

The Politics of Sudanese Higher Education “Revisited | By Khalid Al Mubarak

While in Khartoum for the 4th University of Khartoum Higher Education Conference, I asked an employee of Khartoum University Press about former colleagues, then about the trees which I planted (when I was director of KUP). She smiled and said: They are huge and shady now. This was one of several nostalgic moments in which – during my visit – my mind sometimes wandered backwards.

It is twenty eight years since the publication in 1985 of my book “Attaliem Al Aali Fissudan (Higher Education in the Sudan). The situation has changed drastically. There are now more than forty universities in all states. I still remember the time when one could take a taxi and say: To the University please and be driven straight to our University of Khartoum. If you say so now, the Amjad or taxi driver would ask: “which university?”

The issues facing higher education are different today; but some are constant, just magnified or multiplied by 40. That’s why it came as no surprise to read that immediately after the conference to which I was invited another conference about “University Stability” was inaugurated on 9 March by the National Media Centre.

When I met the University of Khartoum Vice-Chancellor Professor Al Siddiq Ahmed Al Mustafa Hayati at his office, he showed me the ambitious plans for streamlining all University assets for partnerships that can contribute to the annual budget. One example stands out. A university bungalow with a garden can be transformed into a high rise multi-storey building that provides both accommodation and office space for rent. All university properties have now been registered and (in the case of land) fenced. A new reorganised office for Alumni mobilisation is ready to take off.

Our generation was “pampered” and privileged. In the 1960s we even had a strike dubbed the “Self Service” strike, caused by the university administration’s change of the way free meals were available – instead of restaurant - like waiter service of dishes, students were asked to queue, then carry their own tray and plates back to the table. This was the main pretext for the strike!

There are now 35,000 students, many fending for themselves with a string of privately run cafeterias.

We used to brush our teeth and look out to see if the lecturers have arrived or not. Today’s students are not so lucky.

I remember that in 2006, I told the students that during the first 15 minutes of the lecture it would be alright for late comers to enter quietly. Then one student entered ten minutes before the end of the lecture. It turned out that he lived in Omdurman and took three buses to arrive. I quietly dropped my 15 minute rule.

A comparative viewfinder will help us put the Sudanese Higher Education challenges in perspective.

Conferences alone are not enough for continuous scrutiny. There is need for a weekly publication devoted wholly to higher education (like the Times Higher Education in the UK or the Chronicle of Higher Education in the USA). This will provide a unifying platform for a look at the whole sector in order to consider some of the following matters:

- Would it be advisable to categorise universities in groups (e.g. Research intensive universities and new universities?)

- To which extent can we become involved in the MOOC (Massive Open Online Course) provider network? British Universities will now have their own Futurelearn in the second half of this year. We already have the basis (the equivalent of the Open University). Since MOOC courses are free, this could fill a gap for our remote universities that complain of lack of teaching staff.

- If the days of “the traditional university with a range of degrees and modestly effective research” are numbered in the UK (as a recent Public Policy Research report argues) what lessons can we learn?

- The new US administration seems to be interested in “education diplomacy”. Their top priority is the Middle East and North Africa and other Muslim majority countries” according to Megan Curtis, Deputy Assistant Secretary for Academic Programme at the US Department of State. (Quoted in the Times Higher Education 25 Feb 13). Why don’t we test the limits of sanctions in this field, especially after the relative easing of tension with South Sudan?

Khartoum University

There are hundreds of theses that are kept in drawers at different universities. The rehabilitation of Khartoum University Press and establishment of other university Presses should be a priority. There is some serious research that can only be published by a university Press because it won’t distribute enough to make a profit. The press also introduces young academics to the reading public.

- We probably need a body for “quality control” that visits universities to assess courses and make recommendations. They can make a start with faculties of medicine countrywide.

- Awards for excellence in administration or fund-raising would add to the healthy competition between universities. So would sport competitions.

- Politics seem to be the main extracurricular activity at universities. If sport, music, cinema, drama, fine art and other activities are fostered in Secondary schools, university students would continue their preferred activity at university and not be confined to politics.

- The policy of positive discrimination and honouring peace accords with former rebel groups has seen students from the IDPC (Internally Displaced Camps) transplanted to universities away from their states. The new environment was supposed - on paper – to help them readjust. Has it been over-confident? Some seem to have spread the “camp mindset” (the only one they ever knew) to their new environment. Could it be that they needed counselling or political reorientation first? One of them told us during a session that “Loyalty of the homeland to the citizen comes first, to be followed by loyalty of the citizen to the homeland.”

A reversal of J. Kennedy’s famous words: “Ask not what your country can do for you; but what you can do for your country”

The NGO’s and HR organisations that transferred IDP residents from the camps to the UK had a bitter taste of the same violent “camp mindset”. Without counselling or reeducation, they resorted to acts of violence (using machettes, knives and other weapons) twice. Some have now been arrested by police.

These are young, impressionable and traumatised young people in need of a guiding compass.

We should always bear in mind that Higher Education reform and development is a non-stop on-going process. Discussions and deliberations are quite healthy and rewarding. In the UK where the

universities have a proven worldwide record of excellence, there is an organisation called “Council for the Defence of British Universities” which is against “powerful forces” that are “bending the university to serve short-term, primarily pragmatic and narrowly commercial ends.”

There are however, others who uphold the opposite view that universities have to prove their worth for the economy to deserve the funding they get in years of austerity.

Their challenges are different in scale; but in our case, the policy of establishing hundreds of secondary schools and tens of universities is right. Some institutions may not be up to the desired standards; but like the trees I planted in 1984, they will grow and become shady. Let us never forget that the University of Khartoum took decades to reach maturity and acquire regional and international recognition.

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