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African Agricultural Universities can do better: make research results inform policy and community practice

World-wide, universities have three operational cardinal mandates of teaching/learning, research and outreach. Over the years, in the African context, agricultural universities have been established in virtually all countries and many more are still being set-up. This is largely because of the eminent significance of the contribution of agriculture to the food security and livelihoods of local communities as well as national economies. The outcomes and impacts of each of the three mandate functions are generally disparate although they can be inter-connected to certain extends.

The teaching/learning mandate is a function that African universities have performed relatively well albeit the existence of some limitations that affect the quality of delivery and outputs. The output of this function is largely measured in terms of number of graduates that are churned out upon completion and universities have made and continue to make tremendous achievements. Essentially, the outcome of this mandate function should be reflected in the success and prosperity of the graduates in the market place and their relevance to economic growth of nations. Since the advent of university-level education in Africa in the 17th century, graduates from African universities have been successful till the 19th century when unemployment started to be registered and the number of unemployed graduate have increased tremendously over the years. In response, most universities have integrated entrepreneurship in the curricula to be able to mould students towards more of job creators than job seekers. The few universities that have embraced entrepreneurship should be credited, but nonetheless, a large-scale empirical study is required to provide empirical

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evidence on the impact of integrating entrepreneurship on the curricula on employability of graduates.

The research function, in relative terms and in-terms of hierarchy, is the mandate which rank second in the performance of African universities. This function is largely performed through student training and therefore, to a larger extent, can be viewed as an integral part of the teaching/learning function. A common practice in African universities is that research terminates with student completion of studies and to a lesser extent, publication of results for consumption of intellectual and/or scientific communities. However, very limited attention and efforts are directed towards packaging and transfer of research results to the community of end-users. In the context of agricultural development in Africa, community of end-users refers to agricultural value chain actors, development organizations (e.g. NGO) and policy makers.

The outreach function, is by far the mandate element that most African universities have exhibited very limited involvement. This is albeit the fact that outreach is an avenue that is critical to foster the contribution of universities to community development beyond just churning out graduates and conducting research that end-up on the shelves. An important dilemma that makes outreach function essential is that, in the African set-up, access to university education is largely for the few who are privileged. Taking deep consideration of this situation, an important question suffices: how can the vast majority of the educable population that is unable to access university education benefit from the much needed knowledge and technologies lying idle on the shelves? The same question is also relevant to policy makers because of the significance of empirical information on evidence-based policy formulation.

The above question inadvertently leads to the subsequent question: how can African agricultural universities remodel or transform themselves to enable functional transfer of research results to inform policy and community practice? Before this question can be answered, it is important to appreciate operational organization of African universities. A

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simple diagnosis of the mandate structure of African universities reveals that the three mandate functions are delivered independently with virtually weak operational frameworks and mechanisms on how they can be delivered holistically in a way that the mandate functions reinforce each other. A number of African universities such as Gulu University in Uganda, Egerton University in Kenya, in attempts to make the university relevant to the community have integrated community engagement in student training. The engagement processes are largely directed towards student learning (experiencing community practice, conducting research). However, use of the engagement process to transfer research results to inform community practice and policy processes is rather limited. RUFORUM has in place the field attachment programme designed to enable graduate students take research results back to the community, but is also devoid of policy engagement. In terms of implementation, the field attachment programme is run in a project mode but is not integrated into the mandate delivery frameworks of universities.

The RUFORUM field attachment model provides opportunity for bridging the gap between research mandate of universities and transfer of research results to inform community practice and policy. African universities can take advantage of this model to increase their relevance to the society. However, this require policy adjustments and commitment to allocate resources to make the changes a reality.

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Duncan Ongeng is an Associate Professor in the Faculty of Agriculture and Environment at Gulu University, Uganda. He earned his Bachelor's Degree from Makerere University, Uganda and Graduate Degrees (Masters and PhD) from KULeuven, Belgium. He conducts research within the wider domain of food security and community nutrition and has a strong interest in community engagement as a means of making university functions of teaching and research relevant to community development needs.