, a university in a developing society must put the emphasis of its work on subjects of immediate moment to the nation in which it exists, and it must be committed to the people of that nation and their humanistic goals. This is central to its existence; and it is this fact which justifies the heavy expenditure of resources on this one aspect of national life and development. Its research, and the energies of its staff in particular, must be freely offered to the community, and they must be relevant (Nyerere, 1966) ^[15].

From the above statement by Nyerere, many points can be abstracted. First and foremost is contribution to the local community. Nyerere affirmed this to be central in the very existence of a university especially in the developing countries like Tanzania. This is because most universities are built from the national resources with the expectation that they will contribute to the national growth. Failure to do this then the millions pumped into its construction is a waste.

Universities in Tanzania in view of this should redirect their priorities from private good, be it the good of the university or the good of the student, to public good. The major expectation here is that the graduate of the university should be educated well enough to contribute to his local community and not just well enough to be employed. This goes hand in hand with some features of a liberated person as elaborated by Nyerere. These features are: *firstly*, a liberated person must be an active member of the society by giving a contribution to it knowing that, it is the society which has educated him or her. *Secondly*, he must be a self-reliant person who can be creative and productive in the society. *Thirdly*, the person who integrates himself/herself with the masses without isolation from the community members. By doing this, the educated person is said to have counteracted the temptation of intellectual arrogance. *Fourth*, a liberated person should have a sense of commitment to the community through living and working together with other members of the community. *Fifth*, he/she must have an inquiring mind with the ability to learn from what others do and reject or adopt it to his/her own needs and having a self-confidence, values others and is valued by them for what he/she does and not for what he/she obtains (Nyerere, 1968) ^[15].

The results of having developed these features, is a liberated person who can go back to the society sharing what he or she have got from a difficulty journey of studies. This means that, "knowledge is meant to be shared".

Presented with the question whether the decision to channel national resources in building Dar es Salaam University College, Nyerere replied: "... the answer depends upon what the graduates of this university college do in the future and to

what extent their actions have been influenced by the expenditure of more than Tsh. 50/- million” (Nyerere, 1966)^[15].

The second point we can abstract from Nyerere’s quotation above is promotion of critical thinking. Contribution to the local communities cannot be possible if the graduates are not critical enough to uncover the problems of their local communities and articulate possible solutions to these problems. In other words, it is the task of the university to produce graduates that can think outside the box. Emphasizing on this Nyerere claimed that, Whether in a developing country or elsewhere, a university does not deserve the name if it does not promote critical thinking. But our particular and urgent problems must influence the subjects to which thought is given, and they must influence, too, the approach. Both in university-promoted research, and in the content of degree syllabuses, the needs of our country should be the determining factor”. Going further, reemphasizing again on critical thinking Nyerere maintained: “Students must be helped to think scientifically; they must be taught to analyze problems objectively, and to apply the facts they have learned – or which they know exist – to the problems which they will face in the future” (Nyerere, 1966)^[15].

Third Point absorbable from Nyerere emphasis on research. According to him, the search for truth is a fundamental aspect of a university and the truth can be reached through research. As he argued, “I fully accept that the task of a university is to seek for truth and that its members should speak the truth as they see it regardless of consequences to themselves. But you will notice the words ‘to themselves’; I do not believe they should do this regardless of the society.” Seeking the truth makes up the dualistic function of the society alongside contribution to the society (Nyerere, 1966)^[15].

Nyerere’s view conforms to Jaspers (1965) who argues that the university is an institution devoted to the search of truth. This truth can only be reached through a systematic method of research. The second purpose of a university according to Jaspers (1965) is teaching. The truth acquired from research should be communicated through teaching. The last function a university tackles is that of culture (Jaspers, 1965).

With emphasis on truth acquired through research, universities in Tanzania should reprioritize research activities especially from the staff members of all universities. A staff member should not be comfortable staying for many years without contributing to the search for truth through researches and publications especially, the topics which address the need of that particular community.

For a university to achieve its dualistic goals as articulated by Nyerere, responsibility from both the staff members and the students must be at its apogee. A student cannot go outside and behave responsibly if he/she does not cultivate that habit while still in school. A responsible student does not need to be reminded to submit assignments and behave responsibly towards exams. On the other hand, the staff members cannot be said to be responsible if they fail to enforce the necessary code of conduct on the students. Therefore, for a university in Tanzania to achieve its dualistic functions and goals as articulated by Nyerere, irresponsibility from the academic staffs and students must be taken into serious consideration.

4. Conclusion

Education ideally should be a holistic activity targeted at not just the individual and his family but the society at large. This

can only be achieved if the individual is educated enough to identify problems within his/her society and the ability to react to those problems. University education should in no way make us a byproduct of the society that relies on what the society provides for us rather active agents in the society. An education system channeled at providing employable graduates is a harm to the society because the society as well needs graduates that will be critical enough to think outside the box and create employment for others. The society is in need of graduates that can transform its raw materials for the betterment of the entire members of the society. Tanzanian university education has so far failed in this regard in that the priority is training students for employment. J.K. Nyerere stood firmly against this conception of university education. By doing this, Nyerere’s education for self-reliance can be juxtaposed with Paulo Freire’s pedagogy of the oppressed. Pedagogy must be channeled towards individual and societal emancipation. Further studies can be conducted to expose the role of politics in undermining or strengthening universities in Tanzania.

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