

On Spot with Complexities of Development Facilitation: Navigating the Power Dynamics as a University



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A snapshot

In contemporary Africa, gone are the days when universities were largely seen as ivory towers driving the elitists' agenda. Time has come for African higher education institutions to re-orient to reflect the practical realities of African societal development and transformation needs. This is particularly important because of the increasing demand

for African universities to do more to facilitate co-creation and to mediate meaningful delivery of development-driven solutions enabling societal prosperity in the continent.

This article brings to the fore the complex power wedges that entangle African Universities in navigating processes and actions that are deemed to make them true actors/facilitators of societal development change. The article is anchored on lessons and experiences that Gulu University garnered over the eight (2016- 2024) years of implementation of the pilot phase of the Transforming African Agricultural Universities to Meaningfully Contribute to Africa's Growth and Development (TAGDev 1.0) project. The power wedges can be categorized into five main themes: (i) leadership orientation and commitment; (ii) policy environment and implementation dynamics; (iii) staff mind-set and reward focus; (iv) student mind-set and academic credit focus; and (iv) stakeholder perception and commitment. Navigating these power wedges in a pragmatic way is essential for re-orienting a university to take actions that enable it to champion and facilitate societal development change.

The need for institutional re-orientation

Time has come for African higher education institutions to re-orient to reflect the practical realities of African societal development and transformation needs. Since the post-colonial era, the vast majority of African universities established during the colonial times continued largely with the ivory-tower educational orientation left behind by the colonial masters. Even institutions that were established in the post-colonial era largely adapted the same educational orientation. Fundamentally, higher education is a critical tool that should link knowledge creation/acquisition with societal development/ transformation. In the context of African societal transformation, the outcome of African higher education endeavors has largely been on human resource development and research outputs delivered largely as part of student credit accumulation. However, translation of educational outputs (human capital and research results) to facilitate meaningful societal socio-economic transformation has largely remained abysmal. Thus, over the years, African Universities have been excoriated for not doing enough to contribute to driving societal development change.

Inadequate funding has always been adduced as a major factor that holds back African higher education institutions from contributing effectively to the much-desired societal transformation needs. There is no doubt that funding is essential. This article deviates from the underfunding narrative and argue that the traditional "ivory-tower" orientation that most African universities embraced is a key factor that can account for the "theoretical" outlook of the higher education institutions in the continent. The key word here is "orientation" because it shapes the direction that the institution takes and guides investment. The underperformance of African higher education institutions in the context of the wider-societal development is more glaring with agricultural universities. Substantial amount of research conducted in African agricultural universities have largely remained on the shelves or channeled to scientific journals but limitedly translated to inform community agricultural transformation. The dilemma of African farmers in the face of agricultural universities is a reality because in Africa, and sub-Saharan region in particular, agriculture is the main livelihood base of up to 70 % households who have

remained in an unproductive non-progressive subsistence agriculture since pre-colonial era. The ripple effect is reflected in the high state of poverty, food insecurity and lack of economically-rewarding employment opportunities for young people who are largely out-of-school. This situation calls for a bold move to re-orient African universities, and agricultural institutions in particular to become champions and drivers/facilitators of community transformation. The re-orientation, if deliberately and consistently pursued, is likely to make African universities more responsive to societal transformation needs and in the long-run create a “magnetic field” attracting resources that would enable the institutions to immerse fully within the sphere of development!

Testing the theory

In an attempt to test the operational feasibility of a community-development orientation argued out in the preceding section, Gulu University and Egerton University (acting as early adopter institutions), in partnership with the Mastercard foundation and Regional Universities Forum for Capacity Building in Agriculture (RUFORUM) co-created and piloted the Transforming African Agricultural Universities to Meaningfully Contribute to Africa’s Growth and Development (TAGDev 1.0) initiative between 2016 and 2024. TAGDev 1.0 was designed to build lessons that could be used at a wider scale to champion the transformation of African agricultural universities to enable institutions and their graduates to drive development in the continent effectively. The transformation mechanism envisaged was anchored on two pathways: (i) transforming entrepreneurship training from a theoretical pedagogy to an experiential entrepreneurial education approach to enable graduates to create jobs to respond to the challenge of youth unemployment in the continent, and (ii) institutionalizing community engagement to make university education processes and outputs relevant to societal agricultural development needs.

Delivering those two transformation elements encountered five silent power flash points that had to be cautiously navigated over time: (i) leadership orientation and commitment; (ii) policy environment and implementation dynamics; (iii) staff mind-set and reward focus; (iv) student mind-set and academic credit focus; and (iv) stakeholder perception

and commitment. By and large, championing development change at institutional level requires pragmatic and progressive leadership at the top. Usually, leaders love matters that make them “shine in the eyes” of the public and policy makers. This is an essential ingredient for leadership buy-in and is a “sweet carrot stick” that make leaders appreciate the merits of community development change orientation. By design, Gulu university is a community-oriented institution. It is privileged in having the top leader being a community-engaged scholar who took lead in championing university-wide institutionalization of community engagement at a policy level. This created a harmonized environment for domestication of the engagement policy to fit peculiar needs of various faculties.

