

ARE THIRD WORLD UNIVERSITIES REALLY NECESSARY?

by Robin Hallett

Do Third World countries really need universities? Or, to rephrase that question rather less starkly, rather more precisely (the term 'Third World', stretched to embrace countries as different from one another as Mexico and Mozambique, is becoming too cumbersome for rational discussion) can the poorest countries in the world really afford the most expensive type of educational institution? Even in this modified form the question has a shocking, heretical ring about it. Only an arrogant Northerner, someone from the South of the world might argue, would have the effrontery to pose such a question, revealing in so doing his racial and cultural prejudices.

Certainly the question is not one that many people would have thought of posing in the Sixties and early Seventies, that euphoric age of educational expansion, when Education seemed the easy answer to all problems, the panacea for all ills, while higher education was clearly a vital component of the process of Development and Growth. Nor, speaking personally, would I myself have presumed to think heretically in the days when I too had my niche in the academic establishment with a research post at Oxford in the Sixties, a lectureship in Cape Town in the Seventies. But the Eighties have forced me, as they have forced so many others, to find rather less conventional ways of earning a living: supported by a modest inheritance, I work as a free-lance writer, trying to keep my links with the academic world through lecturing engagements in South Africa.

About a year ago I was invited to lecture for a month at the university of an independent African state. My motives for accepting the invitation were, I think, pretty typical of the reasons that lead many expatriates to work in African or Third World universities and so it is worth subjecting them to a certain amount of critical analysis. (The position of an English person working at a white South African university is very different: it is easy to shed the expatriate label and feel oneself assimilated to the local community.) My prime reason for accepting this particular invitation was a purely economic one: I grasped eagerly the opportunity of earning a month's salary topped up as it was by allowances — unnecessarily generous allowances, I could not help thinking, from the British Council.

Curiosity was another motive. Though I had worked in Nigeria and Tanganyika as it then was in the Fifties, I had known Black Africa only in its colonial era and had never had the experience of working in an independent African state. At white South African universities it is all too easy to feel oneself distanced from Africa's fundamental problem, the problem of increasing poverty. I hoped I would find myself among people who had got their priorities right and were deeply involved with essentials. I hoped too that I would have an opportunity of fleshing out the recent history of the country I was to visit, of making it more personal, more vibrant in my mind.

Vanity was unquestionably another motive. I was flattered to have received an invitation out of the blue. It was good to feel that one was actually needed in one's old profession, that in a time of academic unemployment, with English universities turning into closed shops, one could do something useful again. There is, in this desire to be useful, a certain missionary urge. I have learnt to be sceptical of those who set out from Europe to 'help' the Third World. But it is difficult to purge one's mind completely of a certain residual idealism. In any case I enjoy university teaching — at its best the most rewarding, because the most sociable and stimulating, of occupations.

This personal confession is not irrelevant to the theme of this article. British people of my background and generation have played a large part in shaping the pattern of higher education in many parts of Africa. Our experience has a certain historical interest. Besides, education is not a subject that should be written about in the abstract. Potentially the subject is an exciting one. Unfortunately academic writing on education — like academic writing on most subjects — is couched in such drearily abstract terms that the subject itself comes to seem tedious. This is a great pity: in its essence education is concerned with a highly intriguing type of human relationship — the relationship between the teacher and the taught — a relationship that can prove quite as fascinating to consider as that between husbands and wives, parents and children or masters and servants.

From now on I shall be treading on sensitive ground: I shall cause offence no doubt to those who have vested interests in maintaining certain types of educational institution. But I shall not be indulging in sonorous moral judgements: who indeed will presume to be the judge in these matters when we are all guilty of short-sightedness, incompetence and self-interest? I am in pursuit of that elusive substance 'reality'. I want to squeeze as many useful lessons as I can out of a particular experience. I hope that what I say may help to promote and stimulate discussion — and discussion that will not be an end in itself but a movement towards more effective action.

