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COMPANY INDUSTRY

Enrolment chaos dent the quality of Kenyan degrees



Kenya Methodist University students stand outside their institution in Nairobi after it was closed due to management wrangles in February. Photo/LIZ MUTHONI

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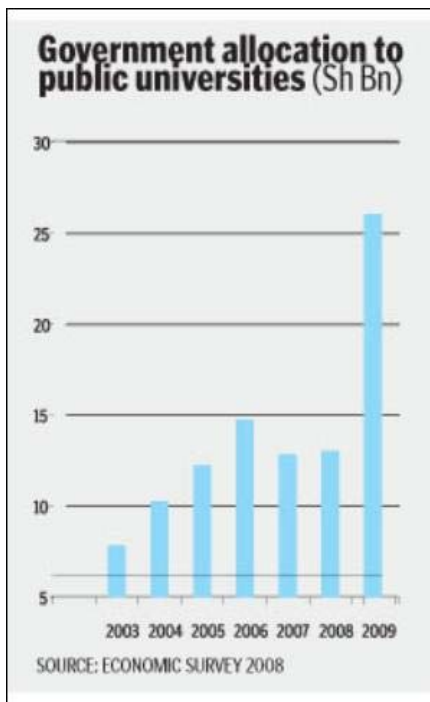
Kenyan universities are admitting students for courses they have not registered with the regulator, deepening a simmering higher education quality crisis and exposing the graduates to the risk of rejection in the labour market.

The Commission for Higher Education (CHE) says many of the courses for which thousands of students are enrolled have not been accredited and can therefore not be recognised as offering proper qualification to the various disciplines – putting thousands of careers on the line.

The commission spoke after a number of graduates reported being denied admission to the various professional bodies such as the Institute of Surveyors of Kenya, the Chartered Institute of Accountants and the association of nurses on the grounds of holding certificates from unrecognised colleges.

It has now emerged that the main culprit in the crisis that is now threatening to shred the credibility of Kenyan degrees are the private universities, which are establishing departments and launching new courses before getting the mandatory accreditation from the CHE.

“Some universities are starting programmes first then filing applications with the commission for accreditation, which is wrong,” said Prof Everett Standa, the chief executive of CHE.



Prof Standa said in the past two years, the commission has dealt with three cases involving universities that offered non-accredited courses.

All were private colleges racing to tap the rich revenue line made up of working students looking to upgrade their skills through part time classes.

Pursuing a degree programme in a university or department of a university that has not been accredited is exposing parents, guardians and self-sponsored students to loss of millions of shillings in fees and other charges in pursuit of certificates that are of no value in the labour market.

Besides setting up unauthorised courses, the admissions race has also seen many of the universities over enrol students in accredited courses far past the recommended levels, making it difficult for lecturers to cope and ultimately diluting the quality of learning in the colleges.

Prof Standa said the commission is currently dealing with an accreditation case at the Kenya Methodist University (KEMU) – a move that may lead to the closure of some of the college’s departments, causing the students heavy losses.

“The university must immediately cease offering programmes that have not been approved because it is illegal to do so,” said CHE in an inspection report.

Prof Standa said while KEMU has since presented the programmes for accreditation, no student should be admitted for such programmes until the process is complete. KEMU declined to comment on the matter.

Educationists blame the ongoing dilution of the quality of Kenyan degrees on uncontrolled expansion in the last 10 years that has seen public universities open campuses in some of the remotest locations in the country, putting to doubt the quality of teaching in the units.

Though the number of qualified lecturers has been growing, it lags far behind the student enrolment rate forcing many universities to hire unqualified staff for academic positions.

It has, for instance, become common to find university departments staffed by non Phd holders and in most severe cases first degree holders teaching postgraduate classes.

The University Academic Staff Union (UASU) data indicates that there were 9,000 lecturers in both public and private universities, up from 7,000 four years ago.

