

# The Higher Education “Revolution” in Sudan and its Impact on Research in Higher Education Institutions

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## Introduction

This paper aims to present the effects of higher education “revolution” in Sudan in the early 1990s on its research situation. In this context higher education encompasses all post-secondary education including both public and private universities, institutes, colleges, diploma and research centres in the country (NCHESR, 2009). The higher education “revolution” has expanded student enrolments, opened door for female students, made higher education accessible (open university) and reduced the socio-economic cost by having regional universities. Nevertheless, the “revolution” reform has led to the degrading culture of research and concentration on teaching only. There are various factors contributing to the deterioration of research, among others, lack of research funding, research policy, lack of academic freedom and poor English language.

## Higher Education “Revolution” in Sudan

The year 1990 is considered as a turning point of the higher education situation in Sudan. The year witnessed the birth of higher education “revolution” adopted by the National Salvation “revolution” that came to power in June 1989. This regime declared that the situation of higher education in Sudan had severely deteriorated in all aspects and there was an urgent need for “revolution” reform.

The major objectives of higher education “revolution” of 1990 were as follows:

1. Increase student intake at all institutions and reform admission policy (from elite students to all). The number of students in public institutions increased from 4,000 in the early eighties to 350,000 in 2006 and 472,000 in 2008 (MHESR, 2010).
2. Geographical distribution of universities in different states of Sudan including rural areas avoid’s concentration of institutes in the capital.
3. Open chances for private higher education institutions and relate educational programmes with the local environment and the needs of society.
4. Abolish student boarding and subsistence schemes.
5. Encourage all students studying abroad to continue their studies at Sudanese institutions.
6. Use Arabic language as the language of instruction and research.

Due to the “revolution”, both public and private higher education institutions (HEIs) in Sudan have witnessed rapid expansion. The number of public HEIs increased from five universities and one polytechnic in 1989 to 30 universities and the number of private HEIs is now approaching 43

universities and colleges (see table 1). The expansion of HEIs happened at too a rapid rate that the major role of university in basic and applied research had been neglected and also does not consider the need of the country. This has led to the claim by academics that higher education “revolution” in Sudan has stronger political influence rather than academic achievement.

**TABLE 1** The number of HEIs before and after the “revolution”

Type of institutions before 1989	No.	Type of institutions after 1989	No.
Public university	4	Public university	30
Specialised college and institutions	10	Private university	5
Private institutions	2	Private college and institution	35
Egyptian university (Cairo university branch)	1	Academies	3
<b>Total</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>69</b>

Source: National Council for Higher Education and Scientific Research (2008)

Geographicals, 70 per cent of private HEIs are located in Khartoum (CBS, 2007). Not only are they concentrated in one location, these private institutions are also not well-prepared to address issues related to diversification besides having low enrolment. There are no major differences between disciplines offered by public and that of new private institutions. It may be said that private institutions are based on profit rather than addressing the needs of the country.

The positive side of the “revolution” is the increase of the number of students enrolled in HEIs. The distribution of universities in the states has helped to reduce cost of travelling and accommodation in towns or in Khartoum. Due to that, the percentage of female enrolled for higher education in relation to male jumped from 16 per cent in 1975 to 53 per cent in 2003 and today it is approaching 60 per cent (El Tom, 2003). In addition, the “revolution” has made higher education accessible for all regardless of socio-economic status and constraints. Accessible higher education has been made possible by the opening of non-conventional education such as distance education which also serves as a response to the growing social demand for more diverse academic programmes. But lack of qualified teaching staff and education infrastructure coupled with the mass waves of students has led to low quality and quantity output of research. Currently, university environment is not conducive to conduct quality research.

## Governance

Administratively, higher education in the country comes under the responsibility of Sudanese state. The foundation of official body responsible for higher education goes back to 1975 during the May regime (1969-1985). Prior to this, HEIs were subordinate to government ministry and departments. In the 1970s, the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research (MHESR) took over the responsibility related to higher education (MHESR, 2008).

This system persisted until the higher education “revolution” in the year 1990s. The “revolution” eliminated many acts and introduced new ones. For example, the higher education act of 1990 (amended in 1993 and 1995) provides the legislative basis and framework for the country’s higher education. This Act indicates that MHESR covers all higher education institutions (public, private and foreign) legally established by laws and Acts. The National Council for Higher Education and Scientific Research (NCHESR) is a new body created by MHESR to take the responsibility of formulating policies and programmes of higher education within the general framework of the State national policy.

Among the changes was to replace the name of the position held by the president of Sudan as the ‘sole chancellor’ of all higher education institutions to ‘guardian’ of higher education. Moreover, the guardian is now responsible for the appointment of universities’ vice-chancellors, their deputies, chairpersons of university council and most of university council members.