Any expatriate with recent experience of working in an African university can bring out a crop of stories about personal hardships and professional frustrations: universities closed for political reasons for weeks or months at a time, acute fears about personal safety on account of the incidence of armed robbery, anxieties caused by the lack of proper medical facilities, austerities imposed by the lack of basic necessities. I got off pretty lightly in the university I visited. I was adequately accommodated, food was easily procurable, and there was a good library. But my visit was certainly surrounded by a good deal of muddle and confusion that seemed intensely irritating at the time — letters left unanswered for months, money wasted on extravagant telex messages, days spent hanging around with no demands being made on my services,

an absence of those small attentions and courtesies which can cast a glow of pleasure, of remembered human warmth over the drabest of experiences.

These points are not trivial: they have great practical importance. In the 1950's and '60's it was not difficult for African universities to recruit first-rate expatriate teachers. Bad working conditions are going to make the task of recruitment infinitely more difficult. The good expatriate teacher in the Africa of the 1980's is going to have to develop some of the qualities shown by the old missionaries — self-reliance, an ability to adapt to the modes of the country, a good deal of faith and dedication. These qualities are hardly likely to be shown by those who see themselves climbing an academic ladder or who have come out to Africa simply to earn a salary.

In the colonial period teaching appointments at African universities were filled almost entirely by expatriates from the metropolis. The staffs of African universities have become much more diverse in recent years. As many posts as possible are filled by locals, but there are still large expatriate contingents. The expatriate communities have become more cosmopolitan: they include many academics from other African or Third World countries. At first there may seem something exciting about having so cosmopolitan an academic community. But cosmopolitanism is only enriching if it is accompanied by open intercourse between people of different backgrounds. If such openness is lacking, then lines of division easily emerge between locals and expatriates, Africans, Asians and Europeans.

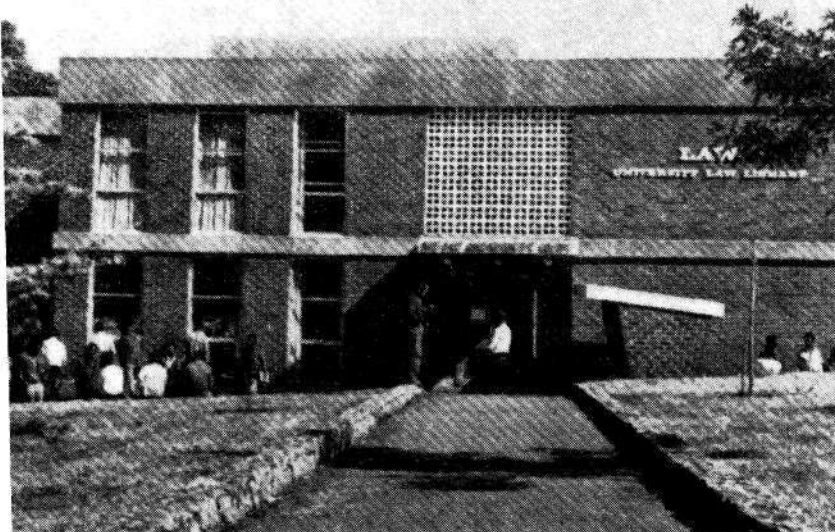
Those who are appointed to posts in African universities have to live with a degree of insecurity that those who have spent their working lives in the stable environment of an English, American, or white South African university would find it hard to imagine. This is most obviously the case with the expatriates. A few of the expatriates may be old-timers who have dug themselves in so deeply that they are not likely to be moved. All other expatriates are appointed on contracts for two or three years. A lecturer out from England whose contract is not renewed faces the alternative either of returning home to join the dole queue (unless he or she is exceptionally lucky) or of taking another contract appointment in another African or Third World country, knowing that in another two or three years the problem of moving will come up

yet again. The plight of African or Asian expatriates is likely to be even more painful. Often political reasons make it impossible for them to return to their own country, while immigration restrictions shut the gates of those traditional refuges for dissident intellectuals in London, Paris or New York.

