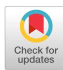

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

# The condition and purpose of universities in Africa

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In his latest article, 'African universities and the challenge of postcolonial development', Jeremiah O. Arowosegbe argues convincingly that public universities in Africa are in crisis, and that this crisis reflects the failure of postcolonial states to build the societies promised by anti-colonial liberation. He is certainly correct that the political economy of higher education (HE) in postcolonial Africa is a much-neglected topic, and his article is even more welcome for that reason. As a scholar with an extensive career in Nigerian public universities, Arowosegbe has also undertaken research fellowships in Germany, Netherlands, Sweden, Switzerland, South Africa and the USA. Now he finds himself at the University of Leeds in the UK. He has experienced much from within and reflected deeply from afar on the state of universities in Nigeria and across the continent. His article is a serious work of reflection and scholarship, crafted and refined over years of engagement. Therefore, his serious charges on the state of the universities in Africa cannot be dismissed lightly.

Arowosegbe traces the history and political economy of postcolonial universities through in-depth research on the evolution of the disciplines of history and political science in newly independent Nigeria. While acknowledging the colonial roots of the contemporary universities, he argues that in the newly independent states of the 1960s there was a relative 'golden age' – one that was explicitly Pan-African, decolonial, development-oriented and foundational, running alongside the postcolonial state-building endeavour. He acknowledges that there were problems with resourcing constraints, tensions over intellectual freedom, and a wider degrading and commodification of African knowledge and science. These were also small, highly elite, intellectual institutions.

He asserts that these vibrant intellectual platforms offered a space for reinvention in the excitement of postcolonial possibilities. However, this brief period of institutional autonomy was truncated by increasing state control of funding and of the intellectual agenda, with heavy influence from bilateral and multilateral agencies in the form of ideologically conditioned funding. This is a trend that has intensified in

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recent decades, particularly in East Africa. For example, the UK Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF), despite a framing rhetoric of partnership and equality, has created a plethora of UK-dominated projects. Due to the nature of the funding conditions, and perhaps the naivety of some of the actors involved, these projects are conditioned to repeat fundamental and well-known harmful impacts of aid-funded intervention, including lack of sustainability, duplication of efforts, and dominance over and diversion of local agendas and human resources. They are also a significant contributing factor in the 'tragedian entrapment' of the African university as an institution and of individual scholars (Serunkuma 2024). This entrapment takes the form of a depoliticized and benign inclusion in globally dominant knowledge production relationships, which co-opt both academic labour and intellectual space.

Arowosegbe further argues that the emergent postcolonial political class did not want intellectual scrutiny and debate. As he illustrates in Ghana, Nigeria, Tanzania and Uganda, to critique became antithetical to the quest and vision of national development, and related research was labelled as an irrelevant distraction compared to the urgent business of industrializing and modernizing. Governments sought increasing control over the university space, privileging and determining the relevance of research to the national mission, while postcolonial intellectuals viewed the political class as seeking only to replace colonial officials rather than actively transforming the state. The charismatic and popular leaders of this era, such as Nkrumah and Nyerere, sought to own the intellectual space themselves, sharing in common the educational background and history of the newly emergent academic class.

In the wider political economy of the continent, the debt and structural adjustment pressures of the 1980s exacerbated the chronic underfunding of emergent public universities and research. Yet, from the 1990s, the HE sector began to expand rapidly. Patterns vary across the continent, but there was expansion in both public and private universities, as the youth population swelled and market mechanisms brought in fee income and government-backed student loan systems. Rather than see it as a marker of success, Arowosegbe suggests that this situation has not produced a vibrant and robust system of HE, but rather a marketized, low-quality production line of often unemployed degree holders. He hinges his position here on the neglectful and uncomplimentary responses of states to the continent's demographic expansion: that is, the failure of states to treat Africa's expanding populations as an asset. African scholars in public universities struggle to sustain a good living, endure state control of their research and expression, and have been unable to establish a collective capability or voice to challenge the powerful colonial and exploitative forces that continue to shape intellectual agendas on the continent.

