

# **Bridging the Gap Between Researchers, Policymakers and End Users through Open Distance Learning: Experience at The Open University of Tanzania**

*Joseph F. Mbwiliza and Halima Kilungu*  
The Open University of Tanzania

***Abstract:** This paper is premised on an unmistakable fact of the existence of a hiatus, a disjuncture between knowledge production and knowledge utilization. It argues that there is need for change of mindsets at both ends, and proposes a programme of action that involves all stakeholders into a partnership. The experiences gained through different research activities at The Open University of Tanzania are analysed bringing out their strengths and weaknesses in transmitting the knowledge generated to end users and proposes what needs to be done in order to move forward by widening research objectives which go beyond intellectual needs and desires. This enlarged scope should include a dissemination strategy which leads to utilization of knowledge so produced. The paper concludes with a proposal for a national dialogue which will lead to identification of priority areas in the national and regional economy that can be addressed through University research and dissemination plan in collaboration and with the support of government and the private sector.*

**Key Words:** research utilization, policy makers and end users; open and distance learning

## **INTRODUCTION**

There are three core functions of any university as currently understood. Briefly stated these are teaching, research and consultancy. The weight and importance attached to each of the three in the overall functioning of a university will vary from one university to another. That is why a distinction is often made between research intensive universities and normal teaching universities although trends indicate that, this distinction is increasingly narrowing down. It is now common to find in one university specialised departments and institutes for research and consultancy alongside its teaching function. Examples are myriad, but we may cite the New School for Social Science Research in New York and Venda University of Science and Technology in South Africa. But whatever differences that may exist in the universities perception of the relative importance of their core functions, ultimately all must account for the rationale of their creation. What are universities for in an African context? Politically, they are with rare exception symbols of a post colonial era. Some even became curiosities because of the magnificent buildings well tended lawns and paved roads and pathways surrounded by squalor in the unplanned settlements. Surely there must be more reason behind the decision to invest in such expensive enterprises than sheer national pride, Nyerere (1964).

And surely the answer to the question must go beyond the provisions of the Charter that established the institution. There is a strong case in defence of the old age argument that, the rationale for the existence of any institution of higher education is not to be sought within the legal instruments which legitimate its creation but is to be sought in the wider society surrounding it. Its vision must be service to humankind and since charity begins at home, the local and national communities. Without this vision of a strong commitment to serve society, universities by their very nature slide into eliticism, operating as self-serving institutions oblivious to what takes within their immediate external environment.

However, a similar attitude is discernible among administrators and policy makers at the other side of the spectrum. There is an element of discomfort and at times mistrust when dealing with university dons which blocks effective communication between them. It is this blocking mechanism which needs radical transformation of mindsets not only of university administrators and planners but also policy makers and end users of the universities outputs be they graduates, research findings consultancies and counselling services.

In order to increase their share of contribution to the local or national development effort through the production and dissemination of knowledge, universities in developing countries and Africa in particular need to transform themselves into developmental universities. But in order to achieve this, other stakeholders such as those in the private sector, government departments, faith based organisations and civil society in general and international development partners must also be prepared to take on new responsibilities. No ready made models are being proposed in this paper. Change will require both creativity and the willingness to engage in thoughtful dialogue, both within and outside universities.

#### **STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM**

Recently the Tanzania Commission for Science and Technology while announcing its invitation for application for research grants made it clear that priority would be given to research proposals which could lead to designing of projects that would utilize existing research results to solve specific problems or bottleneck in the productive sectors of the economy (COSTEC, 2011). In short this was an admission of existence of an accumulated body of knowledge that is piling up in files and library shelves that has never reached the people it was intended to serve. In other words, it is an admission of the existence of a disjunction between what is already known through knowledge generation and its utilization at the end of the spectrum - knowledge generation, dissemination and utilization. It is this problem which this paper intends to discuss, evaluate its essential manifestation and identify opportunities and challenges that lurk behind an attempt to integrate University research activity into problem solving strategies in local and national development plans through a research and dissemination strategy.

