Conversion of Middle-Level Colleges into Universities in Kenya: Does it Affect the Economic Position of the Country?

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ABSTRACT

The conversion of middle-level colleges into universities has been recommended as the one of the greatest ways to lessen the cost of establishing full-fledged universities. This trend, if unchecked, could lead to significant reduction of the crucial colleges that have been known for imparting technical skills in students. The study was done in various universities in Kenya; to assess the extent of conversion of middle-level colleges into universities and the impact on the economy. Stratified random sampling was used as it would enhance full participation of the universities. Questionnaires, interviews and observation schedules were used to collect data. In order to test the validity and reliability of the research instruments, piloting was done in three universities. The data collected was analyzed using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 17.0. Furthermore, descriptive statistics was employed to present the results and the general trends; therefore, the results were tabulated, graphed and discussed. Additionally, there was a discussion of the findings and making of conclusions and recommendations based on the finding in the study. The research revealed that the reduction of middle-level colleges may reduce technical personnel necessary in the economy. It may cause the cost of hiring technical labor to rise. A high number of graduates produced by universities have led to high unemployment as the growth of the economy is not adequate to take in the soaring number of degree graduates. Some of the recommendations include empowerment of community colleges to help meet community educational needs and establishment of fully-fledged universities where need be.

Keywords: Middle-level colleges, Conversion, Upgrading, Universities, Economy, Kenya

INTRODUCTION

The education sector has been named as one of the key sectors that will play an essential role in driving the country to achieve Kenya Vision 2030. Within half a decade, the university sub-sector has grown from 112,229 (68, 300 male and 43,900 female) in 2006 to about 180,000 in 2010 (Kalai, 2011). By 2012, there were 33 universities in Kenya (Ministry of Higher Education, 2012); out of these, 7 were public while 24 were private. In addition, there were 24 University constituent colleges (Ministry of Higher Education, 2012); one of the most notable new universities is the Technical University of Kenya, previously known as the Kenya Polytechnic. The increase of university colleges has made university education, originally the preserve of a few, more accessible to a large number of high school graduates (Kalai, 2011).

The university sector is expected to produce globally competitive graduates who can work and undertake research for sustainable development (Kimalu et al., 2001). University education is aimed at producing graduates who meet the needs of the society, advancing the skills of the current workforce, creating entrepreneurial graduates and molding future business and community leaders (Kimalu et al., 2001).

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Specific objectives of university education are to: Promoting socio-economic development according to the ongoing development agenda: Achieve manpower development and skills acquisition: Promoting a culture of inventions, storage of knowledge and also its dissemination: Upgrading community service: Encouraging innovation and application of research findings and innovation to development (Pillay, 2010).

On the other hand, specific objectives of Technical Vocational Education and Training (TVET) colleges and institutes are: Providing adequate and appropriate skilled artisans, technologists, craftsmen and technicians through practical training: Transferring technology through a co-operative approach between TVET institutions and industries: Promoting decency and dignity of labour especially manual labour: Increasing training opportunities for high school graduates to increase employability: Providing continuous skills enhancement depending on the trainees' ability and desired pace: Imparting technical knowledge and marketable skills: Promoting the knowledge gained in previous learning institutions: Enhancing technological and entrepreneurial innovations in young people: Directing high school dropouts towards productive economic activities (Ministry of Higher Education, 2012).

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The reduction of middle-level colleges through their conversion into universities has been on the rise. This has caused the cost of hiring technical labor to rise. Additionally, the increasingly high number of graduates being produced by universities has led to high unemployment as the growth of the economy is inadequate to take in the soaring number of degree graduates. There has not been adequate research on the real impact of the high number of graduates and how they get absorbed in the economy. There have not been adequate measures to curb increased conversion of middle-level colleges into universities, and most of their administrators have not been vocal about the rate of conversion. This study investigated the threats and pitfalls in relation to the conversion of impact of the conversion of middle level collages into universities.

THE PURPOSE & OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The purpose of the study was to investigate the impact of the conversion of middle-level colleges into universities.

