
The Bologna Process

The Experience—and Challenges—for Africa

A paper presented at
The Third Conference on Knowledge and Politics
The University of Bergen
May 18-20, 2005

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Introduction

Institutions of knowledge creation and knowledge dissemination are undergoing major overhauls and reforms across the world over to place themselves and their countries in a competitive position. The Bologna process and the whole European Higher Education Area Initiative represent this emerging trend.

African countries face numerous challenges in building their knowledge institutions—universities. The challenges that countries face can be characterized as both internal and external in nature. Internally, economic hardship, civil strife, disease, and natural disaster have caused major problems in building meaningful social, economic, cultural and educational institutions.

The external forces are equally, if not more significantly, culpable in impacting the development of higher education in the continent. Structural adjustment programs, trade imbalance, debt burden, and unfavorable policies have punched a serious blow on the already weak state of affairs. African higher education, more specifically, had to negotiate its very existence due to a poor and ill-informed policy imposed externally.

That other countries across the world are building their institutions feverishly and forcefully, one hopes, will not only help African countries from doing the same but also to generate more external support towards this effort.

Higher education institutions have a special place in Africa as bastions of virtually all knowledge dissemination and creation, unlike elsewhere where numerous other knowledge brokers do exist.

Africa, a continent of 54 countries, has around 800 million people. More than 300 public and 1,000 private institutions enroll five million students that employ about 200,000 faculty. Higher education in Africa is a five-billion dollar enterprise. It should be noted that the reality of North Africa is different from the rest of Africa, what is generally known as Sub-Saharan Africa. While the focus of this paper is on Sub-Saharan Africa, the reflection extends to not only the whole of Africa but also the rest of the developing world.

Lessons from Bologna: What Could be Learned?

Bologna Declaration reflects a search for a common European answer to common European problems. The process originates from the recognition that in spite of their valuable differences, European higher education systems are facing common internal and external challenges related to the growth and diversification of higher education, the employability of graduates, the shortage of skills in key areas, the expansion of private and transnational education and so on. The Declaration recognizes the value of coordinated reforms, compatible systems and common action.

Before I indulge myself to grapple with what actually Bologna means to Africa and specially the developing world as whole, I would like to ponder on the possibility of Africa emulating—if not already doing so—Bologna itself—in a form of a manifesto or declaration or process.

Most of the problems the European Area grapples with are also everyday realities in Africa which necessitates the need to draw valuable and relevant lessons selectively. There is a great difference however in the scope and magnitude of the challenges. Africa faces more acute and serious challenges in virtually all aspects of higher education development: funding, enrollment, infrastructure, governance and management, brain drain, capacity building, equity and access, quality, graduate employability, and so on. The expansion of for-profit private higher education, now a fast growing educational phenomenon, is another major development that gripped the continent. Therefore, common regional responses to growing common challenges, as in Bologna, remain the obvious alternative for Africa.

The capacity of most African nations to address national challenges, let alone sub-regional, regional and global ones, is woefully limited. As the powerful forces of globalization sweep across the world apparently without much deterrence, the fate of such countries has increasingly fallen in serious jeopardy. For many countries their sheer size, fragile socio-economic state, and

poor educational infrastructure and intellectual network make it impossible to act by themselves and in isolation, in the face of growing complexity of the world around them. A united front and a common position in a form of organization that effectively serve the broader and common interest of the parties involved thus becomes a necessity. So the African Bologna to address the multitude of issues that confronts Africa is thus critical.

Africa can draw considerable lessons from Europe as its unification process unfolds with the transition from the EEC to EU. Similarly, the dissolution of the Organization of African Unity and the reconstitution of the African Union—the new organization with a much broader mandate and regional responsibility—which replaced it, affirms the general trend of more regional integration. Higher education as one of the prime elements of the unifying and the unification process could play a vital role in realizing this.

As much closer relationship among constituent countries are forged and as economic and social integration in the continent becomes an increasing reality, the need to create an “African Higher Education Alliance” in the likes of the “European Higher Education Area” becomes a necessity. Many national, regional, and international issues increasingly bind together the nation states of Africa and the need to establish such an alliance is therefore mandatory.

Certain global issues of major significance, such as GATS for example, confront every nation. These issues are thus better confronted by a body which is endowed with a broader mandate, a wider voice, a sound capacity, and a broader constituency. For example, the position taken by the Association of African Universities—a regional institution that represents numerous higher education institutions in Africa—in reaction to GATS (in the context of higher education) would be a case in point.

