

Publish or Perish: Ushering in UNZA-JABS

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Essence of a University and the State of African Universities

As we usher in this first issue of the University Of Zambia Journal Of Agricultural and Biomedical Sciences (UNZA-JABS), JABS Volume 1 Issue 1 2012, we feel compelled to take you into a brief discourse on the essence of a university and the current state of African Universities as a way of ably explaining why we are introducing UNZA-JABS.

Historically as well as in modern times, universities world-wide, have been and are known for their academic lives^{1,3}. Existence of a university devoid of a vibrant academic life is most often questionable and most probably such a university is non-existent. So what is the 'academic life' of a university? Indeed what is the essence of a university? Detailed discourse with regard to these questions is beyond the scope of this editorial commentary but suffice to say that the 'idea of a university' with its roots well entrenched in the ancient schools of Plato, the *academies*, is probably in modern times well-articulated and understood by the 'Humboldtian' model of a University⁴. Irrefutably, modern university history probably starts and ends with the outstanding education reforms of Wilhelm von Humboldt, in Prussia, with the subsequent founding of the University of Berlin in 1810^{4,5}. By the First World War, 1914, German universities were generally admired as the best in the world and the 'Humboldtian University' became a model for the rest of Europe. Literature^{4,7} suggests that it was this 'Humboldtian Model' that shaped the elite universities of the United States that are, inarguably, the world leaders in academics today. The Humboldtian University Model has a central principle of the 'union of teaching and research' in the work of every individual scholar or scientist. Thus, according to the Humboldtian model, a university is viewed as a *community of scholars and students* engaged on a common task of *academia*⁴. From the proceeding principle and definition it is extremely easy to appreciate the essence of a university. The essence of a university, world-wide, is *academia*, the common task of scholars (university faculty) and students of advancing knowledge by original and critical investigation. Hence, universities are not mere 'Higher Education Centres' where skills are taught (training of specialists or professionals) but where there is concurrent active search, discovery and creation of new knowledge. Emphasis should be made here that teaching at a university is, normally, inseparable from active search for new knowledge, research. In other ways teaching at a university should be based on this active search for knowledge and students, from all

levels, must participate in this search. This is 'academic life' of a university that makes it vibrant.

The obvious question arising from the discourse this far, is thus, 'what is the current state of universities world-wide with regard to *academia*? As earlier hinted, detailed responses to these pertinent questions are beyond the scope of this editorial. Currently and world-wide, university education has and is undergoing rapid transformation with probable threat to the Humboldtian University Principle and *academia* especially in view of the popular global campaign for universal access to tertiary education^{2,7}. Indeed university education in this post-modern era is being forcefully pushed away from being only for the elite few to masses with universities experiencing huge student enrollments annually. In this scenario, the state of *academia*, the essence of a university, in many universities, world-wide, is probably common sense to everyone. Obviously the huge university student enrollments are not matching with university infra-structure development or, at minimum, faculty (scholar) requirements making the sustainability of *academia* a pipe dream especially in developing countries. We would have preferred to leave this discourse on the current status of universities here but for the sake of this editorial we will delve a little more and specifically into the state of African Universities as regards to *academia*.

The state of African Universities is probably well summed up by the recent observation by a prominent Ugandan academician and renowned international scholar, Mahmood Mamdani, a Professor and Director of the Makerere Institute of Social Research (MISR) at Makerere University, Kampala, Uganda and who also is the Herbert Lehman Professor of Government at Columbia University, New York, USA(8). Professor Mahmood Mamdani has observed that African Universities are currently dominated by a 'market-driven model' with the spread of a corrosive 'consultancy culture'. This has had negative consequences for postgraduate education and research⁹. Expounding on this state of affairs in African Universities, Mamdani writes and we quote, "Today, intellectual life in universities has been reduced to bare-bones classroom activity. Extra-curricular seminars and workshops have migrated to hotels. Workshop attendance goes with transport allowances and per diem. All this is part of a larger process, the NGO-ization of the university. Academic papers have turned into corporate-style power point presentations. Academics read less and less. A chorus of buzz words has taken the place of lively debates". Authors of this first issue of UNZA-JABS editorial agree with Mamdani observation and indeed this is the state of African Universities. *Academia* in many of our universities, even here at University of Zambia (UNZA), has been eroded by the 'consultancy culture'. We are

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engaged in less local and original pioneering research but more and more we are swamped with 'hand-to-mouth' consultancy work. Like what has been observed by Professor Mamdani at MISR and Makerere University, most of the research that occurs at the majority of African Universities today, and even here at UNZA, is externally-driven resulting from Western donor agencies that have funded our counterpart Western universities to do research on Africa. We, the African academics engaged in partnerships of such externally-driven funded research projects are in most cases not equal research partners with our Western university colleagues as in most cases we are not part of the original formulation of the respective projects research questions. Often times such partnerships, or collaborative research project proposals, come to us as *manna* from heaven ready for us to consume. To say the least, in most cases we are mere research assistants to our Western counterparts. Indeed the state of academia in most of our African universities is appalling.