The study sought to find out factors leading to the conversion of middle level collages into universities colleges. It investigated the attitudes of academicians, politicians, college administrators, among other stakeholders, towards the conversion. The study also sought to find out the social and economic impact of the conversion of middle level colleges to universities on the people of Kenya.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Role of Partnerships between Universities and Colleges in the Economy

Historically, diplomas and degrees offered in mainstream universities were coursework oriented while diplomas offered by colleges were predominantly practical. The collaboration between universities and colleges is usually intended to enhance the capacity of higher learning institutions to offer both specialist and technical knowledge to students (Pillay, 2010). It is also aimed at increasing opportunities for low-performing high school leavers to pursue degree education. The resultant effect is a practical, knowledgeable workforce that is skilled in respective fields and that can communicate better, offer solutions and propose

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policies. Such a workforce goes a long way in attracting investment in the country (Kotecha, 2006). Additionally, skilled people can easily find employment in other countries.

A labor force that is both specialist and technical is desirable; however, such a labor force faces threat of extinction of the ongoing conversion of colleges is not stopped (Pillay, 2010). The conversion of middle-level colleges into universities aggravates inequity in accessing learning opportunities (Tettey, 2010). Many students who do not attain the minimum grade to join both regular and parallel programmes are usually denied access to well established technical and vocational training institutions (Manyasi, 2010). The upgrading is also characterized by increased school tuition. These factors eventually cause discrimination of a considerable number of people (Ngolovoi, 2008). Additionally, women are likely to be discriminated against, as university admission requirements are higher than college requirements. The lower cut-off points necessary for admission are not sufficient (Ngolovoi, 2008).

Conversion of Middle-Level Colleges in the World

In the 1990s, a wide gap between jobs requiring skilled personnel and availability of employees with such skills. Community colleges were developed in a bid to respond to the situation (Mwangi, 2011). They imparted skills that would help combat unemployment. They targeted high school graduates especially those that who did not attain the required university entry grades. The community colleges also targeted the high number of people who needed to be retrained. Retraining was one of the best choices for people who sought to enhance their skills and remain competitive in the job market, lost their jobs or sought to change their profession. The colleges became popular especially because of the training given encouraged openness in the admission and representation of students, long-term learning and entrepreneurship.

In Mozambique, middle-level colleges and technical institutes were established to promote equity and encourage entrepreneurship for many jobless youths (Dieltiens, 2008). Students meet who failed to attain university entry points were encouraged to join the colleges. In early 2000s, the Mozambican government started advancing loans to students in a bid to enhance access to all students.

Conversion of Middle-Level Colleges in Kenya

Kenyan universities are increasingly using mid-level colleges to admit the large number of high school dropouts looking for regular and parallel programmes (Kalai, 2011). Consequently, the rate of conversion of technical institutes and mid-level colleges to university colleges and campuses is rapid (Lewa, Mutuku&Mutuku, 2010). Since 1988, more than ten institutes and colleges have been converted into mainstream universities or university colleges(World Bank,2010).Some of the institutions that are now offering degrees in collaboration with universities include, Kitui Teachers college, Bondo Teachers College, Kabianga Farmers Training Center, Kenya Science Teachers College, Kenya College of Communication Technology (World Bank,2010). Some university colleges include Pwani University College, Chuka University College and Kisii University College. Mombasa Polytechnic is also providing degree courses (World Bank, 2010).

Recently, the Higher Education Loans Board (HELB) embarked on issuance of loans to students in Kenyan colleges (Wainaina, N.d.); previously, loans were only given to university students. These recent measures are aimed at helping students from humble backgrounds to access education at all levels (Wainaina, N.d.). However, the initiatives have created a perception that college education is very similar to university education (Johnson and Hirt, 2011). In addition, some companies and government institutions prefer college graduates as

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opposed to university graduates due to the perception that they are practical in the work place Kalai, 2011).College courses examined by government institutions such as Kenya Accountants and Secretaries Education Board (KASNEB) and Kenya National Examinations Council (KNEC) have been on regular demand (Kalai, 2011).

When colleges begin collaboration with universities, they may be expected to follow certain guidelines laid down by universities for a successful partnership. Quite often, these guidelines are not followed to the letter; they may touch on academic qualifications, status of facilities, and duration of courses among others. The resultant scenario caused by inadequate attention to the learning environment is production of unskilled labor force. This scenario threatens the state of the economy in that it does not offer incentive for innovation and foreign investment (Buchere, 2009).

The Effect of too Many Degree Students on Graduates' Performance

The rapid conversion of colleges in Kenya and the consequent number of degree graduates has been blamed for lack of skills among graduates (Kimalu et al., 2001). The available physical facilities including lecture halls and halls of residence cannot cater for the high student numbers do not match increased student numbers(Akoojee and Nkomo, 2007); an uncomfortable and inadequate learning environment not only puts pressure on resources but produces half-baked graduates (Kimalu et al., 2001). Students overcrowd in lectures halls and may not learn well (Akoojee and Nkomo, 2007).The quality of learning in universities has been compromised in that many universities are charging high fees for parallel programs, which have been increased greatly. Parallel programmes are attractive to students who perform dismally in their high school graduates; those who afford them are most the children of the middle and the upper class (Buchere, 2009).