For Nigeria, Arowosegbe traces the fault lines of this space through the activities and disputes of the Academic Staff Union of Universities. I suspect that such an analysis might mirror an analysis of the University and College Union in the UK and the American Association of University Professors in the USA in finding that rapid expansion and the neoliberal market-driven organization of the university produce contradictions and tensions for intellectual endeavour. These are not particular to African states but perhaps a feature of how HE operates in neoliberal capitalism. For Nigeria, and Africa more broadly, the demographic and political fault lines are different. The recent expansion of HE in Africa starts from a very low base and remains relatively

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small in relation to other regions: according to the World Bank (2021), African enrolment is at 9.4 per cent compared with a global average of 38 per cent. High levels of graduate unemployment, despite relatively low enrolment, are widely reported. Arowosegbe suggests that the current governing elites, often Northern-educated children of the first political elites, are threatened by large populations of poor youth. This kleptocratic political elite class continues to uphold the institutions and structures that their parents occupied in the heady days of postcolonial liberation and have captured the state for their own benefit. For those who point this out in the critical and intellectual spaces of HE, it is getting more dangerous to speak, not less. While there are various culture wars raging in some corners of HE in the global North, these are currently not resulting in detention, existential fear or actual violence.

I suspect that there are many who will find this analysis to be excessively bleak and argue that it ignores the vibrancy and growth of HE in Africa more broadly. Seen through an 'Africa Rising' lens, Arowosegbe's argument could be characterized as falling into the old trap of seeing Africa as incapable, a basket case without hope. From that angle, the rapid economic growth of some African economies and their transition to lower-middle-income status is evidence of success, and the rapidly expanding youth population an opportunity for the future. Certainly, in some spaces (some) African HE institutions are becoming prominent. In the elite engagement of the Worldwide Universities Network and the African Research Universities Alliance, Africa-centred alliances and funding are becoming central to the conversations. But the funding for these supposedly Africa-centred alliances continue to bear the mark of external dependence since they are not internally funded by either the states or other Africa-based institutions within these states. The rhetoric of decolonization has resonated sufficiently across universities in the global North for it to become a proclaimed intention in the search for new and more equitable research and teaching partnerships. The diversion of core aid budget through the backdoor to UK universities in the form of the GCRF brought in swathes of new Africa-curious academics who were compelled to show how they would *impact* African policymaking and *build capacity*. Good works in Africa have become a marketable and useful signifier of UK universities' engagement with the Sustainable Development Goals. Philanthro-capitalists such as the Mastercard and Gates Foundations seek to root their new programmes in African institutions. Yet the universities and academics in African universities remain entrapped by the incentives and embedded assumptions of such funding flows (Serunkuma 2018; 2024). This is not to say that they are entirely passive but their agency is constrained. Again, these dynamics are at play globally to different degrees. Funding conditions and ideological narratives shape the possibilities for research in global North HE, but in the race to claim funding, prestige and power, the scholar based in the global North sits further up the aid chain, and African-based 'partners' too often find themselves as peripheral data collectors or conduits of a particular worldview (Smith *et al.* 2023).

Sadly, I find that Arowosegbe's pessimistic view resonates in important ways over this optimistic chatter emanating from the many workshops in Accra, Cape Town and Nairobi into which fly Northern-based scholars in the intense excitement of 'capacity building'. Such engagements are full of hope, and they produce plans, strategies and guides for doing things differently, and yet they too often end as simply wishful thinking. These imagined futures fail endlessly to emerge because they are not rooted

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in a solid or honest analysis of past or present. The full picture is always more nuanced. I draw here on almost twenty-five years of experience of engaging with and teaching in Mzumbe University in Tanzania, as well as my wider research experience on the politics of natural resources and water governance. Vibrancy in elite institutions and capital cities hides the growing and solidifying inequality across the globe. That may well be as true for London as for Dar es Salaam.

Mzumbe University, originally the Institute of Development Management, was founded as a training college for civil servants in 1953 and scaled up after independence. Since becoming the third established public university in Tanzania in the early 2000s it has expanded its programmes and has created multiple satellite campuses. It has both private fee-paying students and a relatively small proportion of students in receipt of government loans. It is now one of nineteen public universities and thirty private universities in Tanzania. It is growing and thriving, providing student education and producing graduates in record numbers; it has alumni in the highest offices of the land, most notably the current president, Samia Suluhu Hassan. Some of my most formative and personally important teaching experiences are with students at the Morogoro and Dar es Salaam campuses. Our collaborative master's programme, run by my former institution, the University of Bradford, in the UK and Mzumbe University (2010–15), was truly pioneering and our graduates still recognize the value of the critical analytical skills they gained. Yet Mzumbe University staff and students continue to struggle to access recent teaching and research materials. Many graduates work hard for their degrees but fail to attain the professional and formal employment that they assume will follow. National employment statistics are a fantasy, but it is literally illegal to challenge them. International organizations are complicit in the deception.

