

Drivers of Policy Change in the Roles of Higher Education Institutions in a Contemporary society

Daniel Attakumah: danielattuhoyetey1@gmail.com

Department of Education Management, Policy and Curriculum Studies

School of Education, Kenyatta University Nairobi, Kenya

Abstract

Society is dynamic and is continually shaped by education. Higher education institutions perform this role of shaping society at the most advanced level. This paper reviews literature on what the variables that drive policy change in higher education institutions in a contemporary economy of countries are. The review shows that a shift in economic and social demands, increase in demand for higher education, employer expectations and other socio-economic dynamics were found to drive policy change in the multi faceted roles that higher education institutions perform. The review propose that higher education institutions should be proactive in developing academic and professional programs that meets the needs of a modern society in terms of technology, labour market and social dynamics inter alia in order that their curriculum maintain its relevance in a contemporary society.

Keywords: contemporary society, curriculum, drivers, higher education, policy change.

1. Introduction

As the world witnesses sudden changes, uncertain, difficult situations to interpret with complex societal problems and explosion of new scientific knowledge, education is what will make people accept their challenges and face them head on for solutions. It is therefore a necessary condition for the curriculum to keep evolving in practical ways (OECD, 2018). This is in the competitive labour market where learners are personally investing more money into higher education and the institutions are being imaginative in their relationships with learners, customers, thinkers, and partners. Students of the modern era expect creative high-quality teaching and services as well as careers results that measure up to their financial investments in their higher education degrees (James et al., 2017).

Moreover higher education is entering a new era of increasingly job-integrated learning that is shaped by increasing learner and hirer demand for new kinds of degrees that are aligned with the knowledge and skills that employers need (Gallagher, 2016; Maxwell, Joyce, Herz, & Edwards,2017). These dynamics provide a solid background to policy changes in higher education. However, Teague (2015) asserted that in the 21st century one of the most important tasks of higher education institutions is shaping the future of society. This means the dynamics of society shape education while education also shapes society. Studies indicate that a strong system of higher education is a significant pivot to a country's ability to compete in the global marketplace. Higher

education is also critical to a country's economic strength, adaptability and social well-being of people. Higher education institutions are colleges and universities which are complex organizations expected to perform critical and diverse roles such human capital formation, shaping of society and carrying out research among others in a country.

2. Drivers of Change in Higher Education policy

The long life of universities as key institutions in the evolution of civil society is linked to their adaptability to changing circumstances, whilst maintaining key elements of continuity such as the global connections which characterised their old foundations (Wittrock, 1993; McClelland, 1998). Dynamics in the contemporary society have brought major occurrences which are driving policy changes in the higher education environment globally. Some of these drivers in policy changes are:

A first driver of change is shifts in economic and social demands: Globally, labour market needs are fast changing. "Automation and digitisation of industry, agriculture and the knowledge economy are changing what is taught, how it is taught and when and where learners are likely to want to be taught". The implication is that a number of works are witnessing changes while others jobs will become outmoded which will imply higher education institutions will have to vary and raise the knowledge and skill it imparts to graduates for graduates to remain valuable and competitive to meet the human capital demands of the labour market (Naidoo, 2014).

A second driver of change is increase in demand for higher education: The number of students seeking to acquire higher education globally has increased drastically. The gross enrolment in tertiary education globally in the year 2009 was 170 million and this number is estimated to be growing at 5% per annum (British Council, 2012). This rise in demand require higher education institutions to consider the choices between expansion of their facilities, establishment of other campuses and the adoption of new technologies including the use of learning management systems such as Zoom, Google classroom/meet and Microsoft teams among others to create access for the increasing numbers of students globally.

A third driver of change is technology: Speedy advancements in information and communications technology (ICT) has brought variations in job description and competencies required for employment in the labour market. Manufacturing has evolved to become advanced manufacturing which relies more on the smart use of technology requiring graduates who are able to work with emerging technologies and emphasis innovation, solution design, smartness in responding to changing markets and opportunities, global and national supply chains inter alia. These changes have resulted in a changed world of industry and manufacturing. Similar basic changes in most fields and industry clusters have influenced what employers' needs and expectations in the world of work, most especially workers who hold a higher education certificate such university degrees. Higher education institutions are therefore modifying their curriculum in sync with the evolving needs in order to remain vital to the post-modern society (Teague, 2015).