The essential contribution of knowledge to economic competitiveness and sustainable development in general is an established fact. Such recognition has raised high expectations on the role universities ought to play in the production and dissemination of usable knowledge. A number of questions have been raised in this regard but more particularly concerning three areas: Are our universities adequately engaged in the national effort of poverty reduction? To what extent are they providing an adequate return on investment beyond mere platitudes? On the other hand there are questions being asked whether the general public is a better judge about what universities should do and what not to do or even how to do it. The debate on the role of universities in developing countries is important for several reasons among which we may mention the strategic role of education in general and knowledge and skills in overcoming underdevelopment, (Bujra, 2001). There are several reasons which can be advanced in support of this claim. Firstly, it is now, in our time, not enough to rely on rich natural endowments such as oil and gas reserves, minerals, forests, lakes and ocean resources without the contribution of local intellectual added value. This has been the Achilles heel of development initiatives throughout Africa. The second reason is that, knowledge is not a commodity that can be bought and put to work with little additional efforts. For knowledge to work, a strong local knowledge base needs to be created and nurtured. Without this, the world's information riches will remain out of our reach and therefore, further devaluing and rendering ourselves irrelevant on the vehicle of human development.

In discussing the role of universities in promoting sustainable development we will focus on three main questions:

- How is the evolving role of universities in developing countries generally and in Africa and Tanzania in particular both a response and at the same time a reaction to forces unleashed by the phenomenon of globalisation?
- What does this transformation mean for African universities in general and those in Tanzania in particular?
- How should universities in Africa and those in Sub-Saharan Africa address the challenges raised by the transformation through which they are going and how should they position themselves to serve their communities better while responding to the external environment?

In answering these questions we have to determine that salient factor which characterise an African university from any other university. Needless to say, universities whatever pretences they may have are ultimately socially embedded. How for example is the American university in Cairo or Nairobi different from the University of Cairo or Nairobi? The difference is more than semantic. What they share is their commonality as universities. The relationship ends there once you raise issues of accountability. Names are indeed labels but labels carry with them a deeper meaning. To whom are our universities accountable? To what extent can African universities claim ownership of their curricular? Does ownership in this respect mean control? Allow us to quote from Prof. Is-ha Oloyede (2011) speech: “While the continent has abundant resources and skills, it does not have the will power to have education on the top of its agenda.

This statement by Professor Oloyede speaks loud above the predicament of the African intellectual. On the one hand he is neglected while on the other society places very high expectations out of her/his work. But we know where power and influence resides. Here again let Prof. Oloyede speak:

“If the leaders organise society in such a way they can demolish a school to give way to build a hotel ..... or you pay your members of parliament higher than you pay university professors, you are making a statement about how much you value higher education.”

And in his keynote address to the same conference on Higher Education and Sustainable development Prof. Akpezi Ogbuigwe (2011) said that to ignore the higher education sector in economic and sustainable development was to ignore the power of knowledge residing in the universities and the power of the youth in contributing to responsible, critical and effective decision making.

There have been initiatives taken by universities to create frameworks for cooperation with industry and business but these initiatives have not been exploited to their full potential. When a faculty of Engineering was established at the University of Dar es Salaam (1974), an office was created to coordinate university teaching with industry. But that relationship was not owned by both the University and industry. As a consequence it remained to serve the purposes of teaching-field attachment. Later in the 1980s, the University went a step further when it created an Institute of Production Innovation. But here again no strong links were established with industrial establishments. The tendency was to go it alone.

The same can be said about social science research. One of the oldest creations intended to generate knowledge through research was the establishment of the Economic Research

Bureau which was staffed with eminent economists that this country has ever produced. Prof. Justinian Rweyemamu (late), Prof. Mbilinyi and Prof. Wangwe all have been associated and served the Bureau. A lot of research and publications have come out of the Bureau yet with little impact on the larger society. Despite the existence of competent personnel with requisite qualification these remain like the biblical prophets in their home countries. The same can be said of the Bureau of Resource Assessment and Land Use Planning (BRALUP) now known as the Institute of Resource Assessment (IRA). More often than not all these end up converting themselves into guilds of consultants working for financial gain with minimal interest in dissemination of knowledge gained from their research output.

