

Opinion

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Like Nujoma, Africa needs to go back to university

By CALESTOUS JUMA and LEE YEE-CHEONG

In a rare display of enlightened leadership, former Namibian president Sam Nujoma, 75, has enrolled at the University of Namibia (Unam) as a masters student in geology. His choice of subject shows that he is ready to face up to the hard facts of student life with his usual courage.

This decision lends credibility to the emphasis placed on higher education in the recently-released report of the Commission for Africa chaired by British Prime Minister Tony Blair. At last the two can agree on an important topic.

But Unam Vice-Chancellor Lazarus Hangula is reportedly apprehensive about his new student, who is also the Chancellor of Unam: "His presence on the campus is certainly a challenge to all of us in many ways," he says.

To the contrary, this is a great opportunity to build a new vision of Africa that values the role of higher technical education in development.

Choosing geology in a mineral-rich country indicates his interest in making education relevant to local needs. At his age, Nujoma confirms that there is no age limit to learning.

His presence on campus will make Unam an important destination for his friends and colleagues, which will enrich academic life with solid knowledge of the real world.

Fellow geologists like former US Secretary of State Colin Powell might pay him a visit and brush up on their knowledge of the field.

OTHER LEADERS wishing to take short sabbaticals and subject their ideas to intellectual scrutiny might find the questioning instinct of Nujoma a refreshing departure from the uncritical acceptance of their views back home.

The University of Namibia could also take advantage of his presence to establish a depository of African presidential archives.

The only archives of this kind are located at Boston University in the US. Former Zambian president Kenneth Kaunda may want to send a duplicate of his presidential archives from Boston University to Unam, where they can be more easily accessed by Zambians and other Africans.

For decades, Africa was made to believe that only primary education mattered for development. This is the colonial legacy under which Africa was defined as a source of raw materials and an importer of processed goods. The first generation of African universities thus focused on producing functionaries for the civil service.

Even though this model is evidently moribund in the age of declining public sector employment, African countries have been too slow to replace lamentation with the vigorous reforms needed to bring universities in line with development needs.

Resistance to change by academic staff has fuelled government neglect of public universities, resulting in widespread institutional decay. Many of them are supplementing their meagre budgets with eclectic income-generating activities. Academic standards in many African universities have hit rock-bottom.

TODAY, AFRICA lacks the critical technical skills needed to meet basic needs, compete in the global economy and manage the environment. To advance, the continent must invest more in technical higher education as stressed in *Innovation: Applying Knowledge in Development*, a report of the UN Millennium Project's Task Force on Science, Technology and Innovation presented to the UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan recently.

The good news is that governments are starting to look for ways to remedy the situation. Uganda, for example, has proposed to make physics, chemistry and biology compulsory courses in high school. Zambia's president recently replaced the Minister for Science and Technology for poor performance.

Nujoma's decision will also lead to discussions on the role of the university in economic development. Producing graduates is no longer a sufficient justification for investment in higher education in countries experiencing extreme poverty. Universities will need to serve as engines of community development, in addition to their traditional research and teaching roles.

Indeed, African universities are already contributing to the effort to redefine the role of the university. Zambia's largest Internet provider, Zamnet, was started as project at the country's national university. Similar examples of institutional adaptation exist in other regions of the world.

UNIVERSITIES IN Brazil and other developing countries are serving as incubators of businesses. In other innovations, private companies are creating institutions of higher learning that train people who are directly suited to their needs.

In Korea, LG Academy helps to train people whose skills are aligned with the goals of LG, the parent company, and the competitive interests of the country.

COSTA RICA'S EARTH University has pioneered a new educational model that focuses on producing young entrepreneurs trained to create companies and be employers rather than be employees.

This model was developed to address extreme poverty, unemployment and environmental degradation.

Sam Nujoma has served the people of Namibia as a freedom fighter and president with distinction. But now he is scoring high grades in retirement from politics for leading yet another revolution: making higher technical education a cornerstone of Africa's economic development.

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