But the position of local members of staff may be hardly less enviable. Superficially they can see themselves as members of the dominant elite, men and women whose careers have been highly successful. But they occupy posts of some political sensitivity. If they are ambitious, they will use the university as a jumping off point from which to move to more lucrative posts in the higher echelons of the bureaucracy. If they fall foul of the local political establishment, they may well find themselves having to flee the country for their lives. The political activities of academics in white South African universities look a good deal less hazardous in comparison.

A measure of insecurity can be stimulating: lively minds and security of tenure do not go easily together. But too much insecurity is bad for any institution, and especially bad for a university. Teaching and research both require a measure of continuity; short-term appointments make for scrappy teaching and mediocre research. Worse than that, insecurity also serves to create an atmosphere profoundly inimical to free discussion. "Keep your head down, be careful what you say, don't get in any way involved in local politics" may be practical advice to give university lecturers working in countries with prickly authoritarian regimes (and most countries in Africa come into that category in the 1980's) but it is advice which negates that ideal of intellectual freedom to which every proper university should surely aspire.

I was innocent enough to hope that the university I visited would be humming with intellectual activity. (When I visit white South African universities, I always find them lively places — but I know I am lucky to have friends whose conversation is stimulating and exciting.) I realized that there would be political constraints but I thought that I would meet a good many people who were giving their minds to the country's basic problems and the need to tackle in a practical manner all the manifestations of underdevelopment. I foresaw myself being given some opportunity to visit development projects. I wanted desperately to correct the gloom induced by a contemplation of the present state of Africa, to meet people whose work would give me real cause for optimism.



University of Zimbabwe Law Library

Perhaps I was just unlucky and did not meet the right people. "So-and-so", somebody said to me, "is the chap you really ought to talk to — but he's gone off to New York." (Incidentally if I were vice-chancellor of a university in an undeveloped country, I would put a complete embargo on conference-gadding by members of staff during term time.) By the time my month was up, I had seen no more of the country than the campus of the university. Like most campuses, it was a very cosy enclave. Within its confines it was as easy to forget the country's basic problems as it is for most white South Africans to be unaware of the realities of life in the urban ghettos and the rural slums.

But I learnt also that there was really no need to leave the campus to learn something of what was happening in the country. Expatriate members of staff might be too new to the country or too taken up with their own difficulties to provide illuminating insights, locals members of staff too cautious and reserved — but then why should they open their minds to a complete stranger? But with students — once the necessary mood of confidence had been established — conversation was much easier. Many of the students were men and women in their thirties and forties, often with a rich and varied experience of life behind them. At their best they were philosophical, perceptive and articulate. As they talked, my mind began to fill with a series of vignettes of local life — family relationships, clan divisions, journeys, cattle, political meetings. There was satire and drama, violence and laughter, human warmth and human variety, in their conversation. This was really what I had come to find, a compensation for all frustration, and on reflection — I shall come back to this point later — an antidote for pessimism. I trust that there was nothing condescending in my interest, my avid curiosity — I did not want to play the part of the anthropologist or the historian, I just wanted to know what it was like to live in that society, that country. I hope I would feel the same about any society. A proper curiosity is the obverse to a proper respect — and respect is the foundation stone for proper human relationships.

