Let's Keep Universities but Do Away With Degrees

By Wandia Njoya

After two decades of the neoliberal gutting down of Kenyan universities, Kenya’s president has now gone for universities' jugular. He has cut off the university as a route for social advancement among the non-elite class. The slicing of the jugular came with the recent university admissions when the government announced that more than a half of them would be turned into technical programmes and institutions. At first, the government announced this move as a choice of the students themselves, but later on, it became evident that many students were caught by surprise.

Kenyan universities have maintained a semblance of independence from direct patronage by Kenya’s aristocracy. As long as universities have existed in Kenya, and especially after the expansion of university education by Kenya’s second president, Daniel arap Moi, a child from a village had a shot in the Kenyan imagination of becoming next in line to the presidency. (For the moment, the integrity of the process is not considered here.) Now that President Uhuru Kenyatta has ditched his deputy, he has got his bureaucratic robots to slice the jugular of Kenya’s schooling system and let it bleed to death.

As is to be expected, the Kenyan media has celebrated the event, thus becoming the conduit for fairly unbelievable stories that clothed Kenya’s feudal politics in the parlance of employment and The Market (as opposed to the regular markets that we all love). Like clockwork, the media
published headlines such as “Are degrees no longer hot?“, wrote op-eds justifying technical and vocational education and training (TVET) as a better alternative to a regular university degree, or held town hall meetings that gave a semblance of public participation by fielding questions from youth who had clearly not understood that they are pawns in a system that just does not care about them. This move will not surprise anyone with knowledge of the aristocratic class system in Kenya and the neoliberal turn of the 1980s. It has been a long time coming.

Missionaries, colonial settlers and the colonial state

Since colonial times, the Kenyan state has been hostile to Africans receiving any type of formal education that does not bend to imperial interests. At the start of colonialism, this hostility came through the missionary condemnation of African rituals, professions and apprenticeships as evil, dubbing, for example, herbal medicine as “witchcraft,” and all the while shipping indigenous knowledge and crafts to London.

When formal British education was introduced to Kenya, there was tension between the competing interests of the missionaries, the colonial settlers and the colonial state. The missionaries were primarily interested in converts, and so reading was essential to their education. The settlers, however, were interested only in manual labour, and were frustrated that the colonial government was not forcing Africans to work on the huge tracts of land that had been dispossessed from Africans. They were therefore hostile to schooling beyond trade schools, and accepted formal education for Africans only on the promise that the inclusion of Christian religious education would ensure that Africans remained compliant with the colonial interests.

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It is from the colonial settlers that Kenya inherited the narrative that education would make Africans unable to do manual work (or what today is called “useful” or “relevant to the market”), because all the African would acquire from education is big ideas and a desire for the status of the Europeans. And, from a certain perspective, the settlers were not wrong. In a stratified system such as colonial society, being at the bottom of the hierarchy, as Africans were, meant a cruel life of dispossession, forced labour and taxes. Africans could not be enticed to go to school if there was no carrot in the form of exemption from this oppressive life. And once that door was opened, it would only be a matter of time before Africans demanded, as Frantz Fanon famously said in The Wretched of the Earth, “to sit at the settler’s table, to sleep in the settler’s bed, with his wife if possible.”

There was a second element of truth to the settlers’ fears. The settlers were familiar with the fact that even in the belly of the empire, aristocratic education had the effect of paralysing one’s thoughts and sense of reality. In Victorian England, the industrialists complained that aristocratic education from prestigious public schools and Oxbridge had rendered their children incapable of running the companies their parents expected the children to inherit.

The settlers did not need to point to London to see the truth of this: the bulk of the colonial administration was made up of graduates of elite British schools, and even the settlers called their own colonial administration stifling and suffocating. The list of complaints by the British settlers are depressingly similar to the complaints that a Kenyan today would make: the government borrowing loans at high interest rates, failing to address the economic depression, moribund, “dependent on an
uninstructed electorate situated 6000 miles away, and characterised by a continuous epidemic of public meetings, which produce much eloquence, heady talk and little practical benefit to the [white settler] community as a whole”.

The Kenyan state needs to minimise the number of contenders for elite status that has been the goal of university education for almost three centuries. The idea, therefore, that we do not need Kenyans to go to university because there is no employment is a fantasy at best, and propaganda at worst.

The aristocratic values which the settlers were wary of would return to Kenya in the 1980s when the World Bank proposed to African Vice-Chancellors to eliminate universities, since African countries needed basic education, not higher education. The audacity of the proposal notwithstanding, it is hardly surprising that the university administrators would not comply and phase themselves out of a job. But later, as Ayesha Imam and Amina Mama report in their book chapter, “The role of intellectuals in limiting and expanding academic freedom”, the World Bank got their wish by starving African universities of money and going to the extreme of demanding that purchases of books and journals be first approved by the Bank.