During the same period, student enrolment grew from 91,541 to 130,000 — a 42 per cent jump. Kenya has 38 private and public universities.

“Ideally, a lecturer should supervise two masters students and one doctorate student but there are cases where one professor is supervising 45 masters students and five doctorate candidates besides teaching undergraduates,” Mr Sammy Kubasu, the UASU national chairman told the *Business Daily*.

University of Nairobi Vice Chancellor George Magoha said the pool of lecturers is quickly drying up with the rapid expansion of institutions.

Prof Magoha reckons that the UoN has kept pace with the rapid growth in student population and has in its pay-roll 1,600 full-time and 500 part-time lecturers — 230 of whom are full professors enough to teach the 49,000 students.

With that number, however, Kenya’s oldest and largest university by student population and number of courses offered is running a lecturer- -to -student ratio that is slightly above the CHE threshold of 1:7 for science courses and 1:18 for social sciences.

The story is, however, different at the Thika Road-based United States International University, where 4,594 students are enrolled against 230 lecturers for a ratio of 1:19 — which stands closest to CHE standards.

More recently as the high student enrolment reduced learner to tutor contact, a lucrative examinations brokerage market has emerged around the campuses trading in term paper, project and thesis writing.

This means students are literally buying scores for courses they have enrolled in, widening the skills gap in the labour market despite the flooding of the market by thousands of graduates every year.

It has also become common for a lecturer to teach in at least three universities in a single semester, forcing them to shuttle around campuses to lecture with quality of tutoring as the victim.

“We cannot talk about quality assurance when universities are ill-equipped, lecturers are overworked, libraries have no books and journals and research is not being carried out,” said Mr Kubasu.

The quality of university degrees crisis has come at a time when Kenya is grappling with a skills shortage that is eroding the country’s competitiveness in a globalised economy.

Though human capital has emerged as a key arsenal for market share growth in the increasingly competitive sectors of the economy many companies are find it hard to get it.

“We are now being forced to ask applicants for their secondary education certificates with the university degree coming in second,” said Caroline Kigen, the chief executive Institute of Certified Public Accountants of Kenya (ICPAK).

“The degree is no longer a reliable measure of a job-seeker’s ability as certain universities are churning doubtful graduates,” she said adding that the faltering quality of learning is forcing employers to reject graduates from some universities.

Analysts argue that poor quality education is quickly eating away at Kenya’s skills base, adding a new layer of challenge to the country’s quest for high rate of economic growth and the realisation of a newly industrialised status by 2030.

“There is a big mismatch between the skills level of graduates and the market needs yet human capital remains a pillar of our development targets,” said Michael Kahiti, the chief economist at the Planning ministry.

Professional bodies are also worried about the quality of graduates.

The Kenya Engineers Registration Board, the professional body for engineers says it only recognises students who have gone through 19 out of 49 engineering programmes being offered by universities countrywide.

Gilbert Arasa, the body’s registrar says these are from institutions which have had their curricula vetted and approved for the purposes of registration of graduate engineers upon the completion of their courses.

“The rest of the programmes and their graduates are of questionable quality otherwise they would not apply for accreditation,” said Mr Arasa.

“This is tarnishing the profession with people increasingly writing to us to ask about certain graduates,” he said.

Prof Crispus Kiamba, the permanent secretary in the Ministry of Higher Education, Science and Technology reckons the sector is very dynamic, bringing with it huge challenges such as quality, equity and relevance concerns.

“With such concerns of quality lapses, we are going to read the riot act and rein in on the institutions which are not following the right guidelines,” he said, adding that the ministry could stop such universities from graduating more students.

Kenyan universities have ranked poorly in the list of global institutions of higher learning with only two of them making it to the top 5,000.

The 2009 Ranking Web of World Universities by the Spanish National Research Council placed Strathmore as Kenya’s top college at position 2,204 globally and in position 12 in Africa, while Kenya’s second, the University of Nairobi finished in position 4,046 globally and 22 on the continent.