The reaction of the European Area of Higher Education community towards GATS—warding off the encroachment of trade policies in educational areas—is also echoed by many other institutions across the world. Such synergies could be effectively harnessed to forge close cooperation with institutions of common interest and similar mandate across the world. The tapping of the Bologna forces to bear on some of the common interests and challenges that cross regional territories, such as GATS, is thus a sound strategy for Africa. It is important that such a regional alliance will also be more proactive rather than reactive.

As the continent is forging a much closer economic and political alliance, it is conceivable that a much wider “horizontal” interaction across the region’s higher education would emerge. Such horizontal integration may involve a more

active faculty and student exchange, research collaboration, credential evaluation and recognition, accreditation, consortia formation and so on.

Among other regional developments, the Mandela Foundation is currently planning to establish four centers of excellence in science and technology at the four corners of the region. This five-billion-dollars-initiative is expected to boost not only research infrastructure and knowledge creating capacity but also horizontal cooperation in the subregions. The spirit of an African Bologna for an effective regional academic and research integration is imperative to foster this historic development.

Therefore, Africa has a lot to learn from this emerging European phenomenon on higher education development. This include taking a lead in formulating, guiding, and implementing own policies, accommodating and mobilizing all stakeholders including faculty and students, deep commitment of political leaders, deploying long-term strategic vision, and setting realistic timetable in executing such schemes.

Raising Hopes: Reviving Shattered Dreams

The Bologna Process, as a major thrust for mobilizing higher education and research for economic transformation, sets vital precedence to other regions such as Africa where higher education institutions have been subjected to justify

their very presence. It is common knowledge that higher education in Africa was starved to its near destruction owing largely to poor and ill-informed policy conceived, enforced and implemented by external forces. The World Bank economists had it that higher education was a poor investment and thus whatever resources that were available (or would be available), should be, they insisted, directed to other forms of the education sub-sectors. This policy had a devastating impact on higher education development in the continent for over two decades consequently undermining the possible competitive edge of these countries in the current global knowledge market.

What is painfully ironic however was that the very countries that were imposing the policy—that advocates cutting higher education funding to public institutions and introduces cost-sharing measures, and promotes private institutions—were themselves providing free higher education. It appears that in the world we live in “what is good for congress is not always good for the commoners”, i.e., opposing guidelines and paradigms operate in the unequal world we live in, and often without accountability and impunity for any adverse consequences.

The Bologna process claims to be conscious of the need to balance competitiveness with the objective of improving the social characteristics of the European Higher Education Area, aiming at strengthening social and gender

cohesion and reducing social inequalities, preserve Europe's cultural richness and linguistic diversity, based on its heritage of diversified traditions, both at national and at European level. At a time when globalization and its values are running amok, such recognitions from one major global player, as powerful as Europe, is especially important to enhance the suppressed voices of other marginalized forces crying for similar cause. This is particularly important for countries in the developing world that have to grapple with a plethora of major social cohesion issues everyday.

Africa is a vast continent of abundant cultures, values, and languages whose future appears to be uncertain as the forces of globalization are sweeping and market forces are unduly glamorized. There are over a thousand languages spoken in the continent. Nigeria, the most populous country in the continent, alone counts more than 350 languages.

The position of the European Area with regard to social promotion and its relevance to Africa create a positive synergy in the preservation and promotion of the rich diversity of cultures and also promote social cohesion far and beyond the sub-continent. An assumption is embedded here that the values countries hold dear and vigorously advocate for their regions would not dissipate as they cross the borders into the international waters. It would be naïve to expect these "threatened" European countries to live up to the universal form of social

cohesion, as they overhaul their institutions and subject them to cooperate, primarily to enhance aggressive competitiveness, thwart perceived and real challenges of the globalized economy, and maintain dominance in the international market place and political space.

It is however important, logical and fair for the European Area to come to the rescue of other vulnerable areas that are confronted with similar, but yet more complex challenges as it is gearing up to jointly face the realities of the globalizing world. Universities everywhere are supposed to be institutions that should fight for democracy, fairness, equity, poverty elimination, and global peace, security and justice. As the mission and mandate of institutions in the “global village” are expanding, regions, countries and their institutions should play these positive global roles more effectively, forcefully, and directly.

