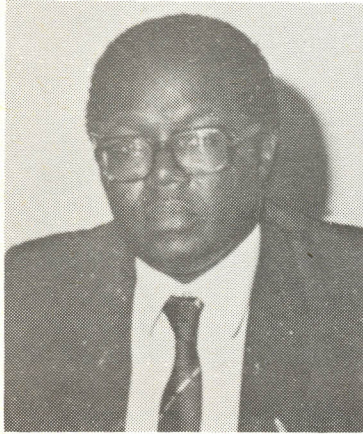


FACING THE GREAT CHALLENGE

The spectre of unemployed graduates, inadequate teaching staff and lack of relevant books compounded by unprecedented thirst for higher education among Kenyans remain the key issues of University Education in the 1990s, says Prof. Mbithi in a speech to fellow vice chancellors during a recent National Universities Planning Workshop.



Facing the future with confidence:
the Vice-Chancellor

On behalf of myself and the University of Nairobi, I would like to thank the organisers of this Planning Workshop for inviting me to talk to you on "Challenges of University Education in Kenya".

The issue of University education is very important to us as is underscored by frequent statements by His Excellency the President, who is also Chancellor of the Public Universities. In the last four years, the number of public Universities has increased from one to four. At the same time, students population has risen from 6,000 to 24,000. This dramatic increase has generated tremendously amount of pressure on University administration. It is therefore most appropriate that Egerton University has organised this Workshop to deal specifically with planning for future development.

In most parts of the world, the biggest problems (which I prefer to see as a challenge) facing University is related to pressure for admission and available places. Although some quarters tend to restrict this problem to third world countries, it is now manifestly clear that developed countries are faced with same problems, of either very high or very low pressure.

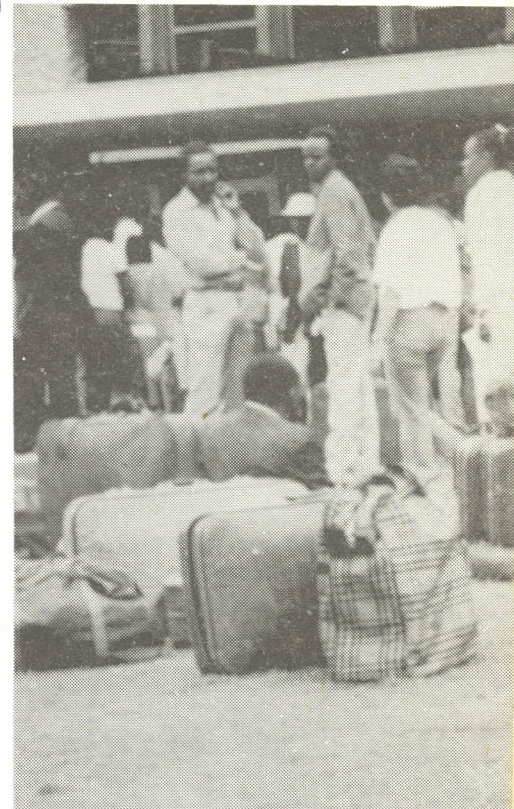
In the Federal Republic of Germany, for instance, there is tremendous competition for available University places which has led to congestion in classrooms. But whereas competition for available University places in Kenya is primarily a direct consequence of population growth, the pressure German Universities face is related to change of values and attitudes towards education in general and University education in particular. The changing pressure in Britain, especially the low numbers of foreign students is related to increase in fees.

The increase in students numbers in Kenya present public universities with the problem of maintaining acceptable academic standards i.e. training of Doctors, Agriculturists, Engineers, Accountants, Administrators, etc. who are competent. The issue of maintaining academic standards revolves around variables such as teacher-student ratios, library books and space per student, total contact hours per student, total laboratory, practical tutorial hours and field experience etc.

Employment

Another serious problem facing University Education is the capacity of the economy to absorb all the graduates. In spite of our continued effort to produce graduate in all fields, there are strong indications that there are still areas in which there are not enough skilled manpower. In the field of agriculture for instance, ISNA Report indicated that there is a serious shortage of research scientists and that we need to readjust our strategy towards producing masters agricultural graduates. Other areas such as general bachelors degree have apparent surpluses.