The heavy teaching workload leaves little time for research, and it is far more beneficial for life and livelihoods to seek to enhance government salaries with consultancy engagement with NGOs and other international organizations. Comparable progress with a locally meaningful research agenda, despite serious efforts by university leaders, is underwhelming; I believe blame lies most with the NGOs, international agencies, and quite a number of well-meaning but naive academic tourists from the global North who come seeking local academics to work as data collectors, more than with the government. Maia Green's book *The Development State* (2014) illustrates the pervasive cultural hegemonic forces that produce NGO-ization of the intellectual and civic space in aid-dependent postcolonial Tanzania.

One of Tanzania's great intellectuals of immediate postcolonial liberation, Issa Shivji, argued similarly in a speech in 2019 at the University of Dar es Salaam:

> Neo-liberalism was primarily an ideological assault on radical nationalism and its relatively independent policies. It devastated our social fabric and the neo-liberalisation of our universities destroyed counter-hegemonic, progressive discourses and debates. The university structures were corporatized. Courses lost their integrity as they were semesterised and modularised. Short courses proliferated. Basic research was undermined as policy consultancy overwhelmed the faculty. Knowledge production was substituted by online information gathering. A few resisted but many surrendered. Voices of resistance from staff and students were stifled and suppressed. University

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> authorities spent more on surveillance gadgets to keep students in check rather than on sanitation facilities in dorms to keep students healthy. This campus, once known for its intellectual salience, is today cited for its selective silence. The kind of discourse that I'm indulging in today, I bet, must sound Greek and Latin to our neo-liberal generation of both students and faculty. This is the story of many African campuses.
>
> As a consequence, the rise of 'new nationalisms' caught intellectuals by surprise. Neither did they anticipate it nor do they know how to react to it. The knee-jerk reaction on many African campuses – not all of course – has been to join the bandwagon either out of choice or because of lack of choice. (Shivji 2019)

In 2023, I gave a lecture in a classroom in a former primary school in Dar es Salaam that had been taken over by Mzumbe University for its expanded undergraduate programmes in public administration. Many of the eager and enthusiastic students were keen to work in NGOs, but they had never heard of Shivji. This loss of their very recent intellectual history saddened and shocked me.

However, over the border, the Kenyan Organic Intellectuals Network has taken Shivji's ideas as the inspiration for a renewed intellectual and activist struggle. Its recent edited volume, *Breaking the Silence on NGOs in Africa* (Mwangi and Maghanga 2023), suggests that NGOs are responsible for the co-optation and suppression of revolutionary struggle against the enriched postcolonial elite. Contemporary academics and universities are barely mentioned; it seems they collectively stand for so little. These activist authors were out on the streets of Nairobi in July 2024 in what is being called the Gen Z revolution, as they protested against tax increases sought by the International Monetary Fund to mitigate Kenya's debts.

It is time for honest and difficult conversations about the current condition and purpose of universities in Africa. Arowosegbe's provocative analysis opens up a space to have a more nuanced conversation. Academics and intellectuals are often very good at analysing external agents and activities, but afraid or unwilling to reflect on their own institutional incentives (or perhaps disinterested). Honest conversations about incentives are very difficult in the global competition for research and education funding. The consequences of the peripheral position of African HE institutions within the globalized HE marketplace need to be acknowledged by all actors in these conversations, and based on more than naive platitudes about 'equality in partnerships or publication'. HE institutions in Africa also coexist with the intense political dynamics of postcolonial and peripheral states; in fact, these are a more pressing set of incentives for the everyday dynamics of teaching and intellectual endeavour. Still more pressing is the demographic imperative. The youthful and marginalized populations in Africa are seeking change and looking for leadership. Perhaps this cannot be found in the existing colonially rooted HE institutions and will necessitate new spaces of debate and organization.

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