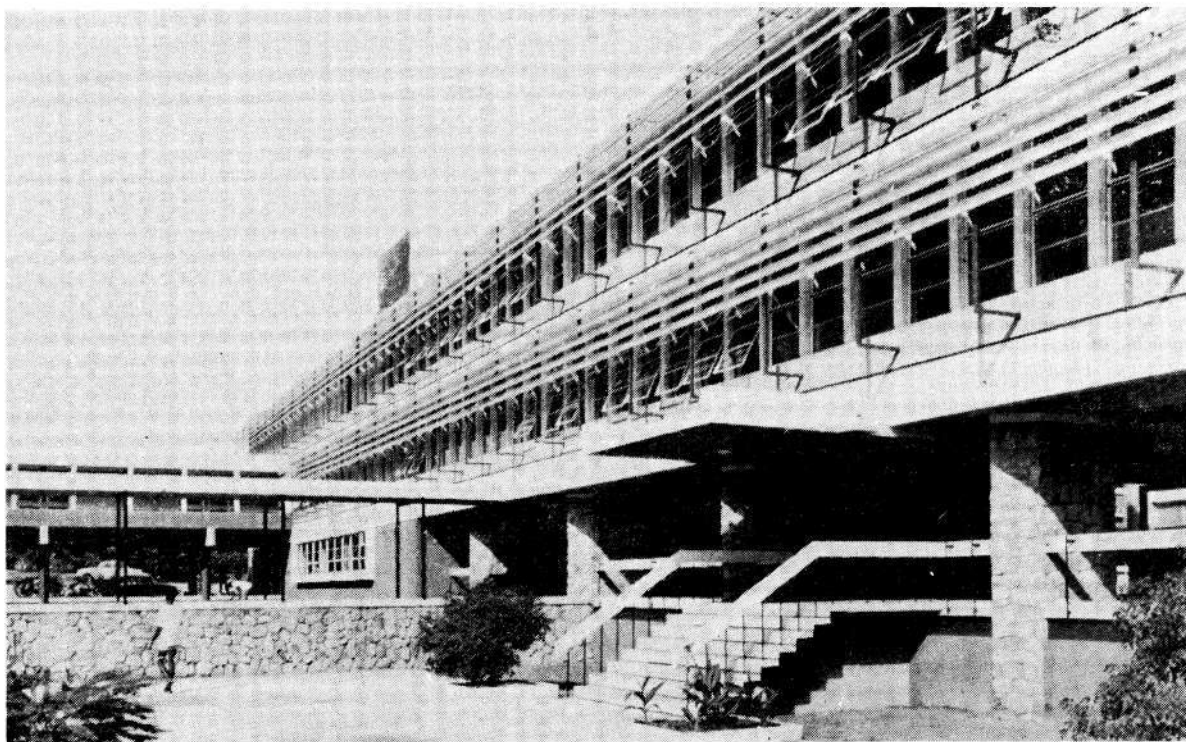
Yet thinking in less personal terms about the position of my students, I could not help feeling worried. I admired them for the sacrifices they had made to reach their present position — but where was their university course leading them? There was really only one answer — to jobs in the bureaucracy. Those who had already acquired a niche in the bureaucracy could count on using a university degree to upgrade their salaries. Those who had come to university straight from school would at least have a substantial advantage over 99% of their contemporaries in seeking well-remunerated employment. Year after year the university would be turning out more people to go on the government's pay roll, to do jobs that would be in the most literal sense unproductive. The country was poor, even desperately poor. Yet every year more and more of its resources were being siphoned off to meet the needs of its expanding urban elite. The problem is to be found in every Third World country. Between those governments which consider themselves Marxist or socialists and other more conservative regimes there certainly is a difference in rhetoric, but not a basic structural difference. In these circumstances surely it is time that we began asking difficult questions. Is it really worth maintaining at great expense educational institutions whose main function is to contribute to a process that is socially divisive and economically retrograde? Would it not be better to scrap universities completely and rethink the whole problem of higher education in underdeveloped countries?

