Anticipated developments: East Africa’s private universities and privatisation of public universities in the global context

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Anticipated developments: East Africa’s private universities and privatisation of public universities in the global context

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Abstract

The growth and development of private universities has been one of the most dramatic features of African higher education in the last two decades. Using the three East African countries of Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda as a case in point, this analysis examines the extent to which developments in the region echo international trends, as well as how they illustrate contrasts. The analysis focuses on three key themes: (a) growth and historical antecedents; (b) institutional developments in terms of continuity and innovation; and (c) internationalism. While only relatively recent phenomena, private universities in East Africa and the increasing privatisation of public universities mirror developments in other parts of the world with a longer tradition of private university developments in terms of growth and historical antecedents, continuity and innovation in institutional development, as well as in internationalism. However, there are some situations in which the East African case is exceptional.

Keywords: private higher education, private universities, privatisation, globalisation, internationalism

Any discussion on private universities and privatisation initiatives in public universities in the East African countries of Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda must be preceded by a clarification of the major concepts and terminologies related to higher education in order to establish the conceptual basis that is pertinent to higher education development. One such concept is higher education itself, which encompasses a broad array of educational institutions, primarily universities that lead to the award of undergraduate or postgraduate qualifications. In this article, the terms “higher education” and “university” are used interchangeably to refer to degree-granting institutions.
The term “private university” means different things to different people, since what constitutes such institutions “…largely depends on variables adopted by a particular country” (Mabizela 2007, 20). In some countries, ownership and funding are the main determinants; in others, state legal and regulatory definitions determine the “privateness” of an institution. Added to this multiplicity of meanings – as will be examined later in the case of East Africa – is the increasing privatisation of public universities via private funding and admission of privately sponsored students, thereby blurring the distinction between private and public universities (Marginson 1997). Thus, ownership and funding fail to yield what Levy (1986, 16) labelled “ideal-type categories” of private and public universities. For the sake of analysis, this article defines private universities as degree-granting institutions that were founded by private bodies and do not receive public funding for operation and maintenance, but do operate within the confines of the rules and regulations of the establishing authorities. These institutions, for the most part, may be required to operate within state regulatory policies.

“Public university” is used to refer to institutions founded by the state, which are dependent on state financing for their operations and maintenance. Granted, many public universities are increasingly receiving funding from private sources, primarily through self-sponsored student programmes and other revenue-enhancement activities; we therefore use the term “privatisation initiatives” to capture this tendency.

The growth of private universities and the privatisation tendencies of state universities in African higher education have attracted scholarly interests from a variety of vantage points. Key themes have been in the areas of equity, quality and finance (Assie-Lumumba 2005; Zeleza & Olukoshi 2004; Sall 2004). This article extends the discourse further and seeks to extrapolate the extent to which private initiatives, as pertaining to East Africa’s universities, mirror trends in other parts of the world. This provides the context in which we employ the concept of anticipated developments, as the title anchor for this analysis. Levy (2006; 2002) argued that recent global trends in the development of private higher education – from growth, role and function – have been “unanticipated”. Given that private university development and the privatisation of public universities in East Africa is a recent occurrence, it is anticipated that the developments will generally mimic what has taken place elsewhere.

The analysis will focus on three key themes: (a) growth and historical antecedents; (b) institutional developments in terms of continuity and innovation; and (c) internationalism. While only relatively recent phenomena, private universities in East Africa and the increasing privatisation of public universities mirror developments in other parts of the world with a longer tradition of private university developments in terms of growth and historical antecedents, continuity and innovation in institutional development, as well as in internationalism. However, there are some situations in which the East African case is exceptional.

Since this analysis implies international comparisons, some caveat is warranted since local and international developments are context-bound. Variables operating in one region may differ considerably from situations in others, thereby complicating
comparisons. The three East African countries of Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda may have different variables operating to influence higher education developments in each state. The region as a whole also contrasts sharply with the rest of the world, thereby complicating any comparative attempt. Nevertheless, the premise in this article is that it is possible to delineate broad features of development and deviations in two contrasting regions. Thus, after examining private universities, the developments in public universities will follow.

**Private universities**

The growth of private universities in areas hitherto bereft of such institutions has been one of the surprising developments in the higher education landscape in the last decade-and-a-half. Growth has occurred in Africa (Thaver 2008), Asia (Lin 2005; Tursunkulova 2005), Central and Eastern Europe (Levy 2005; Giesecke 1999) and Latin America (Bernasconi 2003). While the growth in the number of institutions has been surprising, student enrolment still pales in comparison with that in public universities. Systematic data is still lacking, particularly for Africa, although preliminary data available for the continent, as indicated in table 1, indicates that public university enrolment still exceeds private enrolment, despite the latter’s numerical surge.

