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University Education: The Case for Strathmore

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A university, to quote Pope Benedict XVI, should be “a vast laboratory where, in accordance with the different disciplines, ever new areas of research are developed in a stimulating confrontation between faith and reason.... Is this not an exciting adventure: for one discovers, moving within this horizon of meaning, the intrinsic unity that links the different branches of knowledge: theology, philosophy, medicine, economics, every discipline, even the most specialized technologies, since everything is connected”

A university ought therefore to offer a wide range of studies so that students, even if they don't pursue every subject available to them, gain by living among their peers. This is the advantage of a great seat of learning which in essence is what a university should be. As Newman once wrote, “an assemblage of learned men and women, zealous for their own sciences, and rivals of each other, brought together by familiar intercourse and for the sake of intellectual peace, to adjust together the claims and relations of their respective subjects of investigation. They learn to respect, to consult, to aid each other. Thus is created a pure and clear atmosphere of thought, which the students also breathe, though in each particular case the students only pursue a few sciences out of the multitude. The students profit by an intellectual tradition, which is independent of particular teachers, which guides them in their choice of subjects, and duly interprets for them those which they choose. A habit of mind is formed which lasts through life, of which the attributes are, freedom, equitableness, calmness, moderation, and wisdom”. This broad range of studies equips the students for many walks of life. Whether one becomes a politician, an economist, a lecturer, a lawyer, a doctor or a designer, one needs the ability to think clearly, to organize one's knowledge, and articulate one's ideas so as to deal effectively with the challenges of work and life.

Studies in developing countries show that high quality university education transforms individuals and societies in ways that reduce poverty and increase the global competitiveness of nations. Recent studies also confirm that university education

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produces both public and private benefits. University education is therefore critical for socio-economic development. It has the potential to increase social equity and mobility, social cohesion, productivity and innovation. University education also encourages civil society to challenge bad practices in governance. These studies confirm the prime mandate of a university; to serve society through the provision of quality academic and professional training, as well as human and moral training. Its mission therefore is to prepare students academically and professionally to become leaders who serve their fellow citizens; students who become active and confident participants in a multicultural and globalised society.

In the present knowledge society where there is a move towards mass higher education, there is an increasing demand that students should develop transferable or generic skills such as analytical and critical thinking, the ability to communicate and a general scientific attitude about true knowledge and respect for other cultures and people's opinions. This is in addition to subject-specific qualifications which benefit themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy. A core aspect therefore of higher education is to prepare students for future employment. A university that embeds these generic skills in their programmes is more likely to produce graduates with the attributes mentioned above. These graduates, it is argued, are more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations.

University education in Kenyan, working within a globalised world is called upon to examine these factors in order to come up with ways which will engineer training of graduates for a broader economic, political, recreational and cultural development. Kenyan university graduates should be strategically positioned to meaningfully engage in nation building, actively participate in international affairs and at the same time celebrate the nobility and uniqueness of their cultural heritage.

It is necessary therefore to give our students a broad humanistic education which is an integral part of any professional or technical curriculum in order to educate them in having a passion for the truth, personal freedom, patriotism, citizenship, intercultural understanding, virtuous respect for others and nurturing leadership qualities, so badly needed for our country. This humanistic training also aims at making the students better persons capable of making sure that 'economic progress' and 'success' do not become the rule of life.

Strathmore University

Strathmore received its University Charter from the Commission of Higher Education on 23rd April, 2008. However, the history of Strathmore University, a merger between Strathmore College and Kianda College goes way back to 1961, the year the two Colleges were founded. They were the first multi-racial institutions in East Africa. Due to the laws of segregation existing then, it seemed like a dream to start an interracial college of any sort. The authorities were sympathetic to the idea and accepted it but the laws of the country were opposed to it. A long legal battle ensued and in 1961 Strathmore started as an integrated College. A similar situation occurred with Kianda which also opened its doors to students of all races in 1961. In a short time, these two Colleges became well known for their quality of education.

St Josemaria, the inspiration behind both initiatives, laid down the founding principles.

- The Colleges had to be multi-racial, that is, right from the start, the centres were not exclusive to any one ethnic group. Rather, the different races should intermingle and get to know and love one another. This was quite revolutionary at the time for some 200,000 Asian, and more than 50,000 Europeans who then lived in segregated Kenya among their African peers.

- The Colleges must be open to non-Catholic and non-Christian students. There must be no selection criteria other than the purely academic.

- They students had to be fee paying even if just a nominal fee.

He always supported the founding group of young men and women who started these institutions. As one of them says, his support was without qualifications. He always showed far more confidence in these founders than they could possibly be credited for; his encouragement was so continuous and discrete that they hardly ever thought they were in need of it or realized how important it was.

St. Josemaria had a passionate desire to see all men and women learn to live together in unity. He was acquainted with the differences and divisions that mark the modern world; and he also realized that in Africa, and in Kenya itself, racial and tribal differences threatened the peace and development that independence would bring. He was convinced that Africa and Kenya could give an example to the world, that unity and oneness of heart could be achieved out of a great diversity of persons and backgrounds.