Iconoclasm with a vengeance — iconoclasm to provoke looks

of horror on the faces of the international bourgeoisie, all those who have a vested interest in retaining Third World universities — institutions you can give aid to, institutions you can get jobs in, institutions where you can 'really begin to find out what is happening in the country'. The radicals are particularly shocked: they point out that universities are among the few effective centres of opposition in authoritarian states. Certainly it is possible to enumerate incidents from almost every country in Africa where university students have come out against the government. But universities can far too easily be broken to be really effective centres of opposition. Send the students packing for six-months — they will come back peaceful as lambs, anxious to make up lost time and not jeopardize their career prospects. And if any of them go on being recalcitrant, well, they can be broken or bribed — a knock over the head or the offer of a safe job. An autocrat does not really have to be very astute when he is faced with a dissident university. But surely — how often have I heard this phrase on the lips of vice-chancellors — 'universities are centres of excellence, places that set standards for the rest of the community.' A splendid aspiration: universities should indeed be centres of excellence, institutions from which new and liberating ideas radiate out, institutions which are closely in touch with other institutions, schools, hospitals, government ministries, newspapers, broadcasting corporations. Universities should play a major part in helping to create within a country or community as a whole a climate of discussion, enquiry, experimentation. No doubt in the more highly developed countries a few universities have some such impact, but in the Africa of the 1980's the constraints are too great; what interests can the ruling class, the local elite, have in encouraging discussion, when such discussion is inevitably going to lead to a criticism of its own shortcomings?

When the first universities were established in British colonial Africa in the years after the Second World War, their founding fathers, British and African alike, were profoundly influenced by one of the slogans of the day — Only the Best is Good Enough for Africa. And the Best meant of course Oxbridge, just as in political terms the Best could be identified only as the Westminster Model of Parliamentary Democracy. We are wiser or at least less sanguine now. We know that political institutions cannot be easily transferred from one country to another. (No, we don't all know that — many Marxists have still to learn the lesson.) Surely it is about time we came to realize that the same truth also applies to educational institutions.

During the colonial period an educational system was established in most parts of Africa that proved pretty efficient in one of its functions — the training of clerks, of those who needed certain basic skills in literacy required for carrying out certain routine duties. The process of professional training was carried further after the Second World War. The new universities now began to produce higher civil servants and secondary school teachers, doctors and engineers. The achievement was a substantial one, but the teaching was inevitably based on alien models. The subjects taught were new to Africa, as were the teachers who came out from the metropolis bringing with them their libraries, their laboratory equipment, their workshops. In the age of wishful thinking, most of us were only too happy to accept simplistic ideas about 'development' seeing it as a process in which all countries were involved, in which they would all, if only they followed the rules, trundle along the imaginary runway to reach the magic stage of 'take-off' after which they would zoom off into a future of mass consumerism, their economies powered by the process of 'self-sustaining growth.' In those halcyon days of the 1950's and



A portion of the Education Faculty Complex at the University of Ibadan.

60's the growth of higher education was one of the great success stories of African development.

We live now in a cruelly different age. Most African states are on the verge of bankruptcy, the basic infrastructure of their economy close to collapse. Shortage of foreign exchange means that libraries cannot keep up to date with their purchases, laboratories run out of basic supplies, workshop machinery breaks down for lack of spares. (In the mid-1970's I recall meeting a lecturer from a university in Zaire who told me that his library had received no new books for the last ten years: while I was writing this article, an acquaintance told me of a francophone country in West Africa where it was impossible to get an X-ray because of the lack of the proper photographic material.) The idea of equipping desperately poor countries with modern universities begins to look increasingly absurd.

But institutions once established develop a life of their own, spawning their own protectors. All universities are centres of privilege, and their teaching and administrative staffs, the academic bourgeoisie (occasional displays of rhetorical radicalism notwithstanding), as much a part of the local Establishment as those who occupy the higher echelons of the bureaucracy or the armed services. Being part of the Establishment, the academic bourgeoisie is able to lay a claim on scarce resources and so ensure its own survival. However critical outsiders may be of their nature and function, it is unrealistic to imagine that many Third World universities will collapse and disappear. The dynamism and aspirations of their youth long forgotten, they will turn into the institutions of an *ancien regime* with much stress on ritual — the pantomime of formal academic occasions — and much money spent every year on the maintenance of the grandiose buildings with which they were endowed. (The University of the Transkei, to quote but one example, is reported to use as much electricity as the whole town of Umtata: having seen something of that archi-

tectural monstrosity, I can well imagine this to be the case.) No matter — Third World universities will go on getting support from richer countries anxious to appease sensitive consciences or to 'win friends and influence people' among 'the next generation of leaders'.

