

THE NEED FOR INNOVATION IN GHANAIAN UNIVERSITIES AND COLLEGES

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ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to promote a culture of innovation in Ghanaian universities. This justification is pursued through the following; an argument for the need for innovation in African universities; a look at the term “innovation” from an institutional perspective; apparent barriers to innovation in African universities; how African university leaders can promote innovation; and an eight step strategy African university leaders can adopt in their quest to enhance

innovation in their universities. This paper seeks to emphasize the need for African universities to focus on incorporating a culture of innovation and creativity into university structures and administration thereby encouraging stakeholders to be innovative and creative in their date-to-day activities.

Keywords: *African Universities, Innovation, Africa, Leadership*

INTRODUCTION

Higher education in the 21st Century calls for innovation among universities and other institutions of higher learning across the globe. African universities cannot afford to be content with minimum performance in terms of the graduates they produce (Leavy, 2003). Universities in Africa must seek to increase understanding of innovation and the manner through which students are trained. They must seek to foster a culture that promotes and enhances an innovative potential among faculty and staff. With the increasing need for innovation and creativity in the 21st Century, it will take universities with the capacity to adapt and shift quickly to rapid transformation, especially in the higher education arena, to successfully compete locally and globally (Mayfield & Mayfield, 2008). Since universities are at the forefront of training and developing a country’s manpower, all African universities play a vital role in leading the way to demonstrate innovation for other organizations to follow suit (Mayfield & Mayfield, 2008). This article seeks to encourage and promote a culture of innovation among all African universities and university leaders as well as other institutions of higher learning.

Higher Education in Ghana: The Deserted Factor

African countries are far behind their Asian counterparts who gained independence during the same period. There is a noticeable disparity between the two regions within their industrialization and economic growth rates (Kwadwo, Okrah & Adabor, 2010). The very core machinery responsible for providing and developing economic, social, political and human capital across the continent of Africa has been neglected for over 50 years. Higher education being the sole preparer of leaders who administer governmental bureaucracies, political parties, economic agencies, and private sector industries and contribute towards sustainable development; one would assume that higher education would be a top priority for national governments across Africa as well as major bilateral donor organizations. The current challenge

of higher education in Africa has not been adequately covered in the applicable literature. Unfortunately, major donors like the World Bank, the British Government, and the Rockefeller Foundation over the past few years have decided to cut back support and investment in higher education in Africa for several reasons, notably: African higher education is seen as elitist focused and the desire to reduce dependency on Western organizations for monetary support for higher education in Africa (Banya & Elu, 2010). The above, therefore, calls for a diligent analysis of the reasons behind Africa's failure to keep up with the rest of the industrialized world. The one key missing factor in this case is the overall lack of adequate investment in higher education by national governments, bilateral donor agencies and other global agencies that focus on higher education.

The Current Conditions of Higher Education in Ghana and Africa

The condition of universities in Africa, especially Sub-Saharan Africa is deplorable—lack of books, facilities, adequate living conditions for resident students, and more. Although these conditions have persisted since the 1970's, they have not been addressed. Yet, young Africans continue to pursue higher education in most parts of Africa (Lebeau, 2008). Existing universities across the continent are struggling with ineffective, inadequate, and highly bureaucratic structures that often hinder smooth operations of these institutions. University staff and faculty lack the required qualifications, the appropriate training and preparation, and remuneration to deliver in their areas of specialization. Most of these universities still rely on unproductive, inefficient, and outdated management and administrative infrastructure. These conditions make it difficult for students and faculty to perform.

