

Higher Education for Human Development: Perspectives from Tanzanian Universities

Bertha Kibona

University of the Free State, South Africa

Email:berthakibona18@gmail.com

Address: PO Box 339, Bloemfontein 9300, Republic of South Africa

Introduction

Higher education (HE) in Tanzania has expanded tremendously with an increase in the number of universities from one university in 1970 to 54 universities in 2018. Similarly, the number of students has increased by 108,607 in the past three years, with 286,577 graduates from 2009 to 2016 (Tanzania Commission for Universities 2018, 2019). These developments of the HE seem to aim predominantly at increasing economic competitiveness and opportunities. Sengiyumva (2010) proves that the government of Tanzania has expanded access to universities to train and produce graduates in the major professions for economic development. This argument aligns with Stuart's statement that 'policymakers across the world argue that increasing participation and students' diversity in HE is vital to a country's economic competitiveness' (2012). This way of thinking has significant implications for the core functions of teaching and learning at universities. At issue is the commercialization and commodification of teaching and learning, which in return, results in profit generation and training students solely for employment purposes (Walker and Fongwa 2017).

While this study acknowledges the importance of the economic benefits of HE, I argue for a more nuanced way of interpreting the value of HE that moves beyond economic imperatives to include the potential of HE in advancing the non-economic elements that are essential for individual and national advancement. This premise is based on the broader idea of HE contributing to human development (HD) (Boni and Walker 2016, 2013). Although these areas are foundational and attentive to individuals' actors and freedoms, they have not been compared to other settings such as Tanzania with a unique conflicting aspiration of building a hybrid socialist and capitalist economy (Tanzania Human Development Report 2014). Thus, there is a limited understanding of Tanzanian universities' potential to HD and the perspectives of students and graduates. Nevertheless, students and graduates are critical stakeholders of HE, and their numbers keep on increasing annually. This study, therefore, explores the main research questions;

- 1) What are Tanzanian students' and graduates' perspectives on how HE can promote HD, and
- 2) What are the implications of these perspectives for the public good role of HE?

This study uses HD and the capability approach (CA) to explore how HE can contribute to HD and the public good. This framework defines development by focusing on human freedom in contrast to a narrow view of national income or a rise in personal income (Sen 1999). Hence, the main objective in CA is to enlarge people's freedom so they can achieve valuable beings and doings (Ibid). For example, this study seeks to understand the factors influencing the ability of students to decide on whether to join a university or not. Thus, this research focuses on what students are learning to be, to know, to do, and to value, with the effect on their wellbeing and the broader society (Boni and Walker 2016).

Methodology

This study used a mixed-method multiple case study design within a pragmatic approach. The choice of this design is steered by an argument that a pragmatic perspective acknowledges that neither qualitative nor quantitative methods on their own are sufficient adequately to address the research question (Johnson et al 2007). Two universities (private and public) were chosen to provide an extensive understanding of the conceptualization of the value of HE. There are three phases of data collection. Qualitative data (phase 1) was collected through eight semi-structured interviews with university administrators (1 Director of Undergraduate Studies and 3 Dean of Faculties (Law, Education, and Computer science) from both universities). Quantitative data (phase 2) was collected through questionnaires to all final year students. Another set of qualitative data (phase 3) was obtained through 6 focus-group interviews, three groups in each university, and 30 semi-structured interviews with graduates who completed their undergraduate education within four years ago (15 from each university, five from each of the three faculties).

Findings and discussion

The preliminary results add to the existing literature through previous research in other countries (Walker and McLean 2013) that HE is mainly defined under economic benefits. Therefore, while participants specified that HE in Tanzania has the potential to contribute to the economy of the country, through employment in different professionals, they also value the freedom to flourish in other facets of life, which exhibits a very sophisticated analysis of the purpose of HE for HD. In this way, universities should broaden students' economic opportunities through entrepreneurship courses or transform their education curricula. The aim is to give students the right skills and competence for self-employment, self-reliance, and possible employment. HD and CA also give us a nuanced way of interpreting the broader purpose of HE through the expansion of capabilities such as affiliation, solidarity, and producing citizens who are active and committed to justice. Thus, it can be argued that universities have an essential role to advance values that are crucial for individual and societal wellbeing.

Conclusion

In brief, this study contributes to the debates, policies, and practices regarding the broader value of the university by encouraging universities in the direction of educating and producing holistic graduates for a flourishing economy and meaningful life for all. Through a critical analysis of theoretical and empirical data, the study contributes to knowledge on the social and multidimensional value of HE for individuals and a low-income country like Tanzania.

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