Iconoclasm is an essentially negative operation. "And what would you do?" — those who resent these strictures can quite properly ask. I find myself reluctant to answer — not because I have no ideas of my own — I shall bring them out shortly — but because I am increasingly of the opinion that Africa has suffered all too much from the advice, however well intentioned, of those who are outsiders, who have no stake, physical and ancestral, in the continent. Contemporary Africa is littered with the ruins of failed institutions. Would that African countries could be left entirely alone, unpressured by outsiders, to work out their own solutions. But given the nature of the world economy, the emergence of an international culture, such a wish is an absurdity.

So if I am pressed to say what I would like to see happening in universities in Africa and other poor parts of the Third World, I would say this. Keep your eyes firmly fixed on absolute essentials. Remember how fast your population is increasing. People's most basic need is food — and after food, shelter and health. Strip your educational institutions down to essentials. Cut out all those subjects that must be regarded as luxuries. Close down your faculty of Arts, stop teaching Literature and Political Science and Religious Studies and even History. If you will seek an example from the West, forget all about Oxbridge or the Sorbonne or UCLA, find out something about the way in which working men and women in nineteenth century Britain, caught up as they were in the brutal early processes of the Industrial Revolution under a *laissezfaire* economy, set about educating themselves. The universities were completely closed to them, so they set up their own Institutes, established their own libraries, ran their own courses. Get out of the

habit of thinking that the State or Foreign Aid will provide everything. Break your university down into a number of smaller institutions, each devoted to purely practical subjects — Farming, Building, Health Care, Bookkeeping. (Don't get caught up by the way in providing courses to equip a few of your citizens for jobs with multinationals.) Smaller institutes will be much easier to manage. Cut down salaries. Do not pay your teachers in your institutes more than you pay school-teachers. And keep down the number of expatriates to the minimum.

If you are going to look abroad for stimulating examples, don't look at countries much richer than yourself. You simply cannot afford to do what they are doing. See what China has got to teach you — don't be afraid of its Communism — you ought to know by now how profoundly conservative gerontocratic Communist states really are — but China may have some good ideas. So too may Mozambique and Zimbabwe or even Bophuthatswana — look to the places where people started recently to build from scratch. And perhaps even from England you may get some ideas. Over here universities, subject to increasing cuts and restrictions, look like becoming pretty fossilized institutions. Where will they go — all those bright young men and women who would have enjoyed had they been born twenty years earlier, comfortable academic careers? They will have to work out new career patterns for themselves. You may get some ideas from their experience.

But perhaps the most reassuring advice that can be given comes from putting the whole process of university education in some sort of historical perspective. We can see very clearly now that all over the world the 1960's and 70's formed a period of edu-

cational expansion quite unprecedented in human history. If one takes a much longer historical view, one can see no less clearly that the part played in the intellectual development of mankind by formal institutions of education has been at best a limited one. The world's greatest teachers, Socrates, the Buddha, Jesus Christ, Muhammad, devised their own essentially informal structures. The world's great writers were self-taught. The world's great artists learnt their skills in small workshops. Formal institutions can indeed have a stultifying effect on vigorous and original minds. In the end the institutions fall into the background: what matters is the vigour and originality of thought of individual men and women.

I think back to those students I got to know all too briefly at a certain African university. The stimulus I gained from their company was a constant antidote to the depression that afflicted me when I thought of the structures in which they were caught up. In the end the structures fall away — what matters is the warmth of personal relationships and a lively and self-reliant mind. At its best a university can provide an ideal environment for developing such qualities. Alas! In the harsh, impoverished and dangerous age into which we are all moving, ideal environments will disappear. But though institutions may crumble, human vitality remains a constant.

To think without sentimentality of the vitality of so-called ordinary people is perhaps the best way to develop a certain philosophical perspective. It also leads one to reflect that universities, which can (after all) influence only a very small proportion of the population, are not perhaps quite such important institutions as those of us who have spent half our working lives in them are inclined to imagine. □



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