The educational systems in Africa are heavily shaped by former colonial rulers most of them based in Europe. And these constitute the larger part of Europe’s Higher Education Area. Though Africa became independent a while ago, the influence of these countries still persists owing largely due to a variety of social, political, economic, educational, and "cultural" bonds. As the European countries are looking inside toward their regions for academic cooperation, one might worry that this may affect existing research and development cooperation schemes with Africa. It is a fact of life that resources are not limitless and support

to the continent have been diminishing as East Europe opened up and interest and resources shifted there. For a continent that depends heavily on external support this may have serious consequences.

Critics of donor policies as it is now practiced may not however feel the same way. They hold that external aid would never let a country stand on its feet and assert that external donation is a form of neo-colonialism. If the developed world wanted to actually pull Africa out of its recurrent and massive poverty, they argue, these rich countries could have launched a major global initiative in the likes of the Marshall Plan that rebuilt Europe from the ashes of the Second World War.

A New Cooperation Paradigm: Fostering Competition to Thwart Competition

The Bologna process, as ambitious as it sounds, intends to create the most competitive higher education and research area in the world by 2010. What does actually “creating the most competitive higher education area” mean? In plain terms, it means overtaking other geographical areas that are either currently in the lead, notably the United States—and/or also possibly new emerging ones such as those in Asia.

The kind of competition that is being nurtured—at least within the region, and also possibly beyond its boundaries—one hopes, may not emulate the kind

we are increasingly being accustomed to: *competition as a zero-sum game*. In a world that is increasingly interconnected—either by design or by nature—the possible protagonists—competitors—must learn how to effect constructive competition for the sake of their constituencies and the larger global communities. It is to the best interest of the rich industrialized countries to have a stable, secure and prosperous world. The era of living in peace and prosperity in an island of wealth surrounded by a massive ocean of poverty, disease, destitution and insecurity is no more. We have reached a time where substantiating this point is no difficult matter.

Global warming and other major climatic changes, pollution, disease, civil conflict, natural disaster, and cyber- and conventional terrorism and crime do not bow to the regimes of international human-demarcated boundaries thus necessitating, more than ever before, a much forceful cross-border cooperation and joint initiatives between developing and developed countries in the creation and dissemination of knowledge for building a just, equitable and peaceful society. Bologna should aspire to play an important role in realizing this; after all competition need not be a zero-sum game.

Massive resources, visionary leadership, collective input, and long-term commitment may help achieve the ambitious goal of creating the most competitive higher education area as envisaged in the Bologna and subsequent

manifestos. But other concomitant serendipitous global developments also help fulfill such ambitious goals. The US, Europe's most "competitive ally", for example, is imposing several measures that in effect constrain easy mobility of students, academics, and scholars since the incident of September 11. Some figures show that enrollments of international students in many US institutions are declining owing to very rigorous and stringent visa procedures imposed following September 11. Actually it is not that student numbers are declining but they are going to more favorable destinations—which are capitalizing on the effect of the US policy toward visa, travel and mobility of foreign nationals. Achieving greater competitiveness does of course entail working on the shortcomings of ones competitors.

One may wonder the relevance of this major digression of my paper. Though this appears to be a digression, it is not. In the knowledge economy, intellectual mobility is one major aspect of a strategic plan to ensure competitiveness. Concerned about loosing their economic edge and competitiveness, much of the developed world has embarked on selective favorable immigration policies to attract talent and highly skilled personnel from other countries.

Mobilization of talent is an emerging and growing global phenomenon of significant proportions and affects the socio-economic and socio-cultural

progress of societies and nations across the world. As noted above, in some countries, mobilization of talent has been fostered by a deliberate policy; but in so many others, specially the developing countries, the phenomenon takes place with less or even no effective regulatory mechanisms and has been condemned for siphoning off the *crème de la crème* of the human capital of nations.

The mobility of high-level expertise is widely known as brain drain; some euphemistic terms, such as brain circulation, brain gain, and brain trust have also emerged. This phenomenon is one of the most critical problems facing higher education institutions in the continent in particular and nation building in general. An estimated 23,000 high-level expertise leave Africa every year. In many African countries, more medical doctors practice abroad than at home. In the United States, three in four African immigrants hold some form of postsecondary education. In a certain region in Canada, South Africans make up 20 percent of the migrant population of medical doctors.

