

Why Can't Mine Be International?: An Exploration of the Challenges of Internationalisation in the Public Universities in Ghana

Gifty Oforiwaa Gyamera,
Ghana Institute of Management and Public Administration, Ghana

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Abstract

Internationalisation has become a key concept driving policies and practices in many public universities in Ghana. However, internationalisation as a concept, is bedeviled with many challenges, which impact negatively especially on ex-colonial countries.

This paper explores the challenges of internationalisation in the public universities in Ghana. The research was a qualitative and multiple case studies of three public universities in Ghana. The methods employed for the study were interviews and documentary analyses. The population comprised senior administrators, deans, heads of department and students.

The findings indicate that the universities, as they strive to position themselves internationally, are confronted with many challenges including a sense of inferiority complex and dependency, North/South dichotomy and power imbalances, stigmatisation, limited funding and research, and lack of national policies. These challenges limit the ability of the institutions to contribute meaningfully to the internationalisation agenda. The challenges also limit their abilities to challenge the dominant discourse and offer a different and distinctive 'internationalisation'.

Keywords: internationalisation, challenges, strengths, opportunities, colonisation, neoliberalism

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Introduction

Internationalisation has assumed an increasingly dominant position in determining policies and practices of higher education around the world (Hudzik, 2011; Rowi, *et. al.* 2013). According to Hudzik, internationalisation has become ‘imperative, not just a possible desirability’ of higher educational institutions (2011:6). Altbach (2010) describes the concept as a ‘Revolution’ of higher education.

The emphasis on internationalisation has gradually been reiterated by African universities. A core function of the Association of African Universities (AAU), of which almost all universities in sub-Saharan Africa are members, including the public Universities in Ghana, is to emphasise internationalisation and collaboration among African higher educational institutions and institutions abroad (Website of the AAU). It is hoped that enhancing internationalisation will boost the competitive edge of the universities (e.g. Mbeki, 2005).

Conversely, internationalisation is a concept bedeviled with various challenges including its definition, usage, impact and implications. For instance, it impacts differently on different countries, depending on many factors including the historical, the economic and the socio-political positioning of the country (Knight, 2004, Knight, 2008; Rowi, *et. al.* 2013). Postcolonial theorists and many other writers have expressed concern about the negative impacts of such concepts as globalization, internationalisation and neoliberalism on ex-colonial countries (e.g. Fanon, 2004; Rizvi *et. al.*, 2006). According to Rizvi *et. al.* (2006), such contemporary happenings tend to perpetuate colonial legacies including inequalities and dependency on the West.

The inequalities include the dominance of the English language globally and market imperatives (Harris, 2011; 2007 Harvey, 2005; Unterhalter and Carpentier, 2010). There is also the concentration of ownership of publications, databases, and other vital resources in the privy of the ‘strongest universities’ located almost exclusively in the developed world (Altbach, Reisberg and Rumbley 2009:7).

Another major challenge confronting the universities is lack of funding (Sawyer, 2004; Teferra and Altbach: 2004). Teferra and Altbach (2004) perceives the funding challenge as the severest of all the challenges confronting the universities in Africa, and in an era of internationalisation. The lack of funding and subsequent lack of resources has made the universities become ‘permanent supplicants for foreign development assistance’ (Lulat, 2005: 379). These challenges further exacerbate the power imbalances between the global south and the global North. With the limited funding of many African countries, the West dictates the pace, values and methodology of research, and worldview of knowledge (Harris, 2007). As MacGregor (2011) indicates apart from South Africa, the concept of internationalisation seems to be slowly catching up in other African countries. According to her, Africa continues to be at the periphery of international education, without any meaningful influences or identity.