Additionally, the number of lecturers is low compared to the number of students; it eliminates the opportunities for personal attention to graduates (Akoojee & Nkomo, 2007). Lack of adequate staff, lack of financial support and poor remuneration of academic staff affect the quality of education (Kimalu et al., 2001). The lack of enforcement of Intellectual Property Right (IPR) and data base for innovation and other research also affect the quality of assessment projects, thesis and dissertations (Kotecha, P., 2006). The ranking of Kenyan universities in Africa and across the world also reflect the quality of education in higher learning institutions (Lewa et al., 2010). The most highly rated university in Kenya, the University of Nairobi is rated number 9 in Africa and 1326 in the world (Odour, 2014).

Impact of upgrading Middle-Level Colleges on Economy

The expansion of middle-level colleges has occurred more as a private sector initiative/enterprise. The failure of the occurrence as a public enterprise has caused slow economic growth. This is because neoliberal policies are not applied to generate economic growth. Such policies would be of great help in reducing income inequalities and mitigating market failures (Johnson & Hirt, 2011).

In the new middle-level colleges, there is a shortage of lecturers teaching pharmacy, laboratory technology and other science and technology courses (Lewa, Mutuku & Mutuku, 2010). Failure to check on this trend could lead to serious underinvestment in science and technology in the future. Presently, it is costly to undertake such courses. There has been increasing pressure by the political and business elite for the establishment of regional universities (Aina, 2010). This has partly caused the upgrading of mid-level regional colleges into university campuses or colleges.

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RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A research design is the procedure chosen by a researcher to study a particular hypothesis; it includes the researcher's preference of qualitative or quantitative methodology, and how, if any, causal relationships between variables will be explored (Orodho, 2009). The researcher used non-experimental descriptive survey design to determine the factors leading to the conversion of middle-level colleges and the total impact on the economic position of Kenya. A survey is a method of collecting data through administration of questionnaires and interviewing a sample of individuals. The study intended to collect opinions from the lecturers and university administrators about factors leading to upgrading of colleges and their impact on the economy. The researcher collected secondary data by conducting a literature review from journal sources, relevant books and the internet. Questionnaires, interview schedules and observation checklists helped collect the primary data.

Questionnaires and interviews were used by the researcher to collect data from the sampled respondents in a study (Kombo and Tromp, 2006). The questionnaires were filled by university students and lecturers while campus administrators were interviewed. Observation checklists helped to gather essential data that could not be obtained through interviews and questionnaires. In the questionnaires, students and lecturers put their bio-data, and provided background information of the universities. This would provide information on impact of conversion of colleges on the economy. Interview guide was used to gather information from university administrators to establish the total impact of conversion of colleges.

The instruments were piloted in two universities and the process repeated after two weeks. The pilot project helped eliminate any ambiguity from the research instruments to ensure they generated valid results of the research. The universities where piloting took place were part of the study sample to avoid bias results of the study. According to Kombo (2006) and Mugenda (1999), validity is a measure of how well a test measures what it is supposed to measure. It refers to the extent to which results of a study really represent the phenomenon under investigation. Validity for this study was determined through close consultation and expert opinion of the supervisors; they confirmed the validity of the research instruments used in the study.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Conversion of Middle-Level Colleges

The conversion of middle-level colleges into universities is caused by increased pressure for regional growth and balance, demand for courses offered by fully-fledged universities, the need to cater for the high number of high school graduates.

Recent Upgrading Of Colleges into Universities

Within the last five years, about 60% of the colleges had been upgraded into universities, 38% had been upgraded earlier while 2% did not respond.

Reason for Upgrading of Colleges

Reducing the cost of establishing completely new universities was most common reason for upgrading middle-level colleges, at 47%. Upgrading was also done to cater for the increasingly high number of high school graduates at 25%, followed by the need to meet the demand for courses offered by fully fledged universities, at 16%, and pressure to enhance regional balance, at 12%.

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Threats Caused by Upgrading of Middle-Level Colleges

Some of the common threats posed by the increased conversion of middle-level colleges into universities include threat of diminishing social inclusion, 36%, likelihood of unsustainable livelihoods, 35%, diminished voice and participation of students, 19%, and gender inequity, 10%.