A fourth driver of change is mass higher education: Contemporary times have witnessed a massive expansion of public investment both in research and development and higher education. This has had a great impact on the universities that have developed in the previous century and their engagement with society. The expansion of higher education typically took place outside the established universities which were regarded as too inflexible to meet the demands for new skills emerging in the workplace and from communities where they were not present. The higher education trajectory of most countries has seen increasingly varied sets of institutions. Numbers of the new institutions have been built with limited tradition of research and teaching. In some countries, geographical dispersal of higher education has formed part of a conscious state policy seeking to preserve the spatial distribution of the population and to achieve balanced regional development by addressing regional disparities. It has included also the objective to improve regional access to higher education. This has translated into policies to establish higher education institutions in various regions, examples include Norway, Sweden, Finland, Japan, Mexico. This objective has also led to the emergence of private higher education institutions in some countries (OECD, 2008).

A fifth driver of change is innovation policy: In the area of policy innovation government, higher education institutions and industry interact to facilitate economic and social development, as described in concepts such as the knowledge economy and knowledge society (Etzkowitz & Leydesdorff, 2000). In contemporary times industrial policy, science and technology policy are developed towards a common innovation policy which in some nations embodies a level of territorial dimension. Research focused institutions have been encircled with science parks and a lot of special purpose facilities developed to help in close cooperation with industry. Sometimes these serve as shield to the institution from external pressures instead of facilitating links, these also served as filters or as display windows towards the institutions (Etzkowitz & Leydesdorff, 2000).

3. Society Expectations

Societies in contemporary times expect higher education institutions especially universities to play a lead role and review their curriculum so that entrepreneurship and technology transfer activities and blended delivery models form part of their core curriculum of research and teaching. Higher education institutions are now expected to contribute significantly to economic development in four ways: Create new sectors and generate work out of research; attract and retain work worldwide in all regions through quality research networks and the production of skilled graduates; helping with the diversification of established businesses in their production of new products and services; transformation of existing industries through assistance with incremental products and services and the improvement in industrial and business processes (Goldstein & Luger, 1993; Lester, 2005). These dynamics in higher education sub-sector are coming with tussle between different conventions and rationales that guided the establishment of these higher education institutions. Collaboration with industry mainly takes place with individual academics while most research focused universities are concerned with scientific fame and the associated academic prestige (Goddard, 2007).

Further, unforeseen happenings such as the emergence COVID 19 which is a global pandemic and seen as a new normal situation has driven policy change in higher education institutions. This has compelled higher education institutions to adapt quickly the use of learning management systems such as Google classroom/meet, Zoom, Microsoft teams inter alia as a means of interacting with their learners to keep the institutions running and delivering their curriculum. Higher education institutions employ learning management systems alongside the traditional face to face interaction to be able to cope with a new global pandemic.

4. Employers Expectations

In performing their core role of teaching, higher education institutions take initiative and meticulously incorporate educational technologies into their curriculum and instruction in both practical and soft skills. However employers still insist graduates underperform on their job in a dynamic contemporary world of world of work. Harrison (2017) researched employers' expectations of higher education graduates and reported among other that:

Employers expect new graduate employees who come into their public or private organizations to be able to add value immediately. Thus they should be able to learn fast enough about the organisation and make valuable contributions when they assume duty. Employers expect new graduates to exhibit higher order thinking skills of analysis, synthesis and evaluation of job situations as well as develop adaptive understanding of the organizations.

Employers expect the new graduate employees to come with refined and lively communication proficiency required to work excellently in an organization's context with different clients. Employers expect new graduate employees capable of appreciating the thinking of their different clients and to be able to model communications that would give their organization competitive edge.

Employers expect the new graduate employees to employ technology easily and thoroughly in every area of job and to engage in knowledge/data/information-based economy so as to strategically give the organization a competitive edge.

Employers expect the new graduate employees who are project team players in different job situations, in their areas of expertise, degree of experience, gender and age, socio-economic and ethnic background, learning and work styles in global context and more. In these teams, employers expect the new graduate employee to adopt innovation, produce workable answers to limitations, and take advantage of available opportunities timely.

Employers expect new graduate employees to have professional values, and links required to be abreast with current trends in the field and to network the lead industry models and practices to the progress of the organization. Moreover, new graduate employees must also nurture excellence in their teams and be a part of human capital formation within the organization and impact the

purposeful change of the organization by regularly adding worth and competencies to the organization. The author observed that hitherto, employers expected these qualities from only their senior managers. However, contemporary organizations expect so much of higher education graduates due to insightful dynamics and competition in post-modern work environment: (Harrison, 2017).

5. Conclusion

The review concludes that higher education institutions are established traditionally for teaching, research and to advance technology among others. However there are policy changes in the higher education sub-sector driven by the contemporary society's expectations such as creating new sectors and generating work out of research as well as helping with the diversification of established organizations in their production of new products and services. Higher education institutions policy change is also driven by employers' expectations of new graduates such as to be able to add value to the organization immediately they are employed and unforeseen occurrences like the emergence of the COVID 19 pandemic globally.

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