#### **THE OPEN UNIVERSITY OF TANZANIA: OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES**

Operating within its Vision and Mission, The Open University of Tanzania has a Research Policy that provides entry point for engaging itself in research and dissemination beyond publications. This can be done within the framework of goals and objectives spelt out in our National Five year Development plan 2011/12 – 2014/15 which was launched by the President in Parliament on 8 July, 2011. The plan is in fact a restatement of the objectives enshrined in the Millennium Development Goals (MDG 2000), The Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP 2000), The Poverty Reduction and Growth Strategy (PRGS 2004), and National Strategy for Growth and Reduction of Poverty popularly by its Kiswahili acronym (MKUKUTA).

There are currently a lot of research activities being carried out in the faculties which could serve as building blocks for a university wide coordinated outreach programme for research dissemination that is more focused and result oriented. Such programmes not only would they strengthen University community relations but also reinforce teaching and learning on both researchers and students. In the Faculty of Science for example, there are a number of ongoing research. One such research is on promoting livestock development and has brought together researchers from the University of Copenhagen, Sokoine University of Agriculture and The Open University of Tanzania. However its objectives are narrowly defined and limited in scope targeting extension officers rather than livestock keepers directly (Minga *et al.*, 2009).

Another ongoing research located in the same faculty is the one addressing reproductive performance of small holder diary cattle in Rungwe district (Gimbi and Kimambo, 2000). Whereas this research would have generated much interest amongst smallholder livestock keepers, specialists in animal production and policy makers in the Ministry responsible for animal production, the research team is exclusively academic while dissemination of their research findings most evidently will be through publications.

In the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences research was undertaken on the causes for the sudden outbreak lynching of albinos in some parts of the country. Research findings produced a play which was then put on CD for dissemination to policy makers and community leaders (Mbogo, 2009). In the same Faculty there is planned research on the recurrence of mass murders and retributive crimes in the Lake Victoria region. In all these initiatives collaboration with government law enforcement agencies for dissemination of research findings is not guaranteed. (Mbwiliza, Waane and Pallangyo, 2011). The Centre for Community Economic Development has a lot of opportunities for engaging students and lecturers and communities in problem solving research in a participatory manner. Similar opportunities exist in the Faculty of Business Management, the Faculties of Law and Education. Legal research could easily be incorporated into their Legal Aid programme to educate communities on aspects of the law which impinges on their daily lives and demand

that civil rights be protected. In Education, we witness a gradual erosion of morality and increase in juvenile delinquency yet we have a sufficient stock of psychologist and social-workers that could team to propose interventions to arrest the trend. These alongside the problem of drug abuse are areas which would attract many stakeholders and supporters.

These problems are already known in society. Potential stakeholders already exist and indeed in some cases attempts to address some of them are on. But these are isolated and uncoordinated and hence have no impact on society. What is required is a shared vision and coordinated effort through a dissemination and utilisation plan (*Mwananchi* (newspaper) of June 10, 2011). The purpose of dissemination of research is not in the amount of publications which will be produced out of a particular research project but the utilisation of the research findings. This is what distinguishes this kind of research from conventional ivory tower armchair research. It requires a shift from our obsession with theoretical rigour with mesmerizing jargon and terminologies to down to earth proactive, interactive and ultimately a more effective research paradigm (Lomas, 1993).

## **RESEARCH DISSEMINATION, UTILISATION AND INNOVATION**

### **What Role can Universities Play?**

Dissemination as we have observed is an active and sustained effort to generate a desirable change. For dissemination to realize these objectives effective methods of dissemination must be used. It therefore needs careful planning that is participatory. What is aimed at is that at the end, the target group must be able to innovate or improvise in response to a problem. In this lies the magic for economic growth, the very basis of knowledge based economy (Tanzania Vision 2025). These changes could be technological, organisational, or marketing strategy.

Dissemination of research imposes heavy responsibilities on universities. Research and knowledge generation are some of their core functions and society expects them to deliver. And yet, there is a gap between knowledge generation and knowledge utilization through innovation. But are universities good at disseminating new knowledge in more effective user friendly manner? Here opinions differ. There are some who would say yes they can, while others would simply limit the role of universities to knowledge production. In order to move beyond knowledge generation to knowledge dissemination there is need to bring knowledge and technological knowhow which resides in industry and business closer. We need to build a bridge to interface between universities and industry in our case here with the confederation of industry, the Tanzanian (IIT) Chamber of Commerce, Agriculture and Industry (TCCAI) and the private Sector Development Foundation (PSDF) on the one hand; and respective sectoral ministries. It is through these networks that we will claim our role in any national or regional innovation schemes.

