



**The Role of Innovation in Building Universities that will Outlive the
21st Century in Africa**

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This article seeks to promote a culture of innovation in African universities. This justification is pursued through the following: 1) an argument for the need for innovation in African universities; 2) a look at the term "innovation" from an institutional perspective; 3) apparent barriers to innovation in African universities; 4) how African university leaders can promote innovation at their universities; and 5) eight steps African university leaders can adopt in their quest to enhance innovation in their universities.

Keywords: *African Universities, Creativity, Innovation, Leadership.*

Higher education in the 21st Century calls for innovation among universities and other institutions of higher learning across the globe. African universities cannot afford to be content with minimum performance in terms of the graduates they produce.¹ Therefore, universities in Africa must seek to increase their understanding of innovation and the manner through which they train their students to strive for the highest level of learning. They must seek to foster a culture that promotes and enhances an innovative potential among faculty and staff. With the increasing need for innovation and creativity in the 21st Century, it will take universities with the capacity to adapt and shift quickly to rapid transformations, especially in the higher education arena, to successfully compete locally and globally.² Since universities are at the

forefront of training and developing a country's manpower, all African universities play a vital role in leading the way to demonstrate innovation for other organizations to follow suit.³ This article strives to encourage and promote a culture of innovation among all African universities and university leaders as well as other institutions of higher learning.

Why Innovation in African Institutions of Higher Learning?

The need for innovation in African institutions of higher learning has never been so critical. Although Africa is the second largest continent in the world with enormous human and natural resources, Africa remains poor because of its inability to tap into these resources. To a very great extent, this has to do with the lack of innovation and creativity among African individuals and organizations at all levels. Innovation among African universities will assist in raising a generation of leaders who can compete and perform locally and internationally.⁴ African universities that choose to adopt and demonstrate innovative tendencies have a tremendous potential of assuming and maintaining a competitive edge in the local and global industry for higher education.⁵ Additionally, an innovative higher educational environment will facilitate the process of augmenting opportunities for imaginative ideas among faculty, students and staff, which increases the occurrence of ingenuity and inventiveness.⁶ Moreover, an atmosphere of innovation will cultivate a university environment that allows the intrinsic resourcefulness within the university community to surface, which can result in industrious outcomes.⁷ In answering the question, "Why innovation in African universities?" it is essential that an explanation and meaning of the term is offered.

Another Look at Innovation through the Lens of Higher Educational Institutions

Innovation thrives on a diversity of abilities, skills and points of view.⁸ An innovative higher educational institution can be identified by its culture and distinguished by exceptionality, an ease of ideas on the part of its members and evidenced by an atmosphere of elasticity and capability.⁹ Innovation in higher educational institutions, therefore, becomes the ability to create work that is both unique and suitable for the institution's patrons, in this case students and the community it serves. The expression innovation is also connected with words such as enterprise, formation, and breakthrough which can be associated with institutions of higher learning.¹⁰ It is also a form of thinking that involves the production of new ideas and solutions and the relationship between possessions or ideas.¹¹ Furthermore, innovation in the higher education industry is the application, development and implementation of a new thought. It is the actual process of initiating a solution to an existing challenge in a particular field of study. Thus, it is the invention, reception, and performance of a new thought, procedure, invention, or service.¹² Though the above definition calls for African universities to create an atmosphere that allows organizational members to develop and use their innovative skills; several obstacles prevent African institutions of higher learning from realizing this goal.

Long Standing Obstacles to Innovation in African Universities

Like every institution in any part of the world, African institutions of higher learning are plagued with numerous obstacles in their quest to develop and promote a culture and an environment of innovation. Obstacles to innovation can be internal or external; issues within the organization or among organizational members or factors within the organization's surrounding environment. Though African university authorities may possess what it takes to encourage a culture of innovation, it is relevant to recognize the entrenched obstacles and confinements they encounter when they set out to pursue such endeavors.¹³ A number of current and apparent obstacles to innovation in African universities are captured and elaborated upon in the subsequent paragraphs. Most of these obstacles must be dismantled to enhance efforts to introduce innovative behaviors in African universities. This can be described as the "tearing down process." Thus, the following obstacles must be rejected and diminished for a culture of innovation to thrive.

The Lack of Motivation for Failure

Most cultures frown upon failure. Similarly, failure is not encouraged in African universities because of the monetary costs that may be involved. On the other hand, success is highly rewarded in most universities and other organizational cultures across the globe.¹⁴ Unknown to universities in most parts of the African continent is the fact that a culture of frowning on failure is incapacitating and hostile to the pursuit of innovation because of the meaning it presents to both faculty and students. As a result, most university administrators, faculty and students refrain from failure in all their undertakings. Though a fear of failure may create a platform for some university community members to diligently pursue their dreams and aspirations with excellence to avoid being ridiculed; it becomes a recipe for paralysis for others thereby preventing them from realizing their full potential because of the possible consequences.¹⁵ Failure must be encouraged to a reasonable extent, especially when it is in line with creativity, innovation and organizational productivity.