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Now the obvious questions you may be asking at this point as you read this editorial may include: "Why is that the state of *academia* is particularly appalling in African Universities?"; "Is there anything that is being done to redress this appalling state of Academia in African Universities?" and a more specific question, "How do we counter the consultancy culture that has eroded many of our African universities?" We will briefly express our opinions on each of these questions limiting ourselves to the scope of this editorial commentary. The first question on the reasons why the state of academia in African Universities is particularly appalling is not only beyond the scope of this editorial but also beyond the competency of the two editorial authors of this commentary who are both not specialists in education. We are, however, able to speculate and agree with the available evidence in literature (2 & 9) that much of the current appalling state of academia in African universities is as a result of its immediate historical past especially the colonial and neocolonial educational legacies. One can easily attest to this fact by looking at the pattern of development and proliferation of university education in Europe and the Western World from the ancient Platonian academies in an almost steady continuum especially after the First World War. However, this was not so in Africa not that Africa did not have a share of ancient centres of learning as it is well known that there existed such centres of learning in different parts of Africa notable of which include *Sankore* in Mali, *Al-Azhar* in Egypt, and *Al-Zaytuna* of Morocco⁹. Now during the period when modern university education was proliferating everywhere else, Africa's education plights were restricted by a suppressive colonial education legacy. The British leading colonial administrator for Africa, Lord Lugard, is quoted to have said⁹ that Britain must avoid the 'Indian disease' in Africa referring to the development of an educated African middle class that would most likely result into the 'disease' of nationalism as was the case of Mahatma Gandhi's movement in India. This explains why in the whole of Colonial Sub-Saharan Africa, apart from apartheid Africa, there were only a countable number of established modern universities—two in the whole of West Africa (Ibadan and Legon) and one for East and Southern Africa (Makerere). There is no doubt that the few colonial universities such as Makerere were of high academic class built on the Humboldtian University Principle

as could be seen from the scholarly outputs of the graduates from these universities that are well documented such as that of late Professor Lameck Goma, former Chancellor of UNZA after whose name the 'Goma Lakes' of UNZA Great East Road Campus are named. His seminal studies on the mosquito published in high impact journal of *Nature*¹⁰ are to date still of citable quality. The post-independence period had a proliferation of universities in the whole of Africa with virtually every independent African state symbolically establishing a national university at the dawn of independence. However, the neocolonial university educational legacy of post-independent Africa has had obvious palpable defects contributing to the appalling state of academia in African Universities today. One such defect, as again excellently observed by Professor Mamdani, was lack of postgraduate education at foundation of each of these neocolonial African universities⁹. In virtually all post-independence African universities, until recently, there had been no deliberate local postgraduate training programs. Instead nearly each neocolonial African university had Staff Development Fellowship arrangement where fellows were sent to Western countries for postgraduate studies depriving the local institutions of strong research capacity and outputs. This retrogressive neocolonial university education legacy is still haunting many African universities today further explaining the current appalling state of academia in these universities. With this state of affairs of none-existent vibrant postgraduate research activities the majority of senior faculty (Professors, associate professors and Senior Lecturers) in African universities are hardly in active local and original research work. Their dwindling research mentorship experiences/activities result into low new knowledge production activities or research outputs from their respective universities.