Access to Higher Education in Ghana and Africa

The challenge of access to higher education is significantly evident across the continent of Africa. In virtually all African countries, demand for access to higher education is growing rapidly, straining the resources of already-overburdened higher educational institutions (Teferra & Altback, 2004). Most of the issues triggering the lack of access are an absence of amenities due to the high demand for higher education across the continent (Okrah & Adabor, 2010). Case in point; Ghana has a population of over 24 million people with six public universities, one major private university, and seventeen university colleges. The percent of Ghanaians enrolled in higher education is less than 3%, while in its Malawi 0.5% and in Tanzania it's as low as 0.3%. In Ghana, The University of Science and Technology was able to accommodate only 6,868 applicants out of 17,438 representing 39.38% of the applications received in 2007. In the same year, the University of Ghana admitted just 7,500 applicants of the 16,000 who applied for admission, which represented 46.9% and the University of Cape Coast admitted 3,908 students out of the 13,000 applicants representing a 30% acceptance rate in Ghana (Okrah & Adabor, 2010). Millions of talented and gifted young men and women cannot progress towards a bright future due the lack of higher educational opportunities across the continent. The future of Ghana

and Africa lies in the hands of these young men and women who are denied access to higher education.

Why Innovation in Ghanaian Universities and Colleges?

The need for innovation in African institutions of higher learning has never been so critical. Although Africa is the second largest continent in the world with enormous human and natural resources, Africa remains poor because of its inability to tap into these resources. To a very great extent, this has to do with the lack of innovation and creativity among African individuals and organizations at all levels. Innovation among African universities will assist in raising a generation of leaders who can compete and perform locally and internationally (Mayfield & Mayfield, 2008). African universities that choose to adopt and demonstrate innovative tendencies have a tremendous potential of assuming and maintaining a competitive edge in the local and global industry for higher education (Bjorklund, 2010). An innovative higher educational environment will facilitate the process of augmenting opportunities for imaginative ideas among faculty, students and staff, which increases the occurrence of ingenuity and inventiveness (Mayfield & Mayfield, 2008). An atmosphere of innovation will cultivate a university environment that allows the intrinsic resourcefulness within the university community to surface, which can result in industrious outcomes (Lengnick-Hall & Lengnick-Hall, 1999). In answering the question, “Why innovation in African universities?” it is essential that an explanation and meaning of the term is offered.

A Glance at Innovation through the Lens of Higher Educational Institutions

Innovation thrives on a diversity of abilities, skills and points of view (Leavy, 2003). An innovative higher educational institution can be identified by its culture and distinguished by exceptionality, an ease of ideas on the part of its members and evidenced by an atmosphere of elasticity and capability (Leavy, 2003). Innovation in higher educational institutions, therefore, becomes the ability to create work that is both unique and suitable for the institution’s patrons in this case students and the community it serves. The expression innovation is also connected with words such as enterprise, formation, and breakthrough which can be associated with institutions of higher learning (McLean, 2005). It is also a form of thinking that involves the production of new ideas and solutions and the relationship between possessions or ideas (Lengnick-Hall & Lengnick-Hall, 1999). Furthermore, innovation in the higher education industry is the application, development and implementation of a new thought. It is the actual process of initiating a solution to an existing challenge in a particular field of study. Thus, it is the invention, reception, and performance of a new thought, procedure, invention, or service (McLean, 2005). Though the above expositions call for African universities to create an atmosphere that allows organizational members to develop and use their innovative skills; several obstacles prevent African institutions of higher learning from realizing this goal.

Long Standing Obstacles to Innovation in African Universities

Like every institution in any part of the world, African institutions of higher learning are plagued with numerous obstacles in their quest to develop and promote a culture and an environment of innovation. These obstacles to innovation are both internal and external issues within the organization or among members of the organization. Though university authorities may possess what it takes to encourage a culture of innovation, it is relevant to recognize and expose entrenched obstacles and confinements encountered when they set out to pursue such endeavors (Mayfield and Mayfield, 2008). A number of current and apparent obstacles to innovation in African universities are captured and elaborated upon in the subsequent paragraphs. Most of these obstacles must be dismantled to enhance efforts to introduce innovative behaviors in African universities. Thus, the following obstacles must be rejected and diminished for a culture of innovation to thrive.