Given the many years of prior experience of Strathmore College and Kianda College, and the commitment of these Colleges to the economic and social development of Kenya, Strathmore University was in a good position right from the start to become a leading out-come driven entrepreneurial university in the region by translating that experience into a major contribution to culture, economic well-being, and quality of life. An entrepreneurial university takes a pro-active stance in putting knowledge to use and in broadening the input into the creation of academic knowledge. In creating a vision for the university, we have taken account of local needs and circumstances in developing our research and training programmes.

We see Strathmore as a new kind of university that trains students to put the modern advances of business science and information technology to work for human progress. Currently the university is laying particular emphasis in only a few areas of study and research: business management, financial sciences, entrepreneurship, applied economics, forensic and environmental accounting, computer science, information technology, communications technology, leadership, ethics, governance, modern languages, educational management, health care management, and hospitality and tourism management and law. All these programmes are embedded with the core values of the University.

One of the University's strategies is to create special centres to promote interdisciplinary research in a number of specific practical fields. The University has recently created the "Strathmore Governance Centre" to be a centre of excellence in interdisciplinary research in contemporary governance issues, ethics and leadership. The University has also created the "Strathmore Enterprise Development Centre". The purpose of this centre is to nurture entrepreneurial culture within the University and to provide entrepreneurial and experiential training to staff and students; it will also give support to Small and Medium Enterprises (SME) in the country. These two centres

serve as effective vehicles for interface between the University, government and industry.

Until recently most universities abstained from commercializing research. This stance is changing due to pressure on universities to contribute to economic development and opportunities to generate wealth. Universities now have to get better at identifying their areas of competitive strength in research. Business now has to learn how to exploit the innovative ideas that are being developed in the university sector and government has to learn how to support business-university collaboration by providing conducive regulatory framework and tax laws. This is because in a knowledge based economy both economic competitiveness and improvements in quality of life depend on the effectiveness of knowledge sharing between business and universities hence the need to interface between the University, government and industry.

Experiences and Challenges

The challenge to build a world class university in a developing country has been both exciting and arduous. Resources have been scarce yet good will abundant.

How have we fared thus far? Why has the brand name of Strathmore continued to improve? The Management of the University, always conscious of its founding principles, have put forward a strategy in five areas that have served as the pillars for growth and improvement; this strategy spells out our vision: what we must achieve, by when we must achieve it and how we will fulfill it. In a few years, Strathmore has moved to position one in East Africa in the web ranking of January 2009.

a) The first is in teaching and learning in order to gain international reputation for excellence in teaching and quality of graduates. Excellent staff is one of the most important resources of higher education institutions. It is through the performance of its staff, moreover, that the University will fulfill its mission. Cognizant of this fact, we in Strathmore, embarked on a serious staff development strategy by accessing funds for training, laying down policies to enable staff to maximize their creativity and learning potential, and in so doing, the University encouraged innovation in order to remain relevant to the society. We know that optimal academic staff management is an important factor in both the enhancement of academic quality and the effective learning of our students.

To enhance superior teaching approaches, staff seminars are organized every year for in-depth training in one or other aspects of teaching. Currently, all the staff members are being trained in the use of E-learning. Strathmore has also entered into partnerships with a number of universities and business schools, e.g., University of Navarra, Lagos Business School, Wharton, and IESE and we also participate in Global Business School Network and the African Association for Business Schools. Faculty from international universities mentor our local faculty in new teaching methods and research; we have so far developed 30 cases for teaching.

The curriculum of all the programmes have been designed with a clear interdisciplinary approach and industry input. No effort has been spared in embedding the humanities, especially ethics, as core courses so that the students acquire a philosophical habit of mind which strengthens, refines and enriches their intellectual powers. In this way, they become personally engaged with ethical issues within and

without. In order to keep currency, all our programmes are reviewed once every three years.

Another goal under this theme is to provide quality student services such as mentoring. The University attaches special importance to the personal mentoring of all the students attending the University in order to help them nurture human qualities such as love for one another, sound judgement, honesty, and hard work, a spirit of service, self-control, loyalty and responsibility and thus grow in human virtues. For this purpose the University provides a student mentoring service in which every student is assigned a personal mentor for the entire period the student remains in the University. This personal mentoring is also extended to lecturers as part of their continuing education to prepare them for mentoring students and help them grow in human virtues as well.

b) Research is an important contributor to innovation. Innovation, in turn, is the key to the knowledge economy. The University has therefore put research and enterprise as another pillar in order to build an international reputation for excellence in research and enterprise and become a major contributor to the knowledge economy. The University budgets every year for research funds and all staff are encouraged to engage in meaningful research. Strathmore Research and Consultancy Centre was established to stimulate development of commercial partnerships.