I would like to suggest that the general approach out of this dilemma is to strategically produce more graduates that are needed by the economy in each sector until such a time that we can clearly discern the direction of economic growth. It is naive to limit student numbers on a

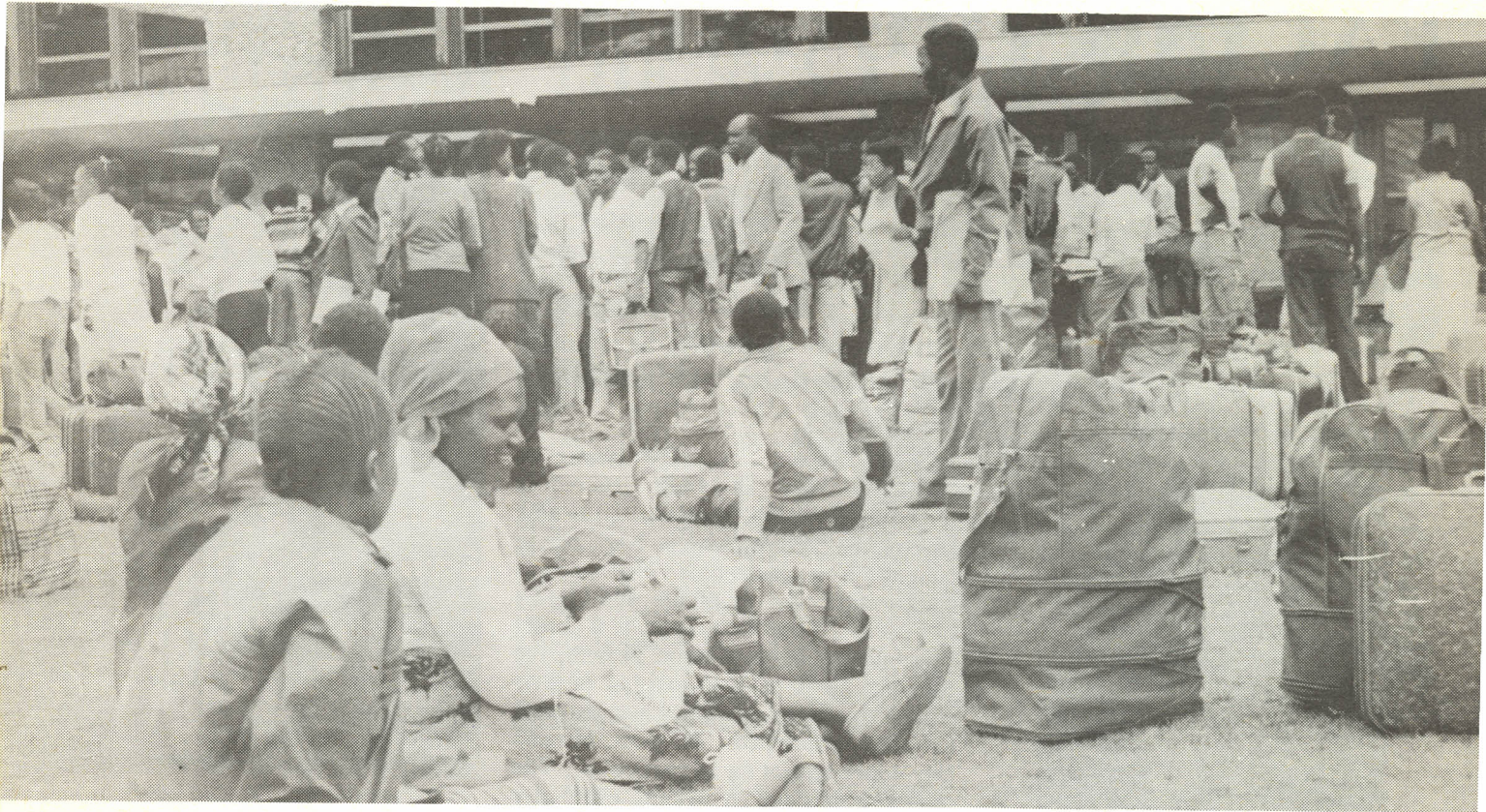


Insatiable thirst for University

short run absorption model if the model is not a true reflection of trends in the economy. However the surplus itself must be carefully managed.

The area of staff training and staff development is the other source of challenges facing universities. Due to obvious historical reasons, most of our specialist are trained in overseas countries. This training is to some extent, irrelevant and on the whole very expensive. To illustrate how important this is, I will give an example. Last year a student returned from Europe with a Ph.D. in some field in Biochemistry. We employed him as a Lecturer and encouraged him to initiate his own research programme. However, we soon found out that he could not start any research programme as his training had relied on extremely sophisticated equipment which we could not afford to maintain. His was a case of "Trained incapacity" to adapt, to relate, to be productive. He is now in America, unwinding, unlearning!

Whereas it is tempting to prescribe that training, especially for first and second degrees be done locally, such an approach is fraught with problems of internal capacities of various departments because of staff maturity and young departments. This leads to a vicious cycle of further staffing incapacity. The approach may be to insist on local 1st



Education: Freshers registering for admission at the University of Nairobi's main campus

degree and to an increasing extent local 2nd degrees with options for split programmes. The Ph.D should increasingly be a split Ph.D.

Teaching

With increased number of students both undergraduate and postgraduate, access to books and other information materials to support learning teaching and research functions of the universities is a vital and worrisome issue. The task of building strong academic programmes, especially undergraduate programmes at the Universities will depend on strong self-reliance in preparing relevant texts which are purposeful, inexpensive and accessible.