If we want to elevate universities to occupy the front seat among key players of national innovation schemes we have to utilize fully our bargaining chips, our relative advantages we have over our potential competitors both internally as well as external. It rewards talent and creativity and invests in human resource development and training. But above all it has among its priorities the development of information and communication infrastructure. The World Bank now includes the knowledge economy as one of its indices for measuring social and economic development. Some of the indicators used for measuring country's performance include:

- The extent of economic incentives and institutional regime that provides sound economic and institutions that permit efficient mobilisation and allocation of resources to stimulate

optimal creativity and incentives for efficient creation, dissemination and utilization of existing knowledge.

- The existence of an educated and skilled cadre of workers capable of continuously upgrading and adapting their skills to efficiently create and use new knowledge.
- An effective innovation system made up of firms, research centres and universities, professional bodies that can keep up with the knowledge revolution and tap and assimilate/adapt it to local needs.
- The existence of a modern and adequate information infrastructure that can facilitate the effective communication, dissemination and processing of information and knowledge.

How then can universities position themselves to effectively play their role within the national innovation system?

In order to answer this question, we must first examine the advantages and essential attributes universities can marshal and bring into the national innovation system. Universities all over the world act as “antennae” to capture and adopt external knowledge as they are within the global knowledge community. It is at universities where we find a very high concentration of highly qualified labour force to which both industry and business turn for partnerships and academic spin-offs. These attributes create opportunities for them to be regarded as first choice in planning a national innovation system.

We must now consider how information and communication technology enhance the role of universities in the national innovation system. Information and communication technology (ICT) is in our age, a key enabler of dissemination and innovation through different modes and platforms (Mbwiliza, 2010). These would include e-learning, distance learning both of which are ideally suited for life-long or continuing education. Universities are by the nature of their core functions already involved in a network that brings together other universities, research institutes both nationally and regionally. It is for these reasons that universities can act as points of convergence where the latest scientific discoveries are received, tested as to their relevance and usability before their transmitted to the larger community. This creates a huge window of opportunity for industry-university linkages. And in this, university alumni are the universities strategic allies. This is a resource that has not been fully exploited by African universities although there are Alumni associations bringing together graduates from foreign countries.

In order to contribute to the development of an efficient national innovation system, universities have the capacity to promote and popularize the use of information and communication technology. At the technical level inventions developed at universities can act as start-up and transmitted through bilateral arrangements to industry for product design and implementation. There is a wide area where ICT application needs to promote quality assurance and control in production and service delivery if only universities are prepared to look around and cast their nets wide.

### **What Does this Mean for Tanzania?**

Let us attempt a situation analysis as it stands today. Though they may not be the best by world standards; Universities have relatively good research facilities and are constantly upgrading their institutional regions through policy reviews. This has made it possible for production of good quality research and publications. They have also developed institutional

linkages through which resource sharing is made possible. However heavy workloads caused by unplanned expansion of student enrolment may soon have negative impact on both teaching and research. Our potential partners are not without the own problems. Our industries are facing stiff competition due to globalisation. Furthermore, they have bore the burden of inefficient economic infrastructure, inadequate and erratic power supply and inefficiencies and the transport and communication sector.

We may add there the phenomenon of idle and underutilized capacity as exemplified by the Machine Tool factory in Moshi, the Nyumbu project in Kibaha, Farm Implements factories in Mbeya and Dar-es-Salaam and idle foundries while businessmen make profits through the export of scrap metals that are recycled.

The emerging scenario is that, the link between our universities is weak. This can be demonstrated by the absence of joint ventures between universities and industry or government. Universities have therefore not been able to make significant contributions to innovative problem solving activities and little direct impact on the economy. And yet, paradoxically society is increasingly becoming impatient at what they perceive to be lack of concern on the part of academia. If this state of affairs is allowed to persist, it could have a boomerang effect on university budgets due to the diminishing government subvention and grants.