We have also established a Graduate Assistant programme where the very best of our graduates are recruited as research students. The programme is now in its second year of operation. We hope to continue recruiting and retaining high quality research students.

c) Access and equity in university education remain a major challenge for the country. Kenya's university education enrolment stands at 3% of adults of university going age. This is low compared to newly industrialized and developed countries, which have 10 and 69 percent respectively. There are 91,541 students enrolled in Kenyan Universities of which 81,491 are in the 6 Public Universities and 10,050 in Private Universities (11% of total students). Of these, only 55 % public Universities students are sponsored by Government. Overall, 51% of students in Kenyan Universities are privately sponsored.

Given this scenario, we have therefore put in place a variety of schemes such as bursaries and scholarships in collaboration with other entities in order to attract a community of students from different backgrounds who have the potential to benefit from university education and do not have the opportunity to benefit from government sponsorship and whose parents cannot afford university education.

We have also developed a student loan facility so that parents or sponsors can borrow money from banks on preferential terms in order to pay fees. This is a new concept and has been a major breakthrough in Higher Education financing in Africa. A competitive yearly scholarship scheme given to six top students from needy backgrounds has also enhanced student access. In any one year, 400 – 500 students apply to this facility but only six are selected. Strathmore University also offers bursary for those bright students unable to meet their tuition obligations.

Given the importance Strathmore University attaches to the human person, we have made a deliberate policy to include women at all levels of management. Student

recruitment also reflects this policy. At present the female population stands at 45% of the total student population.

d) In the development of our strategic plan, we identified the need to institute a Quality Management System to ensure adherence to quality along our expansion path. It was a means of entrenching a systematic approach to quality management in both our administrative and academic functions. We implemented a Quality Management System (QMS) based on ISO 9001:2000 to demonstrate our ability to provide consistently products and services that meet customer expectations and regularity requirements. The standard places emphasis on customer satisfaction and uses the process approach as a means to provide continuous improvement of the Quality System.

In keeping with the University's corporate identity and mission, we designed the Community Outreach Programme which has proved an excellent programme for our students and staff who give of their time and talents to serve the less privileged in our community. All our students are required to do 200 hours of community work during their undergraduate programme. During this period, many of them are confronted with people suffering in our society and these challenges them to alleviate this misery in ways that are both innovative and interesting. In this way, the university ensures that we don't become an ivory tower. Every year, during the graduations, we recognize the outstanding student in community outreach activities.

e) The emerging Knowledge Economy will continue to drive the demand for ICT professionals as well as use of ICT in universities in Kenya. In a knowledge economy, the development and competitiveness of countries will depend on their ability to leverage local and global knowledge. In this regard, Strathmore University has made a concerted effort to provide the infrastructure and ancillary services which support the academic aims including maximizing the use of ICT in University processes and management.

The University is now fully automated. Integration of all the processes has not been an easy task, and continues to be a challenge. Nevertheless, most of our staff and students are versatile in the use of ICT resources. The University has deliberately chosen to use open source software thus drastically cutting costs on expensive commercial software.

Lastly, we are also engaged in shaping public opinion by organizing yearly conferences on public issues such as governance, service in the public sector, quality and human value of education in schools with programmes such as the Teacher Enhancement Programme that has proved a huge success. We are partnering with the government in offering this course to all principles of primary and secondary schools in the country. The Teacher Enhancement Programme (TEP) provides in-service training which aims at the personal and professional development of Kenyan teachers. Strathmore has found it necessary to further equip teachers with the skills to train young people to be honorable citizens, with good character, moral and self discipline, while simultaneously training them with the skills to deal with administrative and management matters in the school. We are also concerned about the problems that afflict our country. After the violence that rocked parts of our country in the earlier part of 2008, members of Strathmore University stepped up to the challenge with confidence, with skill and with kindness. We fed the internally displaced persons,

provided them with medical attention and cared for children who had to flee schools around the country among other activities that we carried out at that time.

Looking to the Future

High quality university education transforms individuals and societies in ways that reduce poverty and increase the global competitiveness of nations as has been mentioned before. It is true that many developing countries, including Kenya, have given priority to primary and secondary education at the expense of tertiary education but in recent years, this trend is changing precisely because university education produces both public and private benefits. Private benefits include better employment prospects, higher salaries, ability to understand complex social and political issues, and a higher social status. These benefits often result in a better quality of life.

The Mission of Strathmore in which we dedicate to provide integral person-oriented quality education characterized by freedom and responsibility; excellence in teaching, research and scholarship, continuous improvement, high moral standards, ethical and social development, respect for others and service to Kenya, Africa and all mankind, in those ways for which we are well suited by virtue of our academic strengths and cultural heritage will always be relevant in this context.

We in Strathmore are determined to educate the knowledge economy workforce required in the key economic areas of tourism, hospitality, business management, finance, communication and information technology as well as the niche areas of computer software development. The University is investing in new teaching methods for adult learners and developing locally relevant content to find solutions to our challenges. The University's founding principles will always be our guide as we navigate in the 21st century.

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