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Varsities must lead education rethink

By: Tebogo Monama

Former president Thabo Mbeki, left, and Professor Adebayo Olukoshi, director of the African Institute for Economic Development and Planning, at the opening of the Times Higher Education Africa Universities Summit at the University of Johannesburg. Photos: Nokuthula Mbatha

Johannesburg - There might be a need to rethink the entire education system to ensure pupils who leave secondary schools are better prepared for higher education.

According to African Institute for Economic Development and Planning director Professor Adebayo Olukoshi, universities across Africa often complain that the students they get from high schools aren't ready for tertiary education.

Olukoshi said universities needed to lead the conversation on the continent rethinking the entire education system.

"Many universities are failed by secondary and primary education systems that are completely out of sync with the kind of students the professors expect. Too many universities complain... that the products of our secondary and primary educational systems do not have the necessary preparations to enable them to have a useful academic time.

"The necessary conversation that must take place about how to revitalise and create a coherent national educational system has been lacking. Universities can play an important role in this conversation," Olukoshi said.

He was speaking at the Times Higher Education Africa Universities Summit that started at the University of Johannesburg on Thursday and ends on Friday.

Olukoshi said because of the complaints, public primary and secondary schools were fast being replaced by private schools. He said the same trend was spreading to universities, with more private higher education institutions opening up.

He said that to build better higher education institutions in Africa, collaboration among institutions was important.

"Breaking down barriers, including sometimes purely egotistic barriers, for collaboration within countries - among universities - and beyond countries among African universities is important. Hardly any university on our continent is able to claim to have all the qualified faculty it requires to compete globally.

“Thinking of ways to break down barriers that will enable us to develop faculties for the joint benefit and mobility between universities’ boundaries is an important part of the challenge,” Olukoshi said.

Former president Thabo Mbeki, who opened the summit, said governments needed to relook at the funding of higher education institutions.

He said that after independence, most African countries viewed universities with pride as they might have helped to attain liberation.

“There is fairly extensive literature about how the then healthy relationship between the state and the university was weakened and destroyed.

“In many instances, if not most, this was linked to the introduction of structural adjustment programmes by the Bretton Woods institutions and the perception among the African ruling elite that the universities were serving as centres of political opposition to this elite,” Mbeki said.

From this straining of relations, governments started “seeing expenditure on universities and therefore higher education as a burdensome but unavoidable cost rather than an absolutely necessary and beneficial investment”.

He said universities now had a tough task to convince governments that they were indeed interested in the African development agenda and, therefore, needed better investments to further this.

“It is only once they are convinced about all this that it would be possible for our governments to lead the process, which would result in the substantially larger public funding that is required and without which many of the radical changes that need to be made will not see the light of day.”

Source: The Star

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