With the preceding conversations, it may look as if the picture of African universities is totally or hopelessly gloomy. It is not. Our opinion is otherwise. The appalling academic state of African universities is not hopeless as such as most of these institutions just requires enhancement of the intellectual environment. This is well demonstrated by a few so called 'centres of excellence' within Africa with enhanced intellectual environments that have high academic performance. This brings us to the last two of our questions of this discourse of whether there is anything that is being done to redress the appalling state of *academia* in African Universities and also the more specific question of how can we counter the 'consultancy culture' that has eroded many of our African universities. We hasten to say that a lot is being done to redress the situation. What is encouraging is the fact that consensus to redress the situation appears to have been reached in nearly African universities. The 'Mamdani prescription'⁹ being offered to MISR and Makerere of creating local intellectual environments within our respective universities strong enough to sustain meaningful intellectual culture appears to be the irrefutable evidence-based solution. A while ago this year, the lead author to this editorial commentary, in the capacity of Assistant Dean Research, was part of a workshop of High schools and their respective stakeholders at Pamodzi Hotel (fortunately not consultancy work), Lusaka, hosted by the National Science and Technology Council (NSTC) to brainstorm on how to redress the appalling high school science education in the country. The resolutions arrived at were not different from the 'Mamdani prescription'. The need to

cultivate a “science culture” among the citizenry was the agreed upon foremost solution! Indeed, efforts and strategies to this effect of redressing the appalling state of academics are being engaged, at various levels, throughout the continent. In a more pragmatic way introduction of postgraduate education has proliferated in our universities across the continent giving an indication that research and scholarly work, and not consultancy work, is reclaiming centre stage of academics in our universities. Yes, it has to be research and scholarly work as there can be no meaningful postgraduate education through consultancy work. Anything less than that is short of being 'communities of scholars and students' engaged on a common task of *academia*, the true definition of universities that we ought to be. Yes, in that state of being less than *communities of scholars and students*, we perish as academics.

That UNZA is going that direction of creating a sustainable intellectual environment in a more resolute way is common knowledge to us all especially as demonstrated and articulated by the 2008-2012 University of Zambia Strategic Plan and the subsequent 2009 UNZA Research and Intellectual Property Rights Policy¹¹⁻¹². The intent by the university to enhance research so as to better inform excellence in teaching and public service is well spelt in the aforementioned policy documents. The overarching goal of the research enhancement activities is to create local intellectual environments within our Campus strong enough to sustain meaningful intellectual culture. Some of these activities of enhancing intellectual environment on campus to allow the flourishing of academia include creation of various fora for research dissemination. Such research dissemination fora include the establishment of peer-reviewed university journals, annual university symposia, and seminars. It is to this end that UNZA-JABS is being ushered in as one of the three journals that the university has established for that purpose. It is worth noting here that publishing in peer-reviewed journals is yet the unsurpassed independent way of gauging scholarly contribution. It is the major basis for evaluating universities, consideration of tenure and promotion of academics/faculty in universities world-wide including UNZA and hence the familiar aphorism of 'publish or perish' among academic communities¹³⁻¹⁵. We would further entreat our readers to appreciate the 'publish or perish' academic aphorism from its positive aspect rather than the aforementioned seeming negative aspect of promotions, fate of academic tenures and pass or fail verdicts of postgraduate students. The positive aspect of this adorable academic aphorism is its inherent emphasis for every scholar or academician to be seen to be documenting their respective contributions to knowledge or science. Furthermore using and paraphrasing another common academic aphorism, 'Research done that stays unpublished is as good as not done'. To put it clearer and paraphrasing from biblical scripture, 'Indeed, what benefit is there for one to light a lamp and then place it under a bowl'¹⁶. Certainly, all those engaged in scholarly work ought to publish their works not just for getting employment, promotions or passing graduate studies but for the professional obligation of documenting their respective contribution to knowledge/science. As elaborated elsewhere¹⁷ publications in peer-reviewed journals are everything in science. They are not only the basis of new innovations and technology but also serve to stimulate multitudes other scientists and future research and thus assuring continuity of advancement of knowledge. We see this as the main reason of ushering in UNZA-JABS so that many scholars

out there can have an opportunity to publish their scholarly contributions. Hence this editorial urges us all, as academics, to 'Publish or we perish'.

We take this opportunity on behalf of the founding UNZA-JABS editorial board as well as the Journal's founding editorial advisory board to make this important declaration that we usher in UNZA-JABS as a peer-reviewed university journal and we look forward to it serving you all. The journal scope, as detailed in the instructions to authors (See pages 52-54 of this issue), is daunting covering three disciplines namely medicine, veterinary medicine and Agricultural sciences. From editorial point of view, we know that the growth and survival of this journal will depend on you the readers besides the authors contributing manuscripts to it as well as those of you who shall make yourselves available to help with the peer-review process. We thus welcome your input to the journal and you are free to write your opinions/suggestions to the journal editorial board through the Chief Editor on any issue with regard to the journal or indeed general academic issues. We end our discourse by re-emphasizing that UNZA-JABS is ushered in as one way of enhancing our academics at UNZA. So publish or perish!

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