**Table 1: Private university enrolment in selected African countries, 2002**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Private enrolment</th>
<th>% of all enrolment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>South Africa</td>
<td>30,000</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zimbabwe</td>
<td>1,797</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ghana</td>
<td>5,383</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nigeria</td>
<td>19,740</td>
<td>Over 3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


The reasons for the private growth are multifarious. An international development climate that promotes market-oriented provision of education and other social services has been a catalyst for governments to promote – and entrepreneurs to invest in – private higher education. Increased demand for higher education, owing to population growth, coupled with declining state budgetary support for publicly financed university education, have created a ready market for private universities. The East African growth is characterised by growth and historical antecedents, continuity and change in institutional development, and increased internationalisation.

**Institutional massification and historical antecedents**

In a region where private universities were almost nonexistent a decade-and-a-half ago, the number of existing private universities demonstrates remarkable growth, which is summarised in table 2. The number of private universities in the three countries exceeds the public ones. In Kenya and Uganda, there are three times as many private universities
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as there are public ones. Student enrolment, too, has burgeoned. The number of private enrolments rose by around 37% in Kenya, from 3,968 students in 2001 to 5,453 in 2004 (Kenya 2005, 51), while in the same period it more than doubled in Tanzania, from 947 to 2,764 students (Kuhanga 2006, 175). In Uganda the growth was exponential, from 80 students in 1988 to 20,590 in 2004 (Tumwesigye 2006).

Table 2: Private and public universities in East Africa, 2007¹

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Public universities</th>
<th>Private universities</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No.</td>
<td>% of total</td>
<td>No.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kenya</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tanzania</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uganda</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: ¹ Only fully fledged universities have been counted; affiliated university colleges are not included. Sources: Kenya: Commission for Higher Education (http://che.or.ke/status.html); Tanzania: Tanzania Commission for Universities (http://www.tcu.or.tz/universities.html); Uganda: Tumwesigye 2006, 207–209.

This systemic growth, however, belies comparatively smaller student enrolment compared with the public universities. Private university enrolment in Kenya was only around 13% in contrast to the 87% public enrolment of over 91,000 students in 2005 (Republic of Kenya 2005). In Tanzania, the private enrolment of 12,400 students was only 24% of the total university population of 51,600 in 2007 (Ishengoma 2007, 87), while in Uganda, the student population at the public Makerere University, the premier university in the country, was 32,000 in 2003, in contrast with slightly over 20,000 students in all private universities (Carrol 2007; Salerno & Beverwijk 2007).

The catalyst for institutional massification has been multifaceted and not that different from the global rationale. In all three countries, economic liberalisation, a policy environment favourable to private sector participation in education, along with state retreat from financing of higher education, have provided impetus for private university growth. Country-specific variables also explain the growth. Rapid population growth has been more important in Kenya (Otieno 2007) and Uganda (Salerno & Beverwijk 2007) than in Tanzania, where competition among Christian churches for spheres of influence has been more vital to private growth (Ishengoma 2007).

Similar to developments in Latin America (Levy 1986), growth has followed a three-wave pattern, albeit with a slight variation. Religious universities, institutions owned and operated by religious organisations, were the pioneer institutions to be established and still dominate the private university landscape in East Africa (the first private university in the region, however, was the United States International University in Kenya, founded in 1970). Conceived as training institutions for the clergy, they have evolved into fully fledged universities offering secular programmes. Their rise and evolution in the post-1990s era reflects the demand for a unique and distinctive higher education with a religious flavour. Unlike Latin America, where Catholic universities
have been a dominant force, Protestant universities are predominant in East Africa, while Islamic institutions are making notable headway, as shown in table 3.

Table 3: Religious and nonreligious private universities in East Africa, 2008

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Religious group</th>
<th>Kenya</th>
<th>Tanzania</th>
<th>Uganda</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Catholic</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Protestant*</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Islamic</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious-leaning**</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nonreligious</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: * Includes all non-Catholic groups. ** Institutions established by private individuals, but with a strong religious foundation and orientation. Sources: Institutional websites. In a number of cases, information on the religious affiliation was missing, as institutional websites were unavailable.