Table 1. Threats caused by upgrading of middle-level colleges

Threat	*Percent*
Diminishing Social Inclusion	36
Unsustainable Livelihoods	35
Diminished Voice and Participation of Students	19
Gender Inequity	10

When asked whether the increased conversion of colleges into universities reduced personal attention from lecturers, 57% strongly agreed, 20% agreed, 13% disagreed, 4% strongly disagreed while 6% neither agreed nor disagreed. When asked what reduced attention and participation translated into with regard to the competence of graduates, 52% said that graduates could not express themselves while 48% said that graduates were not creative.

Pitfalls Associated with the Admission of Students into Universities

The shortcomings associated with the admission of students into universities include admission of a significant number of students without university entry qualifications, at 56%, and diminished opportunities for vocational training, at 44%.

Some of the major reasons for the emphasis of many university campuses in Kenya are: enhancement of educational opportunities for the many students from the rural areas and creation of town campuses. Establishing town campuses is aimed at ensuring that university courses are offered in several urban areas. Town campuses became common after the Commission for Higher Education reduced the stringent rules on acreage needed for establishment of institutions of higher learning.

Impact of Conversion of Colleges on Immediate Employment

Employment occurs in various ways: 46% is employed in own businesses springing up around new universities, 33% are getting employment through upgrading of buildings and infrastructure, 13% through delivery of supplies to the university while 8% of people are employed as lecturers and administration staff.

Table 2. Impact of conversion of colleges on immediate employment

Source of Employment	*Percent*
Establishment of businesses	46
Upgrading buildings and infrastructure	33
Delivery of supplies	13
Lecturing and Administrative work	8

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Employees from well-established universities are moving to new institutions in search of higher academic and administrative positions. First class degree graduates are likely to get teaching positions alongside Masters and PHd lecturers.

Impact of Conversion of Colleges on Long-Term Employment of Graduates

The number of students who get formal employment is about 33%. About 38% of graduates establish their own informal enterprises, 15% start formal businesses while 14% are employed in the informal sector.

Table 3. Impact of conversion of colleges on long-term employment of graduates

Source of Long-term Employment	*Percent*
Own Informal Enterprises	38
Formal Employment	33
Own Formal Businesses	15
Informal Sector	14

Impact of Conversion of Colleges on Economic Cost of Labor

There is 98% probability that there is a fall in wages in some sectors due to oversupply of appropriate personnel and also a rise of wages in some specialist and technical sectors due to undersupply of appropriate personnel. There is also 2% chance that there are small changes in labor cost in both specialist and technical sectors.

Impact of Conversion of Colleges on the Cost of Education and Training

The conversion of colleges into universities and the increased number of graduates has affected the cost of education and training in various ways: rise in tuition fees, 40%, need to undertake additional specialist and technical courses, 30%, and investment in human resource development, 24%.

Table 4. Impact of conversion of colleges on the cost of education and training

Impact on Education and Training	*Percent*
Rise in tuition fees	40
Need for additional specialist and technical courses	30
Investment in human resource development	24

When asked about the source of tuition fees for parallel programmes, respondents said that 49% of all funds came from parents, 33% came from students themselves, 13% came from sponsors while 6% came from Higher Education Loans Board (HELB). Tuition fees for regular students were paid by HELB, 88%, parents, 56%, sponsors, 48% and students themselves, 24%.

Impact of Conversion of Colleges on Research and Innovation

Respondents were asked about the impact of upgrading of colleges to universities on research and innovation. 41% said that it led to more innovation and consequent employment, 59% said that the progress of research had not changed.

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When asked about the resultant effect of more research and innovation, 72% said that there was no significant change, 17% said that there was increased employment while 11% said there were new technologies.

Table 5. Impact of conversion of colleges on research and innovation

Total Effect of Increased Research and Innovation	*Percent*
No Significant Change	72
Increased Employment	17
New Technologies	11

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Rate of conversion of middle-level colleges: There is a rapid trend of upgrading of middle-level colleges into universities. About 60% of the colleges had been upgraded into universities within the last five years, 38% had been upgraded earlier while 2% did not respond.