## **CONCLUSION**

It is evident that there is a glaring necessity for change in what universities have been doing and how they have been doing what they do. We need to strengthen our University networks both nationally and regionally and we must pay tribute to the African Council for Distance Education. We must abandon ivory tower theorization and armchair research and instead descend to the factories and farms for maximum impact through research, dissemination and utilization. Let our surrounding communities look at universities as their most important resource in their development effort.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

Before we end, let us propose a way forward for the consideration of participant in this conference.

Firstly, that there is a need in each of our countries, to hold a national symposium to redefine the role of universities in national development. Participants should be drawn from all stakeholders charged with the objective of mapping out strategies, setting out priorities of what needs to be done immediately to improve both quality and impact of university research and dissemination.

At the regional level and with the same objective a similar symposium could be organised to deliberate on the role of the university in promoting sustainable economic and political integration under the auspices of sub regions such as ECOWAS, SADC and East Africa Community. One of the outcomes of such a seminar or symposium should be a constituted Task Force to consider how through university innovation can enhance the regions competitive in the global economy.

We need the support of both government and the private sector. The establishment of a University-Industry Trust would be a demonstration of faith in the future of our universities.

## References

- Baker, E.L. (1984). Can Educational research inform educational practice? *Phi Delta kappa*, 65, 453- 455.
- Barry Willis (1993). *Distance Education – Strategies and Tools*. University of Idaho, Engineering Outreach: Englewood Cliffs.
- Blasiotti, E. L. (1990). “Disseminating research information to multiple stakeholders: Lessons from the experience of the national institute on Disability and Rehabilitation Research” *Knowledge Creation, Utilization* 13(3) 305 – 309.
- Bujra Abdallah (2009) “The Impact of Globalisation of Higher Education in Africa, Perspectives and Prospects.” [www.bujra.com/documents](http://www.bujra.com/documents)
- Burge, E. (1993). “Adult distance learning: Challenges for Contemporary Practice.” In Thelma Barer-Stein *et al.*, Discussion paper No.36. (1998) Prepared by the international Food Policy Institute Washington DC and International Service for National Agricultural Research, The Hague, Netherlands. Also available at [www.spri.org/sites/deaut/files/publications](http://www.spri.org/sites/deaut/files/publications).
- Gimbi, A., Kimambo, A. E. and L. N. Kanuya (2000). Reproductive Performance Mineral and Body conditions of small holder Diary Cattle Farming in Rungwe district. Ongoing research
- Kamoun Favouk (2005) “ICT and Innovation: The role of African Universities”. Crystal Multimedia Network Research Laboratory. University of Manouba: Tunis, Tunisia.
- Keane, D. & B. R. Mackneson (1993). “The application of learning theory to the instruction of adults.” In Thelma Barer-Stein and James A. Draper (eds) *The Craft of Teaching Adults*. University of Toronto, Ontario.
- Lomas, J. (1993). Diffusion Dissemination and Implementation: Who should do What? Available at [www.evidenceintoaction.org/index](http://www.evidenceintoaction.org/index) . Accessed 06 June, 2011
- Mbwiliza J. (2010). “Towards an effective learning and Teaching platform at The Open University of Tanzania” Proceedings of a Workshop on Rolling Strategic Plan Review, Bungo, Kibaha
- Minga, U., Mhoma, J. and Varisanga M. D. (2009). Transforming Small holder Livestock Farms into Profitable Entreprises. Ongoing research in Dodoma and Singida regions.
- Mbogo, E. (2009). Wachawi wa Bongo, a film in DVD format. OUT: Dar es Salaam.
- Morgan, A. (1991). *Research into student learning in distance education*. University of South Australia: Underdale,
- Nienke, M., Beintema Phillip *et. al* (1998) “A Review of the Role of African Universities in Development. Washington
- Nyerere, J. K. (1964). Address at the Official Opening of Dar es Salaam University College, in Freedom and Unit. Oxford University Press: Dar es Salaam
- Sutz, Judith (2005) “The Role of Universities 0in Knowledge Production” [www.scidev.net/en/ science and innovation](http://www.scidev.net/en/science%20and%20innovation). Accessed June 10 2011
- UNESCO (2011) “The University of the Twentieth-first Century. UNESCO conference on the Role of Universities during the 21<sup>st</sup> Century”. Oman Jordan 2001.