However, some writers have indicated that, internationalisation also provides various opportunities to African universities and their national development as well as to be competitive globally (e.g. Rowi, *et. al* 2013). According to Rowi, *et. al.* (2013) internationalisation enhances interdependence, interconnectivity, partnership and mobility across the globe. It enhances integration of knowledge systems for development. It also enhances research, capacity building and production of highly-skilled knowledge workers to enhance national completion. In the end internationalisation helps African nations and their institutions of higher learning to acquire and also exchange the expertise, human resource and knowledge systems needed to achieve their development goals (Rowi, *et.al.* 2013). It is argued that African universities cannot sufficiently address developmental challenges on their own unless they equally draw on global knowledge systems (Ibid).

In the context of the aforementioned arguments, the importance of being internationally acclaimed in the Ghanaian universities has increased with references in university documents to the need to become world class, and the importance of internationalisation. The institutions have adopted various strategies including developing new mission statements, entering into collaborations with universities both within the African region and outside, and benchmarking foreign universities (Gyamera, 2015). In spite of these efforts, the universities are confronted with challenges, which limit their impact in the international arena.

This paper focuses on the key challenges confronting the universities in Ghana in an era of internationalisation. The paper will be in three sections. The first discusses the empirical study, the second present the findings and discussions, while the third presents recommendations and conclusion.

Methodology

This paper is based on an empirical, qualitative study, of three public universities in Ghana. They were chosen based on age, size, feasibility, mandate and location.

The population of the study comprised senior management, deans, heads of departments and academics.

The instruments I adopted for this study were interviews and documentary analyses and observations. The interviews were semi-structured with open-ended questions. Out of the thirty-seven respondents, thirteen were administrators, seven were Deans, seven were Heads of academic Departments, nine were academics and two were interviewed in their capacity as administrators of supervisory bodies of the universities. Again, out of the total number of respondents, fifteen were professors with PhDs, thirteen have their PhDs but are non-professors, and nine had Masters degrees. Only four out of the total number were females. Respondents were asked about the challenges confronting the universities in their bid to internationally position themselves.

The documents included basic statistics of the universities, university handbooks, institutional reports and historical backgrounds of the universities. Reports of the Vice Chancellors and Strategic Plans were obtained from the websites of the universities.

Findings and discussions

Ghanaian universities have consistently been confronted with various challenges over the years. However, in response to internationalisation, the universities have embarked on various strategies to address these challenges (Gyamera, 2015). In spite of these strategies, which is not the focus of this paper, the findings of the research indicate that the Universities are confronted with various challenges in their efforts to internationally position themselves. Below I discuss these challenges, which limit the efforts of the university to contribute internationally. It is also significant to explain that although there were some little nuances among the universities, mainly, they all appear to be confronted with similar challenges.

The North/South dichotomy and an eschewed power relations

The majority of respondents in all the universities indicated that the biggest challenge has to do with the way the international economic system and politics are ordered: the poor and 'voiceless' South, vis- a- vis the rich and powerful North. This dichotomy fuels Western superiority. One of the Deans in expressing his views internationalisation explained;

And really when we say international arena we are talking about the West basically. We are not thinking about [mentions a country], we are not thinking about [mentions another country], we are not thinking about any other place...and so there is a danger in this narrow definition of internationalization, to me Westernisation. That is what is worrying, very, very, worrying...Oh the dangers are obvious...to think that a subset of the world is the whole world, I mean that is dangerous s thinking...anything that is good for the West is good for everybody else.

Another academic explained in his argument against the dominance of the West:

I have problems with everything international. Why should something be seen as international? Who made it international? Those are the things that we have to question...[We] don't present anything universal, it is always the West...and then we fixed ourselves in those things...I have a problem with internationalisation, globalisation...We always talk about globalisation, whose globe is it? Ok, why is it global, why cant mine be presented as a global issue but always ideas about the West...why don't we also project ours...?