The second wave of development is the elite university. These are high-cost institutions akin to the elite private universities in Latin America and the prestigious private universities and liberal arts colleges in the United States. In developing regions such as East Africa, the rise of elite universities is predicated on the decline in higher education monopoly by affluent groups, as public universities become heterogeneous owing to increased enrolments (Levy 1986). In Kenya, for instance, the double admission of students in state universities in the late 1980s and early 1990s and the growth in university numbers changed the demographic character of the institutions from enclaves of elite to mass institutions. It also increased the visibility of student involvement in national politics. High-cost private institutions offer distinctive advantages for the affluent groups: separateness, depoliticisation and possible academic superiority.

This second wave is still in its infancy in East Africa. Currently, the only elite university is Kenya’s United States International University (USIU), a member of Alliant International University in California, US. Though it was only granted a charter in 1999 by Kenya’s Commission for Higher Education, USIU has been in operation since 1970. It has the highest enrolment among private universities in Kenya, largely owing to its appeal to the elite in the region. As the most expensive university in the region – its per-quarter, tuition-only fees (over $1,600 for undergraduates and $1,500 for graduates) exceed the total student fees of some private institutions – it attracts those with the wherewithal in Eastern and Central Africa. It is patronised by sons and daughters of leaders in politics, business and nonprofit agencies, and receives the bulk of its students via corporate sponsorship. Its programmes, almost always accompanied by “international” nomenclature, convey an image of training a globalised workforce that is very attractive to elite classes beyond Kenya. In spite of these perceived benefits, Oketch (2004) contends that USIU’s quality is not in any way superior to that of other private universities in Kenya.

The third wave is the growth of demand-absorbing universities. Levy (1986, 59–60)
first used the term “demand-absorbing” to characterise private universities in Latin America that emerged to quench the thirst for university education which public universities, due to their exclusivity and elitism, could not meet. It is arguable that all universities necessarily address demand, but demand-absorbing private universities are also characterised by low quality and for-profit character. India and Japan provide a good illustration from Asia, with their disproportionately large number of demand-absorbing, tuition-dependent private universities, while similar institutions are found in Latin America and the United States.

Strict regulatory procedures have discouraged the growth of demand-absorbing types in Kenya and Tanzania. In contrast, Uganda – comparatively late in developing accreditation mechanisms – shows evidence of demand-absorbing types. Kampala International University (KIU), Kampala University and Fairland University are the well-known private universities, established by entrepreneurs, which have been at the forefront of meeting the demand for higher education beyond Uganda. However, questions of academic quality have always been raised (Barigye 2006). KIU’s medical and teacher education programmes were denied recognition in Kenya, Tanzania and even in Uganda. To assuage fears about its academic programmes, it recently sought accreditation of its programmes by NCHE.

Private growth has preceded policy development. Indeed, private universities in East Africa have grown under a policy environment that catered for public university development. The development of policy guidelines for establishing private universities and the enactment of legal instruments for their recognition followed the establishment of the first wave of private universities. The policies and legal instruments were instituted because of quality concerns and were aimed at stemming growth. The Kenya Commission for Higher Education (CHE), established in the mid-1990s, the Tanzania Commission for Universities (TUC), created in 2001, and the Uganda National Council for Higher Education (NCHE), founded in 2004, are meant to ensure quality by accrediting private universities (and public ones for Tanzania and Uganda) in response to private institutional massification.

The objectives of the three accrediting bodies have been to ensure system-wide coordination of private growth, thereby improving quality. The success of this strategy can be seen in Kenya, where programme quality in some private universities has exceeded that in the public universities. At any rate, the goal of ensuring parity in quality between private and public universities is underscored by the fact that membership of the accrediting bodies in all three countries is largely recruited from personnel associated with public universities.

The preceding analysis reveals important trends about East Africa’s private universities, which reflect global tendencies. First, growth in institutional numbers does not necessarily translate into large student enrolment. This is a trend also seen in many African countries. Second, consistent with the Latin American experience, growth has largely proceeded along a three-wave pattern: religious, elite and demand-absorbing universities. However, exceptions are notable: unlike the Latin American case, Catholic
universities are conspicuously marginal, just as the elite are the exception rather than the rule. Third, in tandem with private university growth in Asia (Wongsothorn & Wang 1995), Australia (Marginson 1997), Latin America (Levy 1986) and post-communist Europe (Suspitsin [forthcoming]), regulatory policies have stemmed growth and enhanced quality following the rise of private universities in East Africa.

