

Higher education: challenges for developing countries

Steve Maharey

The challenge developing nations face in the twenty-first century is to ensure access to quality higher education for their citizens. This will not be easily achieved. Most developed nations have been building their higher education systems for many decades and, in some cases, centuries. Now developing nations must do the same – but in a much shorter period of time.

Adapting to the knowledge age

Unlike the more developed nations, developing nations are faced with the imperative to provide mass education to all their citizens in the immediate future because the twenty-first century is the knowledge age. Ideas are the currency of our time, meaning that individuals need access to education if they are to succeed, while societies need a well-educated population if they are to progress.



The message to the governments of developing nations seems clear: they need to set about building higher education systems that can match those of developed nations, no matter how daunting the prospect.

Frankly, this is a challenge that will prove too much for many nations. Higher education is extraordinarily expensive. The cost of providing buildings, libraries, support structures and staff (if they can be found) is testing the finances of even the richest nations. In many developed countries, the once publicly funded systems are now proving beyond the means of governments, and private sources of revenue are having to be sought.

In addition, in a world of internationalising education, only the best will do. Universities are no longer ranked nationally or regionally, they must compete on the international stage.

Does this make the challenge hopeless for developing nations? It will never be easy, but in the concept of the knowledge society there may be a way forward that does not mean having to copy what developed nations have done. Indeed, it may be that this strategy would be wholly counterproductive.

The knowledge society and its impact on traditional views of education

The knowledge society refers, simply put, to our understanding of knowledge. Knowledge has always been important, but in a knowledge society, it gains universal economic value. As a result, it becomes the currency of everyday life.

This has some fundamental implications for education. For a start, everyone has to have it if they are to be able to operate in their society. Second, they must be able to create and apply knowledge for themselves. Education has to be able to support learners to do something with what they know.

This is not the understanding of knowledge that underpinned the higher education systems of most developed nations. Higher education was, for most of its history, the preserve of the few and it focused on transmitting accumulated knowledge, skills and values from one generation to the next. Given this understanding, education characteristically took the form of instruction whereby teachers passed on what they knew to the students.

This understanding of what education was all about accounts for the shape it took. Campuses were built to house experts and storehouses of knowledge (libraries) to which students came to get access to learning. When mass higher education began to take shape in the post-war period, nations simply expanded their systems to accommodate the growing number of students. It was

understood by many that using learning methods that were originally meant for a small group of students might not be appropriate for a mass education system. But there seemed to be no other way to provide higher education.

While this image of learning still prevails in most developed nations, it is rapidly crumbling in the face of new realities.

The rising cost of education for the learner means that many are looking for new ways to access education that will lower costs and allow them to earn while they learn.

Learners want to know if the education they receive will equip them to get a job or in some other tangible way contribute to their community. Employers are asking prospective employees not what they know but what they can do.

To ensure they get what they need, learners are relying less on the long-standing status of an institution and more on what they can find out about what they are doing now.

New technologies, unlike their predecessors, are enabling new styles of learning that are better than the traditional classroom-based method. The vision is one of anytime, anywhere, on-any-screen learning.

To give learners what they are seeking and make best use of the new technologies available, learning is no longer about instruction. Learning styles have more to do with construction and co-construction. From the time a student enrolls, the more progressive institutions are involving them in problem-solving, working in teams, being assessed as a group and interacting with the world around them. Always the emphasis is on being able to actively make use of knowledge as opposed to passively receiving it.

In a knowledge society, learners need to be able to access education throughout life. It is simply not possible to always take long periods of time out to study away from work and family. The demand is for short, more focused, learning. Traditional qualifications are increasingly being questioned as to their value.

Learners have discovered that the most valuable people they will meet in an educational setting are not their teachers but other learners. They want more facilitation and interaction, and less one-way instruction.

These are just some of the changes occurring in the context of a knowledge society that are impacting on traditional ways of learning. Together, they mean that the higher education classroom of the future will not look much like the one we commonly see today. After centuries of speculation about change in education, something significant is happening.