The Lack of Motivation for Failure

Most cultures frown on failure. Similarly, failure is not encouraged in African universities because of the monetary costs that may be involved. On the other hand, success is highly rewarded in most universities and other organizational cultures across the globe. Unknown to universities in most parts of the African continent is the fact that a culture of frowning on failure is incapacitating and hostile to the pursuit of innovation because of the meaning it presents to both faculty and students. As a result, most university administrators, faculty and students refrain from failure in all their undertakings. Though a fear of failure may create a platform for some university community members to diligently pursue their dreams and aspirations with excellence to avoid being ridiculed; it becomes a recipe for paralysis for others thereby preventing them from realizing their full potential because of the possible consequences (Annamalai, 1991). Failure must be encouraged to a reasonable extent especially when it is in line with creativity, innovation and organizational productivity.

The Lack of Elasticity and Opposition to Change and Transformation

Since the days of colonialism, most African universities have held on to the traditional ways of doing things. This has indirectly hindered innovation in most institutions of higher learning. Traditionally, most African leaders and organizations have the propensity to preserve the established customs and conventions of their organizations by maintaining existing rules and regulations which restrains innovation over the long term (Chak-keung & Wai-Ling, 2003). It is easy for university administrators, faculty and students to refrain from considering and identifying alternative means of achieving university goals and objectives due to the simplicity of relying on existing ways of doing things (Annamalai, 1991). A lack of flexibility and holding on to rigid rules and regulations is a formula for resisting pertinent and strategic change and the needed transformation within African universities. This mind set is stifling innovation in academic circles because of its association to institutional change and transformation. A culture

of innovation is therefore needed for African universities to react successfully to change and transformation (Muhammed et al, 2008).

Lack of Commitment on the Part of University Community Members

Due to the lack of opportunities for most faculty and staff to advance in their careers and the almost nonexistent use of gratitude and recognition for excellent job performance in African universities, the pursuit of innovation is significantly minimal. Most faculty and staff lack the level of commitment to their institutions because they are usually not shown the required appreciation and admiration for the work they do (Chak-keung & Waipling, 2003). The absence of such motivational factors results in low self-esteem and less dedication to existing universities on the part of faculty and staff. Innovation is therefore severely reduced due to the part-hearted services of faculty and staff (Mostafa, 2005).

Lack of a Spirit of Innovation and Creativity

A lack of curiosity, resources, resiliency for inquiry, fear of failure and risk taking are obstacles that inhibit organizational creativity and innovation in most cultures of the world (Annamalai, 1991). Similarly, these same factors impede innovation in African universities. The unbridled lack of vision, planning, foresight and imagination among African academic community members is a result of reverting back to old and outmoded forms of operations mostly because of the fear to venture into new terrains and testing, trying and experimenting with new techniques and ways of doing things. This starves a spirit of inquiry and initiative that leads to the absence of innovation among faculty and staff at African universities and other institutions of higher learning. Exposure to strategies that can enhance innovation among African institutions of higher learning can facilitate the process of dismantling the above stated obstacles.

So the question is what is the way forward? Below are eight strategies African universities and institutions of higher learning should adopt to improve a culture of innovation.

Eight Strategies for Developing a Culture of Innovation in African Universities

The following eight strategies are recommended for implementation in all African universities to guarantee a smooth transition process towards developing a culture and an environment that supports innovation and creativity. It is, however, relevant that one appreciates the nature of higher educational institutions as they embark on this journey and acknowledge the fact that higher educational institutions take time to adopt new practices, procedures and processes (new ways of doing things). In that regard, members of African university communities must be ready and prepared for the transition into a culture of innovation and creativity.