The above quotations confirm Western domination and demonstrate a dominant question in the minds of many participants. With such power relations and related perceptions, it is difficult for the universities to contribute immensely to the dominant Western and

neoliberal internationalisation discourse. A major challenge for instance, is for the universities to offer distinctive knowledge systems from the West. Although it has been argued that African universities cannot solely rely on indigenous knowledge systems (iks) to develop and integrate into the global arena (Rowi, et. al. 2013), I argue that it is critical that the universities acquire a distinctive knowledge to be able to make the relevant impact both nationally and globally. Ghanaian/African indigenous knowledge systems, which could have served as alternative to the West, appears less emphasised in the universities. Such dichotomies also entrench the stigmatisation of the universities, as African universities.

Stigmatisation of African Universities

Though the universities make efforts to follow Western standards, the limited infrastructure and facilities, coupled with mis/representations of colonial legacies have created a stigma on the universities. The stigma has various ramifications for the institutions.

It is difficult, for instance, for the universities to attract international students, which is a major feature of internationalisation. The difficulty in attracting foreign students also deprives the local students of the diversity and dynamism international students bring on campuses. It appears that in spite of all the assumed flow of students and staff across continents and nations in the context of internationalisation, few students from North America, Europe and the developed Eastern countries choose to pursue their university studies in Africa.

The three universities attract mainly two types of international students: international students who come to do four-year full time programmes and those who come to do short programmes normally for one or two semesters. The majority of full time international students are from neighbouring African countries, especially from Nigeria, whilst students who come for short courses are mainly from North America and Europe. Statistics derived from the website of the University of Mawuta, which is the largest and most prestigious university in the study, indicates that in the 2012/13 academic year, out of a total intake of over 15,000 students, about 1,000 were international students. Out of this number only 190 students were from North America and Europe. Only two students out of this number did two semesters. All the others did only one semester and only 25 were from Europe. About 160 were from USA. The statistics indicate that even the few students who come are mainly interested in Africa related subjects (University website). The other two universities attract less international students. The University of Ojo attracts the least international students. At the time of the research, they had less than five international students.

The ubiquitous case of limited funding

Funding is the main challenge, which every respondent in the study, mentioned as obstructing their abilities to implement effective changes. The limited funding is also mentioned in all the strategic plans of the universities.

The Government subvention, which is the major source of funding, is considered woefully inadequate by the universities. The gap between the expected funding and the required funding of the universities keeps expanding. The inadequacy of government funding has made the universities to rely more on Internally Generated Funds (NCTE, 2012).

The dwindling of government support appears to be based on the belief that universities require a relative independence from political, economic and corporate influence to function optimally. This is also based on Western neoliberal ideologies which emphasise market principles and which continually shift government policies away from investing so much on higher education and from emphasising state regulatory policies. A major challenge as respondents indicated is acquiring funding for research, particular to on indigenous knowledge systems (iks) which, as indicated above is essential if the Universities could contribute to internationalisation. Respondents emphasised limited support from the government.

According to respondents, there is rather emphasis on science and technology to the exclusion of indigenous knowledge systems. The limited funding limits the ability of researchers to research on local products so as to be able to improve and enhance their usage or develop further knowledge on them. Some of the respondents expressed their interest to research on local products but they were unable to do so because of limited funding. One of the respondents puts it this way:

I am interested in investigating most of our traditional fruits, 'dawadawa', 'atadwe' etc. I am in yam production here, what are the best and fastest ways to cultivate yam? These require certain equipment. Those equipment are from foreign countries, they are high tech, and the university has no money to buy them...Now there is no donor there who is interested in our yams or dawadawa. The average Ghanaian woman who is interested in dawadawa has no money to give me to do research...

This statement equally portrays the limited extent to which academics could engage in research without the donor support. Such limitations perpetuate the concentration of knowledge in Western societies. The limitations also lead to limited research.