It is worth noting that centralisation of the accreditation process in East Africa points to a stringent state-controlled model, which contrasts with the state-supervised model (Neave & Van Vught 1994) that is found in older systems such as the United States, and which promotes institutional autonomy and differentiation. Thus, the private university system may represent two elements common to institutional massification: an explosion of private institutions that is typical of older systems such as the US and a state-controlled regime that guides the development that is typical of newer, private higher education systems.

**Institutional development: continuity and change**

Institutional growth is just one dimension of university development. Academic programming and delivery method, student financial aid, as well as governance structures, are just as important. These attributes denote institutional development in this article. The extent to which institutional development in East Africa’s private universities mimics the public sector, and how it exemplifies innovation, are our chief concerns.

Academic programmes are the mainstay of universities, informing their character, since they provide the point of contact between the faculty, students and the labour market. The replication of public university programmes and teaching methods in private institutions is the most conspicuous characteristic of institutional development in East Africa. Academic programmes that are common to both types of institutions include education, business, humanities and social sciences. Teaching in both types of institutions is largely done through lectures, with study tutorials supplementing the lectures. This pedagogical model is a carry-over from continental European universities, which were the “mother” universities of East Africa’s pioneer state universities. Likewise, governance structures are similar to those of public institutions: as in public universities, private institutions have a tripartite administration, with a vice-chancellor as the head, assisted by two deputies, and academic affairs, as well as finance and administration.

The East African emulation of the public sector is seen internationally too, in the non-voluntary emulation that is characteristic of China and Mexico. In the latter countries, private universities emulate public ones in norms, practices, curriculum and even pedagogical methods. The impetus for this emulation was the movement of academics from public to private universities. Senior professors with vast public sector socialisation are either head-hunted or establish their own private universities, bringing with them their ethos that was acquired in the public sector. In East Africa, the leadership – both administrative and academic – has largely been sourced from the public universities;
hence the similarities in academic programming and organisational structures between the two sectors.

Emulation is also non-voluntary. Institutional and programme accreditation through state organisations is the most potent form of non-voluntary emulation. As in the United States, where institutional and programme accreditation results in almost similar degree structures within a state and region, the same process in East Africa results in no distinction between public and private universities. All private universities and their degree programmes require approval by the national accreditation agencies, which create uniformity across programmes. This approval is largely based on curricular and programmatic precedents set by public universities. The requirement that private universities need a full-time teaching staff of only 25% means that they rely on a large force of part-time academics from the public sector, who bring with them curricular and teaching methods established in the public sector. Whether emulation is voluntary or non-voluntary, legitimacy for the private sector role is assured, as long as there is a market for their products.

Private universities have also been at the forefront of innovative changes. They pioneered the development of alumni associations and student financial aid programmes, using funds generated internally. But it is in the realm of internationalism that the private universities in East Africa have been exceptional. They have led in a broad array of international programmatic services, including recruitment of international students, study abroad, distance education, partnerships, internationalised curriculum and collaborative partnerships. Institutional type, however, determines the level of internationalisation. Low-end, demand-absorbing types in East Africa have a narrow international orientation in scope and purpose, just like their counterparts in other regions of the world. As is the case elsewhere, internationalism in private higher education in East Africa is best exemplified by religious and elite institutions. For religious institutions, financial sponsorship and initial accreditation conferred the first legitimacy for the institutions. Daystar University (Anglican), Kenya Methodist University (Methodist) and University of Eastern Africa (Seventh-Day Adventist) in Kenya received heavy sponsorship and initial accreditation affiliation with United States universities. As a testament to its origin and affiliation, USIU, the only really elite university in the region, still features the name “United States”, even though the mother university has been renamed Alliant. Islamic University in Uganda and Zanzibar University in Tanzania offer a curriculum with a strong Islamic orientation owing to their strong connections with their initial sponsors in the Middle East, Organization of Islamic Conference and the Darul Iman Charitable Association. For both elite and religious-based institutions, internationalism confers legitimacy, based on initial and continuing accreditation affiliation and by addressing an international labour market that may require more than academic credentials.

A growing dimension of private internationalism is interstate penetration. No longer are private universities restricted to their national boundaries. In the developed world, this tendency manifests itself in both private and public institutions, with United States and Australia being the clear leaders. In Africa, South Africa has led the public
sector international penetration, with the University of South Africa (Unisa) opening branch campuses in the region. Within East Africa, private universities’ participation in regional penetration occurs on two levels: first is the establishment of branch campuses in the neighbouring countries. Kampala International University has opened campuses in Kenya and Tanzania as part of its internationalisation agenda; second is the hosting of programmes by other foreign universities. KCA University in Kenya hosts the Unisa doctoral programme in Business Administration. These dimensions of internationalisation are summarised in table 4.