Internationally, Universities in third world countries especially in South East Asia and Latin America, have moved from dependency on publishing and book imports based in the west. Owing to realities of shortage of foreign exchange, high cost of imported books the problem of irrelevancy of such books to specific courses; most Universities in these regions are attempting to produce all books for courses taught themselves. Indeed, in Universities where such a strategy has been followed, it has been possible to produce all required teaching materials cheaply. The Public Universities are currently establishing printing units which would produce quality but affordable reading materials.

We would, however, welcome assistance in this area to complement our efforts.

Mr. Chairman, the provision of equipment is very expensive and perplexing in any university particularly in a developing country. Most of the required equipment such as microscopes, electronic counter-balances, other laboratory equipment, surgical, engineering and office equipment need care and replacement.

This problem is compounded further by the ever changing technology particularly in the computer industry. Public universities are therefore finding themselves in difficulties in providing and servicing equipment to support teaching and research programmes. An approach where support in training maintenance technicians, and setting up maintenance workshops is provided, would be useful.

Hybrid

The social-political environment is another challenge that our universities are facing. As you are undoubtedly aware public opinion indicates that university education is given very high priority in our country. Joining the University is nowadays prime consideration for every family. Universities are therefore facing a lot of pressure from parents. That society is always ready to increase spending at the university level is indicative of the high premium our people attach to University Education. Universities therefore have no

choice but to live up to peoples expectations.

I am certain that you all appreciate that our University system is increasingly becoming a hybrid of both European and American systems where basically we tend to borrow a lot from the British system, the increasing number of American trained local scholars joining us has meant that our Universities are benefitting from both worlds. For instance, we have found the external examination system, which is essentially a British tradition and the American accreditation system extremely useful. On our part, we have introduced the accreditation system through the Commission for Higher Education and through the Vice-Chancellor's Committee which are concerned with such issues as staff terms of service, recruitment and training and academic standards. At the regional level, we are members of the Inter-university Council, (IUC), through which we organise joint subject meetings and debate the - state - of - the art of various academic fields.

Education

The concept of the 8:4:4 system of education emanated from Mackay Report of the Presidential Working party on the second public university in Kenya.

The Report emphasized practical education with special emphasis on Agriculture and Technology. In

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particular, it laid special emphasis on the importance of socio-cultural studies as the basis for appropriate use of science and technology for social and economic development as well as political integration. The Report further insisted on the provision of what it called "foundation teaching: for all undergraduates in Cultural and Development Studies in order to enhance "interaction between Arts and Science students" for their mutual benefits. Accordingly, future leaders of this country should understand its development strategies irrespective of their areas of specialization.

The third cycle of the 8:4:4 system of education, therefore while developing and transmitting knowledge and skill through research and training at undergraduate and postgraduate level, should inter alia:

Produce mature conscientious graduate with ability and desire to contribute to the development of the country.

Provide for national service and development which reflect the National Cultural Heritage;

Foster national consciousness and unity.

In order to meet the goals outlined above, it is desirable to evolve well through-out courses dealing with issues of development, culture social,

ethics, quantitative (statistical) methods, and communication skills which must be followed and passed by every 8:4:4 student during the course of his studies before an award of a Bachelor's degree can be effected. Indeed at its meeting on 4th September, 1987, Senate resolved to set up a board-based Committee to consider the content, contract hours, examination procedure and syllabi for these common courses.

The contents of the common courses are envisaged to be a broad as possible so as to expose the 8:4:4 students to the various development issues in the national life of their country, and to equip them with necessary tools to handle such issues. This is indeed the philosophy of the 8:4:4 education programme which strives to equip the youth with an education that will help them respond positively to the challenges of national development and instil in them a sense of national identify, unity, mutual respect, patriotism and responsibility. The multidisciplinary courses, which should be academically sound and intellectually stimulating, are intended to help the students in the pursuit of their specialised studies with a much broader base of understanding of the general problems facing their country and the solutions being advocated in the hope that on their graduation, they can appreciate their own roles and contribution in nation building efforts.

A good deal of effort has been made to evolve the common courses under several headings:

- (a) Development Studies - covering Economics, Ethics, and Law
Environmental Studies,
Science and Technology, political
science and government
socio-cultural studies, trade and diplomacy
language and literature,
philosophy and history of science.
- (b) Communication Skills
- (c) Computer Science
- (d) Research Methodology

For the first time in the history of University Education in Kenya, Universities will therefore be teaching courses which lay more emphasis on the practical aspects. This shift in emphasis calls for new approaches in the design of syllabuses and local data to provoke and sustain students' interest.

These challenges I have enumerated are not unique to Kenyan University System. Our task is therefore to show increased sensitivity to make our universities strong while at the same time producing skilled manpower for our economy. The day to day problems of any Vice-Chancellor in any University in the world are similar - admissions, examinations, staffing, ethics, financing etc. I have not therefore outlined anything unique to Kenya.

Thank you