The Lack of Elasticity and Opposition to Change and Transformation

Since the days of colonialism, most African universities have held on to the traditional ways of doing things. This has indirectly hindered innovation in most institutions of higher learning. Traditionally, most African leaders and organizations have the propensity to preserve the established customs and conventions of their organizations by maintaining existing rules and regulations which restrains innovation over the long term.¹⁶ It is easy for university administrators, faculty and students to refrain from considering and identifying alternative means of achieving university goals and objectives¹⁷ due to the simplicity of relying on existing ways of doing things. A lack of flexibility and holding on to rigid rules and regulations is a formula for resisting pertinent and strategic change and the needed transformation within African universities. This mind set is stifling innovation in the academic circles because of its

association to institutional change and transformation. A culture of innovation is therefore needed for African universities to react successfully to change and transformation.¹⁸

Lack of Commitment on the Part of University Community Members

Due to the lack of opportunities for most faculty and staff to advance in their careers and the almost nonexistent use of gratitude and recognition for excellent job performance in African universities, the pursuit of innovation is significantly minimal. Most faculty and staff lack the appropriate levels of commitment to their institutions because they are usually not shown the required appreciation and admiration for the work they do.¹⁹ The absence of such motivational factors results in low self-esteem and less dedication to existing universities on the part of faculty and staff. Innovation is therefore severely reduced due to the part-hearted services of faculty and staff.²⁰

Lack of a Spirit of Innovation and Creativity

A lack of curiosity, resources, resiliency for inquiry, fear of failure and risk-taking are obstacles that inhibit organizational creativity and innovation in most cultures of the world.²¹ Similarly, these same factors impede innovation in African universities. The unbridled lack of vision, planning, foresight and imagination among African academic community members is a result of reverting back to old and outmoded forms of operations mostly because of the fear to venture into new terrains and testing, trying and experimenting with new techniques and ways of doing things. This starves a spirit of inquiry and initiative that leads to the absence of innovation among faculty and staff at African universities and other institutions of higher learning. Exposure to strategies that can enhance innovation among African institutions of higher learning can facilitate the process of dismantling the above stated obstacles.

Strategies for Developing a Culture of Innovation in African Universities

The following eight strategies are recommended for implementation in all Africa universities to guarantee a smooth transition process towards developing a culture and an environment that supports innovation and creativity. It is, however, relevant that one appreciates the nature of higher educational institutions as they embark on this journey and acknowledge the fact that higher educational institutions take time to adopt new practices and ways of doing things. In that regard, members of African university communities must be ready and prepared for the transition into a culture of innovation and creativity.

Preparing for the Change Process

To ensure African universities transition from traditional system of operation to a more innovative and creative structure and culture while at the same time, maintaining a balance will

require university leadership to investigate the environment in which the organization functions to identify key strategies for coping with such a transition. It will be beneficial to evaluate local and global higher educational trends, which may indicate whether African universities are prone to maintain their current balance in the short and long term taking into account strategy, structure, people, culture and process.²² University leadership must also take into consideration whether their organizations have the focus, determination and capacity to transition from a regular university to that of innovation and creativity. The following questions must also be asked; are their organizations knowledgeable of their environment and aware of the need for transformation and focus and their organizations willing to address this transformation process and do they have the required resources to withstand this transition and be successful in the long run?²³ These are relevant questions that must be addressed prior to embarking on this change process. It is recommended that the strategies below should not be adopted without working through the issues and questions addressed in this portion of the article.

A University Culture that is Favorable to Learning

An existing university culture can inhibit or enhance both administrative and employee efforts to encourage innovation.²⁴ African university leaders who desire to move their university towards globally accepted levels of innovation must venture to create an organizational atmosphere that allows employees and students to learn through their successes and failures. Faculty, staff and students should be celebrated when they succeed and accepted when they fail. Such a culture and environment will encourage learning and long-term success, competitiveness and productivity. As part of the process to encourage a culture of innovation, university administrators must take critical and crucial steps to study the strengths and limitations of the organization in order to learn how to adapt to become a stronger and more responsive organization.²⁵ This can assist in developing a learning environment that promotes innovation.²⁶ This means faculty and staff should be given opportunities to experience new things and to transform such experiences into knowledge, which should be available to all stakeholders within the university.²⁷ Such a culture will encourage innovation because both internal and external members of the university are given the opportunity to push the boundaries of the organization by testing new ways of achieving university set goals and objectives. This presupposes that faculty, staff and students are free to use their imagination during both “good and bad” times to identify short and long-term solutions. It also means the leadership within African institutions of higher learning must put in place policies, procedures and the needed structures that allow stakeholders to tap into the creative and innovative aspects of their lives to enhance organizational performance for local and global competition.