1. Preparing for the Change Process

To ensure African universities transition from traditional system of operation to a more innovative and creative structure and culture while maintaining a balance will require university

leadership to investigate the environment in which the organization functions to identify key strategies for coping with such a transition. It will be beneficial to evaluate local and global higher educational trends which may indicate whether African universities are prone to maintain their current balance in the short and long term taking into account strategy, structure, people, culture and process (Tushman & O'Reilly, 2002). University leadership must also take into consideration whether their organizations have the focus, determination and capacity to transition from a regular university to that of innovation and creativity. The following questions must also be asked; are their organizations familiar with their environment (internal and external) and aware of the need for transformation, do they have the required resources to withstand this transition and be successful in the long run (Anonymous, 1995)? These are relevant questions that must be addressed prior to embarking on this change process. It is recommended that the strategies below should not be adopted without working through the issues and questions addressed in this portion of the article.

2. A University Culture that is favorable to Learning

An existing university culture can inhibit or enhance both administrative and employee efforts to encourage innovation (Mayfield & Mayfield, 2008). African university leaders who desire to move their universities towards globally accepted levels of innovation must venture to create an organizational atmosphere that allows employees and students to learn through their successes and failures. Faculty, staff and students should be celebrated when they succeed and accepted when they fail. Such a culture and environment will encourage learning and long-term success, competitiveness and productivity. As part of the process to encourage a culture of innovation, university administrators must take critical and crucial steps to study the strengths and limitations of the organization in order to learn how to adapt to become a stronger and more responsive organization (Anonymous, 1995). This can assist in developing a learning environment that promotes innovation (Mayfield & Mayfield, 1995). This means faculty and staff should be given opportunities to experience new things and to transform such experiences into knowledge, which should be available to all stakeholders within the university (Senge, 2006). Such a culture will encourage innovation because both internal and external members of the university are given the opportunity to push the boundaries of the organization by testing new ways of achieving university set goals and objectives. . This presupposes that faculty, staff and students are free to use their imagination during both “good and bad” times to identify short and long-term solutions. It also means the leadership within African institutions of higher learning must put in place policies, procedures and the needed structures that allow stakeholders to tap into the creative and innovative aspects of their lives to enhance organizational performance for local and global competition.

3. A Strategy that Allows Flexibility and Acceptance of Change

Innovation cannot thrive in a vacuum; which means African university leaders must assist in creating an institutional environment where innovation flourishes by creating the necessary

structures, processes and procedures (Kind, 1994). Focusing innovation and creativity within the scope of a well designed organizational strategy is the most effective for success (Wycoff, 2003). The university's strategic direction must lead the way towards determining the rate and speed of learning and the yearning for new information, perspectives and prospects (Zdunczyk & Blenkinsopp, 2007). It also means the university leadership must develop a tradition of enthusiasm to stimulate the imaginations of faculty, staff and students while adhering to and following new perspectives and new patterns of getting work done (Kind, 1994). The leaders must work towards developing a strategy that supports scholarship and allows organizational members to seek information from external sources; such as customers, clients and suppliers to inform their mission for innovation (Zdunczyk & Blenkinsopp, 2007). These strategic goals must be effectively communicated to faculty, staff and students as well as ensure that they align with overall university professional and academic objectives (Zdunczyk & Blenkinsopp, 2007). Most importantly, overall university strategy for innovation and creativity must be narrow enough to define the university's core competency and broad enough to allow exploration into related areas for strategic innovation, creativity, change and transformation (Wycoff, 2003).

4. A University Administrative Structure that allows Innovation and New Insight

Most university hierarchies and chains of authority affect institutional and individual innovation. A flat, dispersed and flexible structure can augment and facilitate the process of developing and maintaining a strong culture for innovation at universities (Zdunczyk & Blenkinsopp, 2007). A flat structure will allow the free flow of information amongst university community members and other functional areas of the university for maximum productivity. Additionally, a flat and decentralized university structure will boost decision-making processes by giving more autonomy to faculty and staff and easy access to top university administrators. This can enhance motivation on the part of faculty and staff to take the initiative to be innovative (Zdunczyk & Blenkinsopp, 2007).