Delivery of institutional functions are strongly dictated by policies and systems. Curricula are an important set of policies that dictate what should be and how it should be imparted onto learners. Therefore, transforming entrepreneurship education from a theoretical pedagogy to an experiential format, and integration of community engagement in student learning required revision of curricula to cater for practical business experimentation, community interaction, assessment and credit accumulation. The revisions were instrumental in changing student mind-set which is always “bounded” largely by credit accumulation. From our experience, it is important to point out that university students are driven by credit accumulation! Thus, whatever does not earn them credit, however good it maybe, they will resist or never take it seriously! This is an important dilemma associated with delivering a wholistic education to learners of the 21st century! Following the implementation of TAGDev 1.0, post-graduation follow-up of the practical business experimentation revealed that 56 businesses were established providing 186 direct employment opportunities for young people. This outcome illustrates that when entrepreneurship education is conducted in experiential manner (*we prefer to call it training for entrepreneurship*) rather than teaching theoretically (*we prefer to call it teaching about entrepreneurship*) has the potential to mold students to become job creators!

The ivory-tower model of education seems to have created immense impact on the mind-set of academics. An initial dialogue session with academic staff on the need to embrace practical entrepreneurial education and community engagement as a development-oriented strategy for delivering agricultural education and research registered a high-level of resistance. Two key issues constituted the epicenter of contention. First, was on how the two agricultural education approaches align with the “publish or perish” syndrome typical of higher education institutions. Secondly, how the staff would be rewarded for participating in community engagement and delivering practical entrepreneurship education, and yet the two elements go beyond the classical business of an academic staff. The university responded positively by including the two issues in the academic staff promotion policy. In the context of research feeding community development, Gulu university experimented community action research (CARP) using pig and rice value chains. The results of the rice CARP were packaged and informed development of three rice farmer cooperatives (30 members per cooperative) and each member earning an annual average income of 6000 USD. The results of the pig CARP were packaged into community-adaptable artificial insemination and Indigenous Microorganism technologies that are helping farmers deal with biosecurity and sanitation issues in pig production. Above all, staff involved in the two CARPs were able to publish the papers from the research and earned promotion to various academic levels. This illustrates elegantly how integrating community engagement in research enables both academic growth and societal development.

Achieving meaningful development outcome of higher education at a community level requires community appreciation and commitment to engage with the university in delivering development change. In the mid-2000 when Gulu university launched agricultural training, the community had very limited appreciation in working with and co-learning with university students. They viewed working with the students as time-consuming and a burden. Nonetheless, there were a few households that embraced the initiative and they acted as champion households within the community. After some few seasons of consistent engagement, the wider community members observed measurable

positive changes in agricultural practices of the champion households, and this created a pull factor for the community-wide appreciation and acceptance of the student-farmer community engagement facilitated by academic staff. There are other key players involved in delivering community development. Key among them are the local governments, the private sector (e.g., seed companies, financial institutions), TVET institutions and non-Governmental organizations. The university needs to cooperate and build synergies with them (through signing memoranda of understanding) and avoid competition. However, developing a functional relationship with non-university stakeholders takes time, requires intentionality and sustained commitment.

Implications for the future

Test of theory articulated above revealed two major results that have implications for institutional re-programming:

- 1. Practical (experiential) entrepreneurial education has potential for molding students to deal with unemployment challenges of young people.** This outcome sounds nice, but has two ramifications. First, provision of funds for business experimentation. Two proposals would suffice. It can be treated as a practical (laboratory) cost coming from student fees or can be made as an element of the functional fees to cater for continuity, and enables all students to gain experience in business experimentation. Arising from our experience, business experimentation is conducted within the university premises and students make use of university facilities. Two issues of concern arise. First, university management look at students' use of university facilities as a cost driver and yet students have paid fees to receive education! Secondly, in most cases, during business experimentation, students make profits for themselves, and the university might see that as unfair benefit on the part of the students, and yet that is business experimentation for which students need to experience profit or loss realization typical of the real world. An entrepreneurship education policy is necessary to provide a comprehensive framework for dealing with these issues. However, the policy needs to provide more incentive and an enabling environment for student

entrepreneurial potential to flourish. In addition, the policy should provide for admittance of the out-of-school young people and those from TVET institutions so that the full spectrum of young people is catered for.

- 2. Integrating community engagement in student training and delivery of research enables both academic growth and societal development.** This outcome is easily achievable with top leadership support, curricula and staff reward policies. At the student-level, financial implications arise. The same solutions as suggested for the entrepreneurship education suffice.