The NCHESR is the responsible body for formulating policies, plans, objectives, funding and all matters regarding higher education within the framework of national policy. It is also responsible for granting licenses for establishment of higher education institutions besides determining the educational and research plans. These new policies have eliminated the academic freedom and stripped the power off the universities.

## Admission Policy

In order to make higher education accessible the revolution has introduced a new admission policy. Thus in 1997 NCHESR has given permission to each public university to admit additional 25 per cent of the competing, fee-paying students. These students share the same facilities with students entering through normal admission. Private HEI students are given incentives up to 12 per cent less than the minimum corresponding score for the general admission determined by general competition. It is interesting to note that the fees paid by private students are determined by the university, compulsory and not subject to any negotiation. The annual private fees range from \$1,000 dollar for social studies, to \$6,500 for engineering electricity up to \$8,500 for medicine. In this regard it seems that the government is supporting rich families at the expense of the poor ones. Sawyer (2002) states that there is a growing tendency for educational system as whole, and the field of higher education in particular to reproduce existing social inequalities. At the end this will

affect research and create knowledge divide within the country between who have access and benefit from higher education and those who lack it (Teffer, 2007).

**“While many countries have been adopting the concept of Research University in order to compete globally and cater to local needs, universities in Sudan still lack the capacity to develop a Research University.”**

## Funding

Historically, funding of higher education in Sudan came from the government and this trend continued till the birth of higher education “revolution” 1990. Since then private bodies became major partners in sponsoring higher education. The rapid expansion of the HEIs has resulted in remarkable funding decline. Currently public HEIs in Sudan are financed by the private sector. They receive little support from the State. The level of public funding for higher education has been sharply reduced or remained when the number of universities jumped from five to 30 universities. The Sudanese public universities responded to this financial cut by amending their admission requirements so as to increase student intake, and raise student fees. Universities’ struggle for funding contributes negatively to the standard and quality of higher education. The rapid expansion in student intake without corresponding increase in the quality of academic environment has had negative impacts on research performance at higher education institutions. Up to the present there is no direct fund for research at Sudanese universities.

## University Staff

The rapid expansion of higher education was not accompanied by the increase of staff quantity and quality. The number of staff holding PhD is declining compared to the rapid increase of students enrolled, not to mention the small number of professors. Female staff comprises half of university staff in both public and private institutions due to more females enrolled in higher education after the 1990s. University position also became less attractive for men. As a result, staff workload keeps increasing, depriving universities and staff adequate time for research. Consequently, there has been very little high quality research outputs. An academic supervisor has to supervise more than twenty students in Masters and PhDs, teach in both private/ public universities and serve as a consultant. Staff are

encouraged to be trained locally instead of abroad so as to cut down funding and avoid the influence of westernisation. In addition the Islamic ideology adopted by today's regime has caused the termination of collaboration, assistance in research funding and staff exchange with many countries.

The expansion of intermediate diploma is another problematic phenomenon in university. In 2003 the number of students enrolled at university of Khartoum was 26,872, of whom 5,850 took intermediate diploma representing 21.8 per cent of the students. They share the already deteriorated facility with public students. This situation poses more barriers to appropriately conduct research.

## Discussion

Research or Research University is central to higher education all over the world. In Sudan the 1990 Act which was modified in 1993 and 1995 states clearly that one of the objectives of establishing universities is to expand scientific research that suits the local social needs. Despite this and the urgent need of knowledge society (UNESCO, 2005), up to the present there is no clear policy on research. Currently there is no concrete link between government departments and university. While many countries have been adopting the concept of Research University in order to compete globally and cater to local needs, universities in Sudan still lack the capacity to develop a Research University.

This phenomenon began during the colonial era when university was needed to produce manpower for administrative jobs and research was not the main priority. There are several factors that cause the lack of attention on research. These include problem of funding, brain drain, lack of research capacity, gap between researchers and policy maker, lack of clear policy, lack of university autonomy and academic freedom. Further, hostility is always hovering between the university and the political regime which has, in turn, impacted negatively on the research and university outputs.

To improve the situation of research in HEIs, bottom up approach is not effective. A top down approach could prove to be more fruitful if there is a will to improve the situation of research in universities. Without mutual understanding between university and policy makers, clear research policy, government-university link and academic freedom, efforts to improve research would be futile. Overall there is an urgent need for a robust research university, which is crucial for enhancing quality of university output and addressing all issues related to sustainable development. In this respect, universities should establish networks and act as centres of excellence at the local, regional and international levels.

## Conclusion

This paper has shown that the number of public and private HEIs has increased dramatically due to the slogan of higher education "revolution" adopted by the current regime. This has led to the increase of female students and reduction of the

socio-economic cost to study in the capital and main towns. On the negative side, this paper reveals that the unplanned expansion has led to degraded quality of higher education institutions in terms of production of poor graduates and research output. The state of research in Sudan's HEIs is lamentable due to over-concentration in teaching, lack of research funding, paucity of research culture and time, capacity, constraints, and above all absence of political will.

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