A Strategy that Allows Flexibility and Acceptance of Change

Innovation cannot thrive in a vacuum; which means African university leaders must assist in creating an institutional environment where innovation flourishes by creating the necessary structures, processes and procedures.²⁸ Focusing innovation and creativity within the scope of a well-designed organizational strategy is the most effective for success.²⁹ The university's strategic direction must lead the way towards determining the rate and speed of learning and the yearning for new information, perspectives and prospects.³⁰ It also means the university leadership must develop a tradition of enthusiasm to stimulate the imaginations of faculty, staff and students while adhering to and following new perspectives and new patterns of getting work done.³¹ The leadership of African universities must work towards developing a strategy that supports scholarship and allows organizational members to seek information from external sources; such as customers, clients and suppliers to inform their mission for innovation.³² These strategic goals must be effectively communicated to faculty, staff and students as well as ensure that they align with overall university professional and academic goals and objectives.³³ Most importantly, overall university strategy for innovation and creativity must be both narrow enough to define the university's core competency and broad enough to allow exploration into related areas for strategic innovation, creativity, change and transformation.³⁴

University Administrative Structure that Allows Innovation and New Insight

Most university hierarchies and chains of authority affect institutional and individual innovation. A flat, dispersed and flexible structure can augment and facilitate the process of developing and maintaining a strong culture for innovation at African universities.³⁵ This will allow the free flow of information amongst university community members and other functional areas of the university for maximum productivity. Additionally, a flat and decentralized university structure will boost decision-making processes by giving more autonomy to faculty and staff and easy access to top university administrators. This can enhance motivation on the part of faculty and staff to take the initiative to be innovative.³⁶

Independence and Sovereignty to try New Things amidst Effective Goal Setting

The absence of restrictions and a promotion of independence can enhance the quest to decide and define ways and means to achieve set university goals and objectives on the part of faculty and staff.³⁷ Such goals must be valuable, worth the accomplishment and fruit bearing for all stakeholders.³⁸ Amidst this freedom and independence, African university leadership must strive to be specific and strategic in their goal-setting approach with university community members since this can serve as an effective means of enhancing innovative stakeholder capabilities.³⁹ Having estimable goals is fundamental to spur key stakeholders on, but the nonexistence of goal clarity and precedence can lead to adverse effects on motivation and innovation.⁴⁰

Culture of Critical and Creative Thinking

Culture is the playing turf of innovation in any organization. Unless African university cultures respect ideas and support risk taking, innovation will be stifled before it begins.⁴¹ Moreover, critical and creative thinking is a necessary ingredient in the 21st century organization for the development of an innovative culture. Shared leadership and self managed teams are means by which African university administrators can fully tap into the creative and innovative abilities and skills of their faculty, staff and students.⁴² Creating an environment that allows organizational members to think critically and creatively enhances their problems solving skills as members brainstorm to identify reliable solutions to existing problems and challenges.

Resources

One of the main barriers to organizational creativity and innovation identified in the literature is time.⁴³ Innovation takes time, energy and money. More so, organizational members need a reasonable degree of freedom and time to reflect and explore new ideas and ways of thinking.⁴⁴ African university leaders must endeavor to use their organizational resources wisely to strike a balance between when and how to make ample resources available to encourage innovation. They must be able to determine when to make sufficient time available for creative and innovative performance within their universities.⁴⁵ Ample financial resources should be made available to faculty and staff to prevent a situation where they have to halt their creative and innovative efforts in order to find the needed financial and material resources to get the work done. Though innovation is critical and crucial to the future of all African universities, its implementation is dependent on the level of investment these institutions of higher learning are willing to make today.⁴⁶

A Center for Creativity and Innovation

Like most undertakings, a culture of innovation and creativity will take root in African organizations if university authorities design, develop and dedicate a department or center for such a purpose. Thus, all African universities should consider recruiting a team of individuals with an attraction, affinity and skill for innovation and creativity and task them with creating the needed processes, criteria and metrics for innovation in the university environment.⁴⁷ The team must be commissioned to organize and implement regular innovation and creativity trainings to provide university faculty and staff with the necessary tools and techniques that will boost their ability to think outside the box. This team should also be responsible for developing guidelines within which faculty; staff and students can operate and be productive in their pursuit of creativity and innovation. This team of dedicated individuals ought to be charged with managing innovative and creative ideas that are proposed by university community members. The team must capture these ideas and engage the proponents of the idea in developing, modifying, enlarging and evaluating the ideas to ensure they do not fall through the cracks.⁴⁸

The Way Forward

Institutions of higher learning across Africa have the ultimate responsibility to educate, train and raise the next generation of innovative African leaders. Therefore, all institutions of higher learning across the continent must be tasked with the responsibility of incorporating innovative ways of teaching and learning to assist in this quest. Existing universities and colleges must ensure their curriculum has content that will facilitate the process of inculcating and developing innovative and creative abilities and skills in individuals who go through them to enhance their capacity to identify innovative solutions to Africa's current and future challenges. Moreover, departments and centers should be dedicated to such initiatives on all university and college campuses to help entrench this movement. Nevertheless, this journey requires a significant level of determination, resolution, time, and financial, human and other resources in order to be realized. African university leaders cannot afford to retreat because of existing challenges and obstacles. They must move forward by putting in place structures that will enhance the creation of an innovative and creative culture within their universities. African universities must be designed and organized to enhance individual and organizational innovativeness. Such university structural designs must allow organizational members the needed autonomy and independence for creative and innovative thinking. Above all, African university leaders must always take the relevance of innovation into account when formulating short and long-term strategies for their institutions.

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