Table 4: Emerging patterns of internationalism of private universities in East Africa

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>International dimension</th>
<th>Kenya</th>
<th>Country and institutions</th>
<th>Uganda</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Financial sponsorship and initial accreditation</td>
<td>Religious Daystar University; University of East Africa; Kenya Methodist University</td>
<td>Religious Zanzibar University</td>
<td>Religious Islamic University in Uganda</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regional penetration</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Kampala International University in Kenya and Tanzania</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Public universities

Amid the global surge in private universities is a simultaneous rise of privatisation initiatives within public universities. While, traditionally, US public universities have privatised and commercialised aspects of their operations (Bok 2003; Lee & Gaertner 1994), leading to what Clark (1998) has labelled the “entrepreneurial university”, this trend has only recently become fashionable in other parts of the world. The global impetus towards privatisation of public institutions is also at play in East Africa, in keeping with the worldwide neoliberal agenda that privatises the international development policy, promotes the privatisation of services, upholds the sanctity of the marketplace and eschews states’ financial involvement in development (Munene & Otieno 2008).

Public privatisation growth and historical antecedents

All public universities in the region now operate on a dual-track system consisting of government-sponsored students, together with private-sponsored students who pay the full cost of tuition. Privately sponsored students have been a cash cow for universities. Substantial revenues from this source were responsible for the revitalisation of Makerere University – the Makerere miracle – after decades of neglect owing to civil war. The
same revenue stream allowed Kenya’s universities to improve faculty salaries without recourse to the state treasury. At Makerere University (Uganda) and Nairobi and Kenyatta universities (Kenya), the number of privately sponsored students exceeded their state-sponsored counterparts. Key to the success of these programmes are offerings in high-demand areas of study such as business, computing, education and medical sciences. The privatisation of academic programmes has allowed public universities to confront two interrelated challenges: raise revenue and meet growing demand for higher education.

Charging tuition in public universities is a tradition in higher education in the United States. While US students in public universities may be categorised as in-state or out-of-state for the purpose of tuition fees, in East Africa the bifurcation is based on mode of admission rather than residency; government-sponsored students pay a lower tuition than self-sponsored ones. While the US system allows for change of residency status and, therefore, fee structure, that does not appear to be the case in East Africa. To a considerable degree, the privatisation of the academic space in East Africa’s public universities mimics the developments at the University of Melbourne in Australia, with the establishment – in early 2000 – of the now-defunct Melbourne University Private (MUP), a for-profit private entity in a public institution that was meant to offer degree programmes and corporate training in high-demand programmes (Ellerinton 2004).

Privatisation was also established through private corporations to exploit and manage revenue-generating activities. This corporatisation of entrepreneurship, while still embryonic, is evident in areas of food services, transport, bookstore retailing and merchandising and scientific research (Munene 2008). Kenyan universities seem to have fared better in the development of appropriate organisational framework to formalise the entrepreneurial culture. The University of Nairobi, Jomo Kenyatta University of Agriculture and Technology and Moi University have established private, fully edged corporations to manage all of the entrepreneurial activities, borrowing largely from the entrepreneurial culture in US universities. In this way the universities have essentially privatised the entrepreneurial culture in the state institutions.

**Private institutional development: continuity and change**

Academic programmes pursued in the privatised state university sector are largely the high-demand courses: business, computing, education, law and medical sciences. With the exception of the medical sciences, privately sponsored programmes mimic private universities in terms of academic offerings. Further, in addition to the minimum university admission requirements, admission to these self-sponsored programmes is based on ability to pay, rather than prior merit. In contrast, admission to the state-supported programmes is a competitive-merit scheme based on a nationwide high school graduation examination, and all programmes have a uniform tuition fee. Thus, it is not uncommon to find privately sponsored students in the competitive medical programme with lower high school achievement than those admitted under the competitive government sponsorship. These trends are well established in the private university sector; students seeking admission in private universities must be able to
pay the tuition, which varies according to the programme of study. So labour market demands and ability to pay are powerful in homogenising academic programming and providing legitimacy for the programmes’ existence in both private and “private” public university sectors.