Limited research

Historically, research has been central to universities worldwide. In the context of internationalisation, however, the crucial importance of research in higher education has become phenomenal (Altbach and Salmi, 2011; Harris, 2011, Rowi, et. al. 2013). The number of researches produced by a university enhances its prestige and world recognition (Burke, 2012) . However, many respondents especially in the departments of Agriculture discussed how limited funding and infrastructure including lack of certain equipment, chemicals, water and electricity affect their ability to do research in the universities. Even where the academics are able to undertake research, there are

problems with publishing. Many of the academics lamented on their inability to publish books. The printing presses of the universities do not function mainly due to limited funding to support them. There are few local publishers and it is difficult to obtain a contract with a publisher. This challenge also limits their ability to attain the international reputation associated with research.

Without the needed funding and infrastructure, it is difficult to challenge the hegemony of the West. As an academic at the University of Mawuta asked:

... But do you question Western knowledge and then tell them to publish your work? It doesn't work that way. If you want to challenge them then you must have the outlet to challenge them.

Such conditions affect the confidence level of academics and their ability to develop indigenous knowledge systems, values and products. It thus affects the ability of the local universities to add to international knowledge systems. Such limitations enhance stigmatization of the universities which exacerbates the imbalanced power relations and Western hegemony. Universities with limited research, in an era of internationalisation will continue to exist as peripheries of the Centre (Altbach, et. al. 2009).

Unequal partnership in collaborations

It is believed, not only by universities in Ghana, but worldwide that the more international collaborations and international students a university has, the higher its quality and reputation (De Wit, 2011; Knight 2011). Collaborations are thought to enhance intercultural learning and diversity, and enrich classroom learning. They are also thought to promote networking and enhance exposure. All these could be immensely beneficial to the universities (Rowi, et. al. 2013). However, in spite of the fact that collaborations are supposed to benefit both universities and be on mutual grounds, the data indicated that many of the collaborations between the universities and Western counterparts are beset with a lot of challenges, which could also be situated in the colonial legacy.

While the University of Mawuta did not say anything regarding the challenges of these collaborations, the two other universities talked about these problems. The challenges include a seemingly unequal relationship between the North and the South divide, differences in expectations, and at times, what is perceived as exploitation of the universities by some universities in the North. A Dean of the School of Agriculture at the University of Ndebang, who is a professor had this to say about these challenges:

It is becoming quite interesting. Sometimes, the North-South collaborations had ended up being... a master... it's not been on equal footing...I think there has been inequalities ... and sometimes the emphasis is also on the fact that we here are not vocal or savvy enough to fight for a good something when we are collaborating.

This statement shows the perceived inequalities and power relations occurring in collaborative ventures between institutions and individuals in the North and the South. This respondent again cited an example where they were used as collaborators with an institution in a Western country. The Western collaborative partners received the funding and undertook the project in their country. At the end, the Ghanaian partners felt they did not gain anything from the project. Another respondent who is a professor at the University of Ojo cited an incident where they did a joint research with some researchers from the West, but in the end, the Ghanaian collaborators were not cited as contributors to the research. These unequal relations, I would argue, occur because mostly, the universities in Ghana, due to many of the challenges discussed above are at the receiving end of the collaboration, becoming beneficiaries of scholarships, funding for research and other grants. Since the collaborative partners have more resources, they are able to influence and control the collaborations.

It is significant to say that while some respondents felt they were pressured to accept the terms and conditions of collaborations, others did not, nor did they feel pressurized to accept Western initiatives. I argue however that while respondents may not be pressurized, they may enter into certain collaborations expecting some benefits, financial or as contributing partners of research. However, as explained above, they do not often derive such anticipated benefits which at times make them feel exploited.

In some cases, as indicated above, research activities that emerge from such collaborations are not commensurate with the needs and goals of the local institutions and the nation (Sawyer, 2004.) Thus though universities in the South may have certain opportunities through these collaborations, they may also be vulnerable to exploitation by some institutions in the North due to various weaknesses of their higher educational systems coupled with their many challenges (Naidoo 2007).

