Standardising higher education can lower the quality of Kenyan university graduates

Kamau has a choice of locating his new technology firm in Kenya or in Tanzania. The company relies heavily on telecommunications so he would care deeply about any burdensome regulations imposed on him by the Communications Authority of Kenya (CAK).

Now, imagine that CAK no longer focused on customer experience as outcomes, but instead cared much more about outputs. The authority would begin to allow Kenyans to only own the outdated Nokia 1100 phones. Simultaneously, only old apps it approved could run on the phones. Next, visualise that CAK regulated that no phone calls could last less than two minutes, but not longer than three minutes.

Which company in its right mind would desire to operate in such a restrictive environment?

If CAK focused heavily on standardisation instead of customer experience, it would implement non-researched steps that kill business.

Unfortunately, Kenya’s Commission for University Education (CUE) seems set on pursuing a similar real-life situation.

Governments have learned the lessons also discovered by bilateral donors to not focus on outputs.

Every CEO knows that bureaucracy does not solve problems. Cures for small pox and polio did not originate from any government. Instead, private citizens strived to make a difference in society and were allowed the freedom to do so.

On the flip side, Kenyans do not desire a veritable Lord of the Flies situation where everyone fends for themselves with no government intervention. We all remember years ago when an institution came into Kenya from a neighbouring country and offered severely substandard education. The predecessor to CUE dealt with the situation appropriately.

Kenyans have grown to expect a strategic balance between the two extremes of tight controls versus no standards at all. They would not want the government to kill a mosquito with a hammer.

In the past 12 months, CUE began issuing directives to universities stipulating which syllabus must be used in each class. Every class of every course must teach almost the same topics and use the same textbooks.

France tried to standardise its post-secondary education following World War II to devastating effects. It lost its competitiveness to the UK with its storied rivalry between Oxford and Cambridge universities.

Many Kenyan universities teach the “theory of debt” that states companies should hold one-third debt and two-thirds equity. However, the theory is outdated, disproved and not relevant in today’s economy. Do parents want their children all learning such incorrect uniformly without allowing each lecturer to teach up-to-date well-researched theories and realities in their fields of expertise?

Even Harvard University holds dramatically different theories and views on financial economics than does the University of Chicago.

Graduands celebrate at a local university. New directives by the Commission for University Education are raising questions on whether they will result in improved quality of education.

Even Harvard University holds dramatically different theories and views on financial economics than does the University of Chicago. The two institutions compete on Nobel Prize awards and their rival theories form the basis of financial markets around the world. If those two institutions moved to Kenya, they would be forced to stop diversity of opinions and creativity arguably lowering quality to mediocre standards.

Next, CUE mandated that all management and governance structures in universities must be the same. At what point should government dictate boards of directors or management structures of any public or private industry?

Should smaller rural institutions be forced to do the same thing as big urban entities? Do all institutions have the same needs? Organisation development research shows such actions cause an over-organised situation that leads to slow responsiveness, lack of inventiveness and poorly educated students.

Then this July, CUE called a meeting of all university vice chancellors. The goal: require all faculty at all universities to hold the exact same titles and get promoted the same way. Imagine CAK required Airtel, Orange, and Safaricom to only promote employees according to its criteria.

USIU might call a particular type of faculty an “assistant professor” under the North American model while the University of Nairobi might call a similar faculty a “senior lecturer” under the British model.

What if Strathmore University desires to promote based on research published in top international journals while Kenya Methodist University may promote more on teaching quality?

Why would obsession with output matter? Why would changing the institutional criteria that lowered Kenya’s education outcomes?

Share your views at #KenyaEducation- Quality on Twitter.

**********

Prof Scott serves as the director of the New Economy Venture Accelerator at USIU’s Chandaria School of Business and Colorado State University. Contact: www.ScottProfessor.com, info@scottprofessor.com or follow on Twitter: @ScottProfessor

Join dozens of other Business Daily reading social entrepreneurs, investors, bankers, donors, and researchers at the upcoming Social Entrepreneurs Networking Event at Safari Park Hotel at 6:30pm