Besides resembling the private university sector, the privatisation initiatives in the public sector reveal some innovative trends. The most prominent are partnerships established with both public and private non-university colleges to provide degree programmes. Kenya leads in this development, with Jomo Kenyatta University of Agriculture and Technology franchising 21 colleges, while Kenyatta and Moi universities have done so on a smaller scale (Otieno 2007). Under the various contract arrangements, these colleges offer the public university curriculum, charge a lower tuition and share revenue with the sponsoring university. It is a symbiotic relationship: public universities are able to enlarge their catchment area to include small rural centres, while the colleges are able to enjoy the prestige associated with public universities. These reciprocal partnerships echo the state universities-community colleges’ linkages in the United States.

A recent development is the internationalisation of this partnership. In March 2009, it was announced that Makerere University, Uganda’s premier public university and the oldest institution in East Africa, had established a partnership with Mt. Kenya University, one of Kenya’s newest private universities, for the purpose of offering its programmes in Kenya (Gathura 2009). This “unique partnership” (as the vice-chancellor of Mt. Kenya University called it) seeks to capitalise on two mutually reinforcing benefits: Makerere University is able to penetrate and expand the huge higher education market that is Kenya (there are many Kenyans studying in Uganda because it is cheaper, given the strength of Kenya’s economy), while Mt. Kenya University expands its student enrolment through the association with an established historic institution.

**Conclusion**

This article examined private university development in East Africa, with particular reference to how it epitomises global trends, and highlighted some notable exceptions. Developments within the private university sector, along with privatisation initiatives in the public one, were explored. Rather than concentrate on a multiplicity of specific illustrations, the article selected cases in the region that exemplify the major themes that define privatisation in higher education.

As has been the case in other regions of the world, the development of private universities in East Africa has followed a familiar pattern. Firstly, growth in institutional numbers has not necessarily led to massive enrolments. Public universities still dominate student enrolment, although their institutional numbers pale in comparison to private universities. Secondly, private institutional growth has occurred in three waves – religious, elite, and demand-absorbing tuition-dependent universities – which have also defined private institutional growth in Latin America and the US. Thirdly, policy development has lagged behind institutional growth and accreditation has been enacted after the private universities made their appearance. Exceptions have been identified: there is a notable
lack of elite universities, Catholic universities and low-quality, demand-absorbing universities.

Institutional development in private universities reveals both continuity in public university traditions and innovations. The universities mimicked public universities in terms of key academic programmes, teaching methodologies and administrative structure. Movements of staff from the public to the private sector, coupled with accreditation requirements, fuelled these trends towards emulating the public sector. This is a scenario not uncommon in global private university developments, particularly in China and Mexico. Besides mimicking public universities, East African institutions also demonstrated innovation in student financial aid, alumni mobilisation for institutional development, and internationalism. On the internationalism front, private universities led the way in recruitment of international students, international partnerships and linkages, and in regional inter-country penetrations. The global character and legitimacy of the private universities have been enhanced by internationalisation, where religious and elite universities have established affiliation arrangements with American universities and international Christian and Islamic organisations.

Privatisation initiatives in public universities have been catalysed by exogenous and indigenous variables. An international policy environment that privatises development and provision of social services, operating in a regional context characterised by a rapid population growth and declining state subventions for higher education, have provided conditions for privatisation of academic programmes in state universities. The admission of privately sponsored students with a different tuition fee structure in public universities has translated into a dual-track system, with private students exceeding government-sponsored ones in Kenyan and Ugandan universities. In a revenue-generating strategy, public universities have embarked on the corporatisation of entrepreneurship, further entrenching the privatisation initiatives. These twin strategies gradually paved the way for the incursion of the privatisation ethos in East Africa’s public higher education.

These privatisation trends in public universities have not been without continuity and innovation. I demonstrated how privatised programmes in public universities have reflected trends obtained in the regions’ private universities in terms of programmes, admissions and fee structure. Through franchising private provision to non-university public and private colleges, state universities have demonstrated an innovative approach to extend their catchment areas. An emerging innovation has also been the Makerere University’s franchise agreement with the private Mt. Kenya University in Kenya for the former’s academic programmes to be offered through the latter.

To summarise, privatisation in East Africa, whether through private universities or privatisation of public ones, reveals important dynamics as it echoes international trends. One outcome that is difficult to escape is the increasing blurring of differentiation between public and private universities as global and local variables shape the development of private initiatives in the institutions. While the entire university landscape in the region has changed because of privatisation, it is a change that demonstrates large continuity – the adage “the more things change, the more they stay the same” comes to mind. This,
however, should not discourage us from recognising exceptions and innovations within the region’s universities.

References


