



SPOTLIGHT ON KNOWLEDGE

By Joseph Maina Mungai

The university: An 'ivory tower' of great value



THE University of Nairobi on graduation day.

THE University has often been described as an ivory tower by many of its critics to imply that the institution is completely detached from the realities of life in society and environment around it. The figurative expression ivory tower does in fact mean a place where one retreats from the rest of the world and other people.

In the case of the university, the retreating means the highly organised practice of reclusive and scholarly concentration on the processes of development of knowledge by the university students and staff.

Historically this process derives from the reclusive practice of withdrawal, especially by religious persons, for meditation. Indeed, many aspects of university education have their origins in ancient churches and other religious institutions.

Ivory is the hard substance comprising the tusks of elephant, hippopotamus, and warthog. Its value is based on its hardness and hence durability that it imparts to those products made out of it.

In the case of the university, ivory represents the highly valuable knowledge developed there. When this knowledge is appropriately used to solve problems of individuals, families and society, it imparts into their lives an enhanced level of adaptability to the changes and chances of life.

The ivory of the elephant tusks is made of the same hard substance as found on bone and teeth. In fact the tusks of the elephant are teeth of the upper jaw, which have become prolonged into weapons that the animal uses for protection.

Because of their large size and the fact that they are made of a very hard bony substance, the

elephant tusks have become an important medium for some of man's valuable commercial and artistic work. The tusks are hard enough to ensure durability of the sculptural and industrial products made from them, but not so hard as to be impossible to cut.

Other types of ivory are found on warthog, hippopotamus and a few other animals. The ivory is also found on these animals in the form of tusks which are smaller than those of the elephant. These tusks are also teeth which have been modified for protection and breaking objects. These teeth can also be worked on by sculptors and industry to produce delicate artistic work and other durable products which are not easily damaged. The best ivory is, however, obtained from elephant tusks, especially the African elephant. The tusks of a large African elephant may measure over three metres in length and weigh over 100 kilos.

The tusk is solid for approximately half of its length. The part close to where it is attached to the skin is thin and not very useful commercially.

Ivory is valued according to

size and quality of the tusks. Most of the ivory found in various auction markets in the world comes from Siberia, India and Africa with the largest amounts coming from some of the African countries. All in all, several million pounds may be sold in each year in auction markets which are found in various parts of the world.

Ornaments

Ivory is used in making expensive cabinet work and ornaments such as knife handles and bangles. In Eastern countries, ivory is used by carvers and jewellers for making artistic ornaments. Ivory is particularly valuable for making billiard balls. Those that are made of high quality ivory bounce very well because of the hardness of the material. Billiard balls are made from the most solid and hardest part of the elephant tusks. Ivory is the only material which will impart the hard and velvety qualities of the billiard balls.

Ivory is also used in making high quality piano keys. But although bone and other substances may be used as

substitutes, in making all these products, they are never as satisfactory as ivory.

A tower is a high building standing distinctly on its own or as part of another building. In the case of the university, the tower is the distinctly high and complex level of organisation at which knowledge is developed, stored and communicated as an integral part of national development.

While the expression ivory tower has thus been used by university critics in a derogatory manner, it nevertheless is the most sincere reflection of the truthful picture that the public hold of the high value of the university as a national asset.

Furthermore it reflects public recognition that the university is a place where adults can withdraw to concentrate on desirable development of their knowledge.

The concept of the university as an ivory tower therefore needs to be seen seriously from the point of view of its positive value of an institution of high social value.

But this can only be meaningfully realised through a carefully worked out process of

planning, programming and budgetting of its basic functions of development, storage and dissemination of knowledge. Furthermore, such a planning, programming and budgetting exercise will not realise its full meaning unless there is full participation and understanding by the students and staff of the institution.

Their scholarly findings then need to be placed in the perspective of the social and economic realities of the country in particular and the world in general. In this regard, it is vital for the university community and the public to understand that the university has been affected by the economic constraints of the country and the world in two main ways.

Firstly, although education in the country continues to spend about 30 per cent of the national recurrent budget, the high annual rate at which education expenditure used to rise 11 per cent had to be reduced three years ago to about the rate at which the economy as a whole would be expected to grow 6-7 per cent.

In this regard, the university has an approved budgeted of KSh8.085 million for the year 1979/1980. Due to the economic realities of the country

this budget is 14.5 per cent below what the university would have liked to have. This is why the university has had to undertake a budget reduction by 14.5 per cent.

According to the budgetary provisions printed in the 1979/1983 Development Plan the university budget will rise at an annual rate of about 5 per cent during the Plan Period.

Secondly, the university is affected by the rising costs of equipment, food, housing, drugs and other essential commodities. In this regard, the university must look for ways and means of reducing some of the costs such as those of housing, medical care, food, maintenance of vehicles and equipment, tailoring, and so on in order to ensure that the available funds are maximally utilised for the essential functions of development, storage and dissemination of knowledge.

All this implies the need for increased collaborative work between the university community, the Government and the public. Only in this way will the scholarly productions of the university community be continually integrated into the day-to-day activities that constitute national, cultural, environmental and other aspects of development.