Lack of national policy on Internationalisation

Currently, there is no national policy regulating the internationalisation of higher education in Ghana, especially at the institutional level. Though there are national policies including immigration laws, foreign relation policies, trade, employment and accreditation which may impact on internationalisation, there is no national policy related to funding, research, teaching, programmes and general direction of internationalisation at the universities. Many of the universities adopt ad hoc approaches to internationalisation. A lot of these strategies are based on Western standards and approaches.

The lack of policy on internationalisation is worsened by the fact that there is no comprehensive national policy on higher education in Ghana to direct the institutions' activities and goals (Communiqué on Tertiary Education Policy Dialogue, 2013). For instance, as indicated by the Communiqué on Tertiary Education Dialogue, there is no clearly nationally developed vision or plan to guide higher educational institutions in various aspects including focus, research and innovation. The limited policy on

internationalisation in the universities in particular, and the lack of comprehensive policy on higher education generally, exacerbates many other challenges confronting the universities.

Negotiating the terrain

A complex interplay of historical, economic and social factors creates various challenges for the universities in Ghana, as they strive to position themselves internationally. However, with the strengths and opportunities, the universities could negotiate the terrain to make their contributions count in a globalized world. Also strengthening the internationalisation processes will enhance the ability of the universities to contribute immensely to their local needs and expectations (Rowi et al. 2013). Based on the research, this section presents recommendations to enhance the internationalisation process in the Ghanaian universities.

A contextualized approach to internationalisation

The present global occurrences including internationalisation, have created new forms of power relations, which, I argue in support of post colonial theorists among other writers, should be situated in the context of colonial empires (e.g. Harris, 2008, 2011; Hardt and Negri, 2000; Rizvi, 2006). Unlike colonialism, contemporary happenings do not rely on fixed borders, and are managed through ‘hybrid identities, flexible hierarchies, and plural exchanges through modulating networks of command’ (Hardt and Negri, 2000 p. xiii) but they, nevertheless re-create power inequalities and dependencies which decolonization processes seek to address (Ibid, Rizvi, 2006). There is the need for the universities to reinterpret internationalisation to reflect the Ghanaian context and reflect what they could distinctively offer. Such an approach will eliminate the inferiority and dependency approach that presently, characterise the approach to internationalisation by the universities. Reinterpreting internationalisation, I argue should equally involve addressing the misrepresentation of Africa.

Addressing the misrepresentation of African

As the universities strive to internationally position themselves, as they strive to follow international standards and homogeneity, it is important for the universities to make efforts to avoid and resist negative representations of Africa themselves through their actions and inactions. Though colonial subjects hardly follow colonial dictates without any form of resistance (Bhabha, 2009; Rizvi, et. al. 2006), the data indicates that in the context of internationalisation and the need for homogeneity, the Ghanaian universities hardly offer any resistance towards what is perceived acceptable by the West. Often when they resist, the form of resistance is itself seeped and inhibited by the language of the colonial ‘master’ (McLeod, 2000; Rizvi, 2006). Language is very significant ‘in the colonial formation of discursive and cultural practices’ (Rizvi, et. al. 2006: 50). The universities should critically examine the type of discourses, language and methods of teaching in the institutions, which would tend to perpetuate more cultural and psychological domination. Particular attention should be given to pictures and video clips

used in power points presentations during teaching and other presentations could have an impact on students and other individuals.

Towards A Comprehensive National Policy on Internationalisation

To give a firm direction to a national internationalisation policy, there is equally a need for a comprehensive national policy on higher education. It would be difficult for a national policy of internationalisation to succeed without a comprehensive national policy on higher education.

Collaboration of the universities and the government

Firstly, there is the need for effective collaboration between the universities and the government. I argue that the internationalisation process, I argue, is so demanding and complex for the universities to deal with it alone. Secondly, the policy of internationalisation which must be formulated and agreed upon by key stakeholders such as the Ministries, the regulatory bodies, the tertiary institutions, industries and national research councils should be nonpartisan.