Reasons for upgrading of colleges: Most of the reasons given for the increased upgrading of schools are related to increased demand for higher learning and growth of the number of high school leavers. Reducing the cost of establishing completely new universities was most common reason for upgrading middle-level colleges, at 47%. Upgrading was also done to cater for the increasingly high number of high school graduates at 25%, followed by the need to meet the demand for courses offered by fully fledged universities, at 16%, and pressure to enhance regional balance, at 12%.

Threats caused by upgrading of middle-level colleges: The rise in the number of new universities and high student enrolment make it difficult to offer personal attention to students and conduct sufficient research that ensures that solutions to social challenges are found. Gender inequity and mismatch of courses are bound to occur. Some of the common threats posed by the increased conversion of middle-level colleges into universities include threat of diminishing social inclusion, 37%, likelihood of unsustainable livelihoods, 23%, diminished voice and participation of students, 22%, and gender inequity, 18%.

Shortcomings of the current admission practices: Some of the shortcomings associated with the admission of students into universities include admission of a significant number of students without university entry qualifications, at 56%, and diminished opportunities for vocational training, at 44%.

Impact of conversion middle-level colleges on immediate employment: Most immediate employment occurs due to the demand for services needed by students; 46% of the people are employed in own businesses springing up around new universities. Therefore, there is rapid economic growth of areas that surround new universities. Small businesses that spring up around new universities mostly offer foods, drinks, electrical gadgets, clothes, printing and photocopying services, clothes and financial services. 33% of the people employed are involved in the upgrading of buildings and infrastructure, 13% through delivery of supplies to the university while 8% of people are employed as lecturers and administration staff. Teaching positions benefit graduates with First Class degrees.

Impact of conversion middle-level colleges on long-term employment of students: Although majority of students expect to be formally employed upon graduation, most of them, 38%,

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end up starting their own businesses due to unavailability of positions. The number of graduates who get formal employment is about 33%. 15% of graduates usually establish formal businesses while 14% get employed in the informal sector.

Impact of conversion of colleges on labor: There is 98% chance that wage rates in certain sectors will fall due to oversupply of appropriate personnel. There is also 98% chance that there will be a rise in wages in other specialist and technical sectors due to undersupply of appropriate personnel. This is because the high number of students admitted each year also corresponds to the lower aggregate points required for admission. It also translates into relaxed requirements for certain courses and the consequent over or under enrolment.

Impact of upgrading of colleges on the cost of education and training: The conversion of colleges into universities and the increased number of graduates has affected the cost of education and training. For students, they are not only needed to pay higher tuition fees, but also forced into undertaking additional specialist and technical courses in order to remain competitive. The conversion has also caused a rise in the amount of investment in human resource development.

As most modern firms are actively involved in human resource development; therefore the conversion of colleges into universities and the increased number of graduates also causes them to spend more. As most funding for regular programmes came from HELB, it is evident that the government is spending more by issuing loans. Additionally, parents of both regular and parallel students end up paying more in tuition fees; students and sponsors have not been spared too.

CONCLUSIONS

Implications to Practice

Both university education and training in vocational and technical colleges is important in the social issues affecting the country. Several factors have led to widespread upgrading of middle-level colleges. They include: reducing the cost of establishing completely new universities, catering for the increasingly high number of high school graduates, the need to meet the demand for courses offered by fully fledged universities and pressure to enhance regional balance.

Therefore there has been increasing trend of conversion of colleges without adequate establishment of new middle-level colleges. Additionally, students are being used to learning in crowded institutions. They are also paying more in tuition fees. There is likelihood of mismatch between courses and students' interests or abilities.

Implications to Policy

The Kenyan government should establish a limit to the number of middle-level colleges into universities. This will ensure that a considerable number of students enroll for vocational and technical courses. Additionally, the courses offered by new universities should be reviewed to respond to the ongoing social challenges. The Joint Admission Board, in collaboration with the Ministry of Education, should revise admission requirements to reduce the high number of students admitted and enhance matching of students' interests or abilities with the courses they enroll for.

The government should empower middle-level colleges and other vocational and technical institutions to balance the supply of both specialist and technical labor. The ministry of education should also promote advancement of masters and PhD courses in order to enhance availability of lecturers needed to teach for the rising number of high school leavers.

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Additionally, it should enact measures to ensure that the increase in university and college tuition fees does not discriminate against sections of the population.

Future Research Directions

Research should be undertaken to determine the employability of university graduates. Also, a comparative study needs to be carried out to find out the preference of college and university graduates in the work place. Additionally, a study to determine the extent of marginalization caused by high/low education qualifications or inaccessibility of tuition fees can be carried out.

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