5. Independence and Sovereignty to try New Things amidst Effective Goal Setting

The absence of restrictions and a promotion of independence can enhance the quest to decide and define ways and means to achieve set university goals and objectives on the part of faculty and staff (McLean, 2005). Such goals must be valuable, worth the accomplishment and fruit bearing for all stakeholders (Bjorklund, 2010). Amidst this freedom and independence, African university leadership must strive to be specific and strategic in their goal setting approach with university community members since this can serve as an effective means of enhancing innovative stakeholder capabilities (McLean, 2005). Having estimable goals is fundamental to spur key stakeholders on, but the nonexistence of goal clarity and precedence can lead to adverse effects on motivation and innovation (Bjorklund, 2010).

6. Culture of Critical and Creative Thinking

Culture is the playing turf of innovation in any organization. Unless African university cultures respect ideas of staff, faculty and students and support risk taking, innovation will be stifled before it begins (Wycoff, 2003). Critical and creative thinking is a necessary ingredient in the 21st Century organization for the development of an innovative culture. Shared leadership and self managed teams are means by which African university administrators can fully tap into the creative and innovative abilities and skills of their faculty, staff and students (Varke, et al, 2009). Creating an environment that allows organizational members to think critically and creatively enhances their problems solving skills as members brainstorm to identify reliable solutions to existing problems and challenges.

7. Resources: Time and Money

One of the main barriers to organizational creativity and innovation identified in the literature is time (Chak-keung & Wai-Ling, 2003). Innovation takes time, energy and money. More so, organizational members need a reasonable degree of freedom and time to reflect and explore new ideas and ways of thinking (Wycoff, 2003). African university leaders must endeavor to use their organizational resources wisely to strike a balance between when and how to make ample resources available to encourage innovation. They must be able to determine when to make sufficient time available for creative and innovative performance within their universities (McLean, 2005). Ample financial resources should be made available to faculty and staff to prevent a situation where they have to halt their creative and innovative efforts in order to find the needed financial and material resources to get the work done. Though innovation is critical and crucial to the future of all universities across the continent, its implementation is dependent on the level of investment these institutions of higher learning are willing to make today (Wycoff, 2003).

8. A Dedicated Department or Center for Innovation and Creativity

Like most undertakings, a culture of innovation and creativity will take root in African organizations if university authorities design, develop and dedicate a Department or Center for such a purpose. Thus, all African universities should consider recruiting a team of individuals with an attraction, affinity and skill for innovation and creativity and task them with creating the needed processes, criteria and metrics for innovation in the university environment (Wycoff, 2003). The team must be commissioned to organize and implement regular innovation and creativity trainings to provide university faculty and staff with the necessary tools and techniques that will boost their ability to think outside the box. This team should also be responsible for developing guidelines within which faculty; staff and students can operate and be productive in their pursuit of creativity and innovation. This team of dedicated individuals ought to be charged with managing innovative and creative ideas that are proposed by university community members. The team must capture these ideas and engage the proponents of the idea in

developing, modifying, enlarging and evaluating the ideas to ensure they do not fall through the cracks (Wycoff, 2003).

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Institutions of higher learning across Africa have the ultimate responsibility to educate, train and raise the next generation of innovative African leaders. Therefore, all institutions of higher learning across the continent must be tasked with the responsibility of incorporating innovative ways of teaching and learning to assist in this quest. Existing universities and colleges must ensure their curricula has content that will facilitate the process of inculcating and developing innovative and creative abilities and skills in individuals who go through them to enhance their capacity to identify innovative solutions to Africa's current and future challenges. Moreover, departments and centers should be dedicated to such initiatives on all university and college campuses to help entrench this movement. Nevertheless, this journey requires a significant level of determination, resolution, time; and financial, human and other resources in order to be realized. African university leaders cannot afford to retreat because of existing challenges and obstacles. They must move forward by putting in place structures that will enhance the creation of innovative and creative cultures within universities. African universities must be designed and organized to enhance individual and organizational innovativeness. Such university structural designs must allow organizational members the needed autonomy and independence for creative and innovative thinking. Above all, African university leaders must always take the relevance of innovation into account when formulating short and long-term strategies for their institutions.

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