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Finding new pathways to learning

Change will not come easily in the developed nations. They have centuries of tradition behind their systems that will make changing a slow and sometimes painful process. There will be resistance from those who say that only the traditional way of learning is worthwhile. In the years to come, we will see these institutions fade into irrelevance as learners and those who employ them flow past looking for new ways of constantly accessing knowledge.

But developing nations need not confront this problem. They have the opportunity to build systems that reflect the demands of the knowledge society and by so doing speed up their ability to respond to the demands of their citizens.

The challenge developing nations face, therefore, is far from hopeless. But if progress is to be made, the (very understandable) tendency to view higher education as what developed nations currently do will have to be put to one side. In its place, new thinking will need to be developed that will allow investment to flow in different ways. Let me offer some examples.

While it is true that physical infrastructure will be required, it need not take the form of large lecture halls and all the other structures usually associated with universities. Spaces where people come together to learn could be made more flexible and multipurpose. They need not be located on large, costly campuses. Rather, they could be scattered around the community, making use of workplaces, schools, community facilities, homes and public buildings.

Investment in new technology is vital, but once again this can take advantage of tools that cut costs. Books, for example, are one of the major costs of any university. New e-readers mean learners do not need to access a physical library, because they can browse online for what they need and then download the text at virtually no cost.

Course materials, once laboriously created and updated by staff, can be digitised and rapidly edited. Access can be gained to the best material and best staff in the world by making use of technology.

Teaching techniques, currently often understood to require investment in staff who provide lectures and other intensive forms of instruction, can be changed to involve active learners. They can be facilitated and undertake much of their own learning while interacting with other learners.

The list of possible ways of doing things differently is substantial.

Maintaining quality of learning in the face of change

Of course, those who are seeking to build higher learning systems in developing nations are aware of these possibilities. But there is always the nagging doubt that if these new pathways are followed questions will be raised about the quality of graduates.

This is something I understand very well because the university I belong to, Massey University in New Zealand, has taught both campus-based and distance students over the past 51 years.

Throughout that time, there has always been debate about the quality of the learning undertaken by distance learners. The university has ensured, therefore, that the experience of both groups of students is equivalent. The same staff who teach on campus also teach at a distance, and it is their responsibility to ensure the quality of what they do is maintained for all students. This attention to quality means that, today, Massey enjoys an enviable reputation for a high standard of learning around the world.

But we are changing what we do. In line with the argument I have been making above, the university has been working towards abolishing the difference between campus and distance students. Our aim is to offer them the same rich learning experience by using both face-to-face and digitally based teaching within a constructivist learning model.

We accept that the traditional teaching methods no longer meet the needs of the knowledge age learner. It is time for change if we as a university are to remain relevant. What we teach, how we teach, how we assess and how we support our learning are rapidly changing.

In making these changes we are not only committed to maintaining quality but raising it. Our belief is that the new approaches we are taking will enhance what we have to offer our students.

In a way, the challenge facing developing nations is a challenge faced by all nations. We all need to develop higher education systems that meet the needs of learners in the knowledge age. As developing nations address this issue, then perhaps, just perhaps, they can leapfrog what they see in developed countries to give their learners opportunities to flourish in the world that is taking shape rather than in the one that is disappearing.

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Kampala International University

Exploring the heights

Mission
To respond to societal needs by designing and delivering an education guided by the principles and values of respect for society, the economy and environment and to provide and develop a supportive research environment in which scholars, at every stage of their career, can flourish.



Postgraduate Studies Building

Kampala International University (KIU), which commenced operation in October 2001, has grown to be one of Uganda's premier private universities.

The main campus is located along Ggaba road in Kansanga, 3 km from the city centre and 2 km from the shores of Lake Victoria. The western campus is located in Ishaka, Bushenyi district, offering medical and other science courses. The Dar es Salaam campus is located in the city of Dar es Salaam and is for self improvement and career advancement.

The Academic Plan of the University is organised around four major goals which are the key components of KIU's mission and vision. These goals include:

- Excellence in teaching and learning
- Excellence in research, scholarship and creative activity
- Excellence in civic engagement
- Enhancement of the resource base



Western Campus, Main Building

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