

UNIVERSITIES AS ACTORS IN INTERCULTURAL DIALOGUE

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Abstract

Universities generally provide a multicultural environment where students, faculty and community interact and exchange ideas. However, this environment can also be a microcosm of ethnic and political tensions, cultural misunderstandings and misconceptions. The Kenyan context particularly reflects this diversity and calls on university management boards to put into place mechanisms that address the various challenges that students, faculty, staff and administration face in their daily lives. This paper thus seeks to answer the questions: How should Kenya best deal with the challenge of cultural diversity and the threat to peace and harmony in our universities? How can universities develop into a microcosm of cross-cultural dialogue in a manner that they actually set the agenda for national unity?

Key Words: *Tolerance, Culture, Intercultural, Multiculturalism, social cohesion, integration, Actors & Stakeholders, Pluralism.*

Africa has in the recent past seen a sharp increase in the demand for higher education. This has led to the mushrooming of numerous Institutions of Higher Learning (IHL) so as to meet the demand. Kenya has particularly witnessed a high increase in universities. There are currently 66 universities in the country. Students in these institutions are from various nationalities, and countries across Africa and beyond. This is partly accredited to the fact that Nairobi is a diplomatic hub hosting many international organizations from the United Nations to civil society groups. The need to constantly build capacity of personnel has also contributed to the increase of service to consumers.

Intercultural dialogue is a process that comprises an open and respectful exchange of views between people or groups from different ethnic, cultural, linguistic, and religious backgrounds. The process

aims to develop a deeper understanding of diverse perspectives and practices; to increase participation and the freedom and ability to make choices; to foster unity and equality; and to enhance creative processes.

Cultural diversity in Kenya is marked by inter-regional and cross-border migrations caused by factors ranging from conflict to natural disasters. Kenya hosts one of the largest refugee camps in the world with more than 400,000 refugees, mostly from Somalia. The social and political instability in the neighbouring countries has meant that refugee migrations have led to inter-marriages and cross-nationality hybridization.

However, despite these opportunities to diversify Kenyan society, universities have become a representation of the divisive social-political scenarios witnessed in society in general. For example, elections of student union leaders have been marked with abrasive political undertones, often along the politics of dominant political parties. Besides, the voting patterns seem to be gauged on ethno-political divisions witnessed during the general elections in the country. Such divisions have serious ramifications on the efforts towards social cohesion of the student body, often affecting the learning process and student perceptions of the objectivity of the lecturers in their patterns of teaching and evaluating students, particularly in the public universities. In some cases such divisions have spilled on to the administrative structures of the university. Hence, there is need to address such divisions through social and institutional reforms at both the student body and administrative levels.

The key to university transformation to address the diverse layers of ethno-political divisions is to enhance an assertive and uniting leadership. Leadership of institutions of higher learning ought to promote dialogue through the imparting and instilling of values to students that the society can stand for. It is from these university milieus that students take their essential values with them into their professional careers and into the wider society in which they belong. In the current dynamically changing world, students should no longer be viewed simply as recipients and clients, but active participants in improving the environment in which they live. Universities therefore are vital institutions for empowering students' self-knowledge and their potential for social transformation of the society in which they live.

In the recent past, universities in Kenya have incorporated in their curriculum the teaching of "Intercultural Communication" as a discipline of study. Such teachings enhance the understanding of the "other" within the university context and beyond. However, the intercultural communication course is yet to gain popularity in all universities.

Another important factor increasing social cohesion in universities is to expose students to the national history, particularly specific periods when there were conflicts and social-political divisions. Thus, the teaching of the Kenyan History would aid in healing the wounds of the past. For example, an analysis of the factors behind the 2007/2008 post-election violence following disputed election results between the incumbent president and opposition leadership leading to the death of more than 1500 people, the Wagala massacre in which innocent civilians were massacred, and the Burnt forest clashes in the 1992 General Elections that lead to deaths and displacements of families, among others. The dark moments of the country should prepare the younger generation to learn from history and commit themselves to changing attitude and perceptions.

The inclusion of religious studies in the curriculum should be encouraged as a means of integrating the life of faith in to the social-political sphere. Ideally religious education and confessions in an intercultural context give knowledge about all world religions, beliefs and their history and enables the individual to understand religions and belief systems of the other. The application of religious values into the leadership styles could, to some extent, improve the quality of leadership at the university level and in the country in general.

Students' outdoor activities like sports, debates, music festivals, inter-university discussions and forums and field studies and tours can create enabling environments for cross-cultural dialogue and social cohesion. Besides, such extra-curricular activities can enhance one's health and improve students' intellectual performance.

Lastly, educators at all levels play an essential role in fostering intercultural understanding. Educators serve as role models and should lead by example. It is important that university lecturers and administrative leadership develop systems of social accountability and hold everyone mutually accountable to the public.

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