There is also the need for collaborations of sister universities in Ghana. The universities should cooperate and work together to project themselves internationally. There is the need for synergy of strategies, efforts and programmes. Such collaborations would involve sharing instead of competing; they would also enhance the streamlining of activities to enhance equal participation and sharing of intellectual properties, especially with international collaborative partners.

Funding

A major need for enhancing the internationalisation agenda is funding. Funding from the government would improve facilities of the universities, which in turn would help the universities to attract more international students. Attraction of students could be a major opportunity for addressing the perceived problem of over-dependence on government funding.

More students and academics should also be supported to have further studies abroad to enhance their intercultural learning and appreciation. As students of Economics at the University of Ndebang said, it is only when academics are exposed internationally that they will be able to integrate international experiences in their teaching. More academics should also be sponsored to have international seminars, workshops and conferences. Some academics have indicated that exposing academics internationally should be more than the short periods at conferences and workshops (Harris 2008). In the Ghanaian context, I argue, these short exposures could be a major boost to the internationalisation process.

Ranking of the universities

Efforts are being made by the Ministry of Education to introduce ranking systems in the universities as is happening in global universities. I suggest that the ranking systems should not be based on the parameters used by the Western world. I argue that if the universities emphasise the Western benchmarking, local needs and iks will be suppressed.

The parameters should be based on 'fitness for purpose' principle instead of the 'one-size-fits-all'. If the universities go according to world ranking parameters, many universities which are really impacting on the communities, would be neglected, and this will exacerbate the inequalities in the country. For instance, when using infrastructure and citations, it will be difficult for the University of Ojo to bypass the University of Mawuta. The fault, however, will not be Ojo's. Moreover, the biases, shortcomings and flaws of the dominant ranking systems have been confirmed by various reports (Rauhvarges, 2011, European Commission, 2009). These rankings 'enjoy a high level of acceptance among stakeholders and the wider public because of their simplicity and consumer type information' (European Commission, 2009).

I argue that in the Ghanaian context, much attention can be paid to community participation of universities, how they are able to help the disadvantaged groups or how the universities address particular needs of the communities in which they are situated, and the country in general. I argue that the ranking parameters should be based on the needs and abilities of the Ghanaian community.

Emphasising indigenous knowledge systems

There is also the need for the government to enhance and emphasise iks in the universities. Though some of the departments in the study have made various efforts to enhance iks in their curricular, it was realised that these are done in ad hoc basis without firm institutional and national policies to regulate it. Various factors including dictates of the market and present emphasis on the instrumental usage of knowledge limit the emphasis on indigenous knowledge systems. Even at the University, where there is a national mandate to emphasise iks in the curricular and in addressing indigenous problems, the scientific knowledge systems and ways of addressing problems are emphasised. I argue for the need of government to emphasis iks in the universities to help the universities to be competitive abroad and address local challenges. Non-indigenous knowledge systems cannot offer total solution to challenges confronting many African countries Jowi, et. al. (2013). There is the need for the universities to utilise and change to use internationalization to develop locally relevant knowledge for local challenges.

In addition to government national policies, there is the need for institutional policies to complement national efforts to position the universities internationally through iks.

Conclusion

Universities in the study, in their efforts at internationalisation, are confronted with a lot of challenges including a sense of inferiority complex and dependency, North/South dichotomy and power imbalances, stigmatisation limited funding and research, and lack of national policies. These challenges tend to limit their ability to achieve their desired goals of making meaningful contribution at the international front. Whilst they find it difficult to meet the standards of the dominant neoliberal Western discourse of internationalisation, there is a challenge of the universities to offer a different understanding and vision of internationalisation.

Among others, the paper argues for the universities to contextualise internationalisation and strive to offer a distinctive knowledge systems from those of the West. The paper also argues for the universities to address the mis/representation of African universities and also for a national internationalisation policy, which it is argued, will augment the internationalisation efforts of the universities.

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