The undermining of African higher education was motivated by the desire to elevate top-ranking American and British universities to luxury services afforded by the world’s elite by pushing for a global commodification of university education through the World Trade Organization (WTO).

To see that the complaint of “useless” and elitist graduates has not changed a century later gives us food for thought. But it is not as disturbing as the fact that Kenyan citizens today are strange bedfellows with colonial settlers and British industrialists, sharing the same complaints about the Kenyan ex-colonial state and its aristocratic schooling system. When communities of different geographies, cultures and political inclinations have the same complaint about university graduates, it is time for academics to abandon the old strategy of accusing society of not understanding what university education is for. We need to either concede that society is right, or we explain the truth. I choose the latter.

**Justifying why Kenyans don’t need university education**

To explain the mess of the system that is now receiving its last kick from the president, I will address three justifications for the bizarre turn of events in university education:

1. People shouldn’t get degrees because there is no employment.
2. Degrees make graduates become employment seekers rather than employers.
3. Degrees do not give Kenyans skills which are “useful” or “relevant” to The Market, such as entrepreneurial skills for business or technical skills for building infrastructure.

**The lack of employment justification**

This justification should be fairly easy to explain by pointing out that the availability of employment is an economic, rather than an educational, function. In Kenya, however, this argument routinely falls on deaf ears for psychological and ideological reasons.

Psychologically, tackling the economy is too daunting for simple minds fed on the Anglo-American logic of easy and instant solutions to complex and long-term problems. It would require addressing the political economy, being an active citizen and making certain demands politically.
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In contrast, blaming schools for unemployment is comforting. The majority of the school population is made up of minors who cannot speak back, and of teachers who are fairly powerless in terms of employment conditions and even the syllabus, especially in these neoliberal times when teaching has been transformed into slavery by managerial and regulatory regimes of accountability.

Blaming the education system has an added ideological benefit – it justifies employers exploiting labour in the name of graduates not being adequately prepared for The Market. Unfortunately, the trade union movement has been too paralysed to come up with an effective counter-argument, and those who are still in permanent employment have failed to establish worker solidarity with their colleagues suffering on gig terms.

In any case, there is an argument to be made against using educational accomplishment for employment. The reliance of employers on academic certificates is a form of discrimination, since those who are employed will always be those with the resources to get an education. Reliance on academic achievement also makes the school system subsidise employers by sparing them the cost of equipping their employees with the requisite skills.

Any country that has a backbone should tell businesses to shut up and train their own employees at their own cost. But in this era of state capture, that is unlikely to happen.

The education for employment justification

It is important to clarify that employment was never the immediate goal of the British-oriented university education system that Kenya inherited. In Victorian England, university education and admission through the examination system were primarily a tool of assimilation for the rising middle classes into the aristocracy. It was through the university system that members of the middle class gained access to the social and symbolic power of European aristocracy, which remains the source of cultural legitimation in today’s world. In turn, the middle classes were offered an opportunity to become part of the burgeoning British Empire. As a consequence, most of the colonial administrators were graduates of public schools and Oxbridge, and even now, the rising inequality in Britain has been attributed to the fact that this same cohort still dominates British politics and institutions.

Similarly, university education in Kenya was an opportunity to be assimilated into the colonial state. The first university graduates were the children of Chief Koinange, a colonial collaborator. One of his children, Mbiyu, received education from elite schools in three continents: Alliance High School in Kenya, London School of Economics in the UK and Columbia University in the US. He was also a Rhodes scholar at the University of Cambridge. He later became the brother-in-law of the first president, Jomo Kenyatta, and was in the president’s core cabinet for most of his life in independent Kenya.

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With the outbreak of the Mau Mau war in the 1950s, and with the rise of the United States as a global power, the British government jacked up the availability of university education to raise a KiKuyu middle class that would provide the civil servants for the colonial state. After independence, the first president saw the university as fulfilling precisely the same role, and as Mwenda Kithinji argues in his brilliant book, *The State and the University Experience in East Africa: Colonial Foundations and Postcolonial Transformations in Kenya*, the first president had no intention to expand university education since he had the KiKuyu elites that he needed. The second president, a member of a minority ethnic group, then expanded university education in order to widen the Kenyan middle class to include people from other ethnic groups. It is therefore wishful thinking, if not delusion, for Kenyans to believe that the government schooling system was ever about employment. The schools have always been about class status and power.