As Europe, Africa's long standing associate and closer "partner" in social, economic and educational development, is opening itself and actively recruiting more expertise to the area, Africa would face an even more serious danger of loosing its highly talented and seasoned professionals. The staggering problem in the healthcare is especially illustrative as an increasing number of African medical doctors work in countries which afford better pay, living standard and

work environment. While Bologna is intended to effectively compete with comparable formidable adversaries, it should be conscious of this stark reality, if unchecked would further undermine whatever competitive advantages that these poor countries may have left with.

In a world where market forces are rampant and existing policies that favor social cohesion are superseded by other more aggressive ones, it requires considerable persuasion and persistent voice to curtail their impact. The major intellectual elements that can counter these forces in African countries and other developing countries reside in universities. Even under heavy pressure, universities in these countries continue to play a variety of positive roles—though limited in scope.

It requires a genuine and serious concern and a great deal of fairness towards the developing world in a global scale not known hitherto to foster the forces of social cohesion and address chronic poverty, major health crisis, massive illiteracy, and rampant destitution. The time has come for such initiatives to take effect and the major avenue to achieve this is through enhancing capacity building and revitalizing major institutions.

The global challenges are such that institutions are operating—willingly or forcefully—to operate both in a local and international framework—consequently pushing them far and beyond their campus doorsteps. It is thus

important for Bologna not simply to play the global games as already set out but also shape them to be more inclusive, fair and equitable.

While shaping the rules of the games, Bologna should be conscious of promoting the knowledge institutions in Africa and other developing countries through genuine collaboration and mutual benefit. Thus, in order to shape fair rules, Bologna should take a leadership position in the global knowledge market place.

Resisting the Hype

“We live in a knowledge economy” is now a cliché which seems to have masked the underlying major importance of natural resources for development which Africa is endowed with abundantly. Yes we do live in a knowledge economy. And yes it is an information era.

But the knowledge economy cannot thrive without an oil (a major natural resource of critical importance), or metal ores vital for manufacturing PCs, PDAs, cellphones, iPods, and other electronic gadgets that drive the world of informatics, microelectronics, and robotics or biological diversity to discern, unlock and capture the secrets of nature for medicinal purposes and drive the world of biotechnology.

Africa has tremendous potential to turn these so called “old-economy tools” into high-tech instruments, only if it can build its research and development capacity: Research and development to be able to turn these natural resources to software, computers, PDAs, cellphones, and so on. The fact however remains that, for research and development, Africa depends very heavily on Western countries which are responsible for fueling the knowledge economy, as well as hold that the rest do matter less.

In the very world we live in, where competition is forcefully encouraged, market policies are glamorized, and cooperation is shunted, one may ponder, why any donor country build such capacity in a potential recipient country which would effectively compete and eventually threatens the very existence of an institution or organization or company in a donor country? I have yet to grapple with this stark issue. The economic success stories and effective competitiveness of Chinese and other East Asian countries with the rest of the developed world may dampen emerging enthusiasm—optimism and hope—to strengthen major research and development schemes in poor developing countries.

Conclusion

Africa has a lot to learn from Bologna and other subsequent manifestos to support higher education and research development in Europe. The challenges that face both areas are similar in nature—though tremendously different in magnitude and scope—and thus Africa is advised to draw a lesson from the experience and start pondering in similar schemes adapted to the realities on the continent. The Bologna process is an important precedence for Africa to emulate. Of course, emulating should be subject to a great deal of selectivity so that relevant issues are carefully picked and adapted to the African reality.

On the other hand, the ramifications of Bologna may have some consequences for the continent whose effect may have already been reverberated in some corners. It is thus prudent for Bologna community to work jointly with other most vulnerable and fragile knowledge areas, such as Africa, to protect them from direct and indirect impact of the process.

It is hoped that the Bologna community countries would commit themselves not only in exerting more energy and favorable policies but also more financial and technical resources to revitalize the distressed African institutions so as to bridge expanding knowledge gaps in the world. It could be argued that if major global institutions and their constituent countries insisted African institutions shift resources—away from higher education based on a faulty

policy earlier, in effect starving them—they are, in all fairness, under heavy moral obligation to right the wrong and its consequences. And the right is to support higher education and research development in a more sustained manner with African countries and their institutions on the driver's seat.

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