However, the popular belief in education for employment is understandable, because the expansion of the control of the (ex)colonial state and global capital by the British and Kenyan elite was experienced by ordinary Kenyans as employment.

But almost 60 years after independence, there is no longer a need for the Kenyan elite to provide Kenyans with university education. In the 1960s, when there were not enough British-educated Kenyans to run the civil service, the Kenyan elites were the first generation in their families to go to British schools. Today, however, there are enough British-educated Kenyans to run the ex-colonial state. The children of the elite are in power, and they also have children and grandchildren whom they want to ascend to power. Moreover, the inequality in Kenya’s education system necessarily means that those who perform well are children of middle-class parents who can afford private school education and can take over the bureaucracy and civil service through patronage, rather than through academic achievement.

The elites of Kenya, whom the current education system serves, have enough of their children and relatives to work in government, and enough of second-generation middle-class children to do their work. With families of a minimum of four wives and dozens of children, the elites have enough personnel.

Moreover, the elites cannot afford an educated Kenyan population outside of government. The Kenyan state needs to minimise the number of contenders for elite status that has been the goal of university education for almost three centuries. The idea, therefore, that we do not need Kenyans to go to university because there is no employment is a fantasy at best, and propaganda at worst. The goal of the government education system in Kenya has never been employment. Employment was simply a side effect. And employment seekers were not supposed to be ordinary Kenyans; they were supposed to be the elites entering top government posts through family ties and club networks.

**The “useful” and “relevant” skills justification**

Given this history of the imperial education system, it is almost laughable that university scholars have sought to justify themselves as providing skills that are useful for graduates in *The Market*. That said, it is a lie to which I dedicated a significant part of my career, until I realised that studying the arts can never be “marketable” in an anti-human economic and political system.

That aside, the fantasy of making university education appear “relevant” has been a public relations exercise in which even the British academy was engaged in the 19th century after industrialists complained that universities were not training their sons to take over the family industries from their fathers. In fact, John Brown argued in 1970 that the British elite university could not find a strong enough argument to defend the imperial education based on the Roman and Greek classics. However, it won over the industrialists by what he calls “the parlance of advertising” and an
“imaginative sales effort”. Rather than argue for university education on its own merit, the universities assimilated the critique about their lack of “practical skills”, and claimed that elite class manners were a skill in and of themselves.

To put it simply, the universities told the business elite that they needed knowledge and habits of aristocrats for them to be “successful”. It was not enough to make money; one had to be sophisticated and convincing, able to talk across cultures and social class.

Before my road to Damascus conversion, I made this same laughable argument myself. Now when I think of it, this defence of university education belongs to the same whatsapp group as the products of business coaches and motivational speakers who promise “soft skills”, like how to speak convincingly, how to make an elevator pitch, how to dress to look presentable, and all other forms of self-improvement for The Market. We academics making those arguments are no different from those who give tutorials on how to have English “afternoon tea the correct way”.

**We should do away with universities - as they are now**

If universities, as they currently stand, are useful only to the elites, it should come as no surprise that the elites are now destroying them. After all, the universities are theirs.

But rather than fight for universities to remain public institutions in their current form, we the people need to fight for them to become truly public by removing degree programmes and turning them into a space for knowledge and culture. We should break down the walls of admissions and examinations. We should diversify and increase opportunities for people to learn through cultural centres, festivals and public libraries. We should make public engagement, like dialogues under a tree, and visits to what Odero Oruka called “sage philosophers” a part of formal education. For skills training, we could resort to apprenticeships as a way to enter a profession and facilitate peer review as a way to improve services.

Two things must definitely be removed from the university as an institution: 1) certification; and 2) the interference and regulation in university education by the state. Both have reduced university education to a cynical process of gaining papers to access elite status and titles, and of measuring outcomes and indicators like a balance sheet.

Most of all, we must remove the institution of the imperial elite, which is made up of people who gain wealth and power through their manipulation and control of the commons – land, natural resources, labour and knowledge.

Africa may not always have offered degrees, but it has had universities for millennia. We can do away with degrees and retain universities. If we divorce training for the workplace from university education, universities can return to being sites of knowledge that are open to the public and that benefit society. Right now, universities are hardly different from members-only clubs for those who survive the hazing ritual of examinations and gain the right to become snobs who undermine democracy and social justice for the rest of their lives.

But to scuttle such fundamental and dynamic reforms to education, the economy and politics, the president has now sacrificed the dreams of an entire generation of Kenyan youth – however contradictory those dreams may be – in order to sustain the exploitative social status of his family and the ruling elite. This situation is not only unjust; it is also untenable.
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