
QUALITIES OF A WORLD-CLASS UNIVERSITY AND THE DRIVE TOWARDS ACHIEVING WORLD-CLASS UNIVERSITIES IN KENYA IN THE LIGHT OF COMPETENCY- BASED EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

Statement of the Problem: The concept of the world-class university has become central to higher education reforms globally, as nations seek to establish institutions capable of driving socio-economic transformation through research, innovation, and high-quality graduate production.

Purpose of the Study: This paper critically examines the defining qualities of world-class universities and analyzes Kenya's strategic efforts to achieve this status within the framework of Competency-Based Education.

Methodology: The paper is based on a review of theoretical and empirical literature, drawing on Human Capital Theory and Knowledge Economy Theory, as well as scholarly works by Altbach, Salmi, and Becker.

Findings: The study identifies research excellence, academic freedom, internationalization, strong governance, adequate resources, and high-quality graduate production as key characteristics of world-class universities. It further establishes that CBC and CBE reforms can support competency-oriented learning and improve the relevance of higher education in Kenya.

Conclusion: The study concludes that Kenya has made notable progress in expanding access to higher education and reforming curricula. Nonetheless, funding gaps, weak infrastructure, low research productivity, and governance challenges continue to hinder the full achievement of world-class university status.

Recommendation: The study recommends increased investment in research, infrastructure, governance reforms, international partnerships, and competency-based teaching approaches to strengthen Kenya's movement toward world-class universities.

Keywords: *Qualities, World-Class University, Drive, Achieving, Light, Competency-Based Education*

INTRODUCTION

In the twenty-first century, the knowledge economy has fundamentally transformed the role of universities, positioning them as critical drivers of innovation, economic growth, and global competitiveness (World Bank, 2002). Consequently, governments worldwide are prioritizing the establishment of world-class universities (WCUs) as symbols of national prestige and engines of socio-economic development. The notion of the WCU has been popularized by global ranking systems such as the Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU), QS World University Rankings, and Times Higher Education Rankings. However, the definition remains complex. As Altbach (2004) famously notes, the term "world-class university" is elusive because "everyone wants one, no one knows what it is, and no one knows how to get one" (p. 20). Despite this ambiguity, scholars generally agree that WCUs are institutions characterized by excellence in research, teaching, governance, and global engagement (Altbach & Salmi, 2011).

In Kenya, the pursuit of world-class universities has intensified alongside broader educational reforms designed to enhance quality and relevance. The adoption of Competency-Based Education and Training (CBET) and the Competency-Based Curriculum (CBC) reflects a strategic government desire to align education with national development goals, employability, and global competitiveness (Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development [KICD], 2017). Kenyan universities are consequently expected to transition from traditional knowledge transmission models toward competency-oriented systems that emphasize practical skills, creativity, innovation, and problem-solving. This paper critically examines the qualities of world-class universities and evaluates Kenya's efforts to achieve such institutions within the framework of competency-based education.

CONCEPTUALIZING THE WORLD-CLASS UNIVERSITY

The concept of the world-class university (WCU) is commonly associated with elite, research-intensive institutions that operate at the forefront of global intellectual, scientific, and technological advancement. These universities are recognized internationally for their excellence in teaching, research productivity, innovation, and societal impact. According to Jamil Salmi (2009), WCUs are institutions capable of producing highly skilled graduates, undertaking cutting-edge research, and generating innovations that significantly contribute to national and global

development. Such universities are often ranked highly in global university league tables because of their influence in knowledge production and dissemination.

In the same vein, Philip G. Altbach (2009) argues that world-class universities are characterized by strong research cultures, academic freedom, international collaboration, and the presence of highly qualified faculty members. These institutions attract talented scholars and students from across the world, thereby creating multicultural academic environments that stimulate creativity, innovation, and scholarly excellence. Altbach further notes that WCUs are not merely institutions with impressive physical infrastructure, but rather universities that consistently generate new knowledge and contribute solutions to global challenges.

Jamil Salmi (2009) identifies three major characteristics that underpin the success of world-class universities. The first is a high concentration of talent, referring to the recruitment and retention of exceptional faculty, researchers, and students. Such institutions are highly selective and create competitive academic environments that nurture intellectual growth and innovation. The second characteristic is the availability of abundant resources, including adequate financial support, modern infrastructure, advanced research facilities, and strong technological systems. Sustainable funding enables universities to invest in research, attract top scholars, and maintain international standards. The third characteristic is favorable governance systems, particularly institutional autonomy, visionary leadership, and efficient management structures that promote accountability, flexibility, and strategic decision-making.

These three elements interact dynamically to create a conducive environment for global competitiveness. Talent alone cannot flourish without adequate resources, while resources may not yield excellence in the absence of effective governance. Consequently, successful WCUs integrate these dimensions into a coherent institutional strategy aimed at achieving academic excellence and international recognition. This interaction explains why only a limited number of universities globally attain and sustain world-class status.

The “flagship university” model advanced by John Aubrey Douglass (2016) further conceptualizes world-class universities as apex institutions within national higher education systems. According to Douglass, flagship universities play a transformative role by setting academic standards, driving

national innovation systems, and contributing to economic and social development. They serve not only as centers of advanced learning and research but also as symbols of national prestige and competitiveness in the global knowledge economy. Through research partnerships, policy influence, and technological innovation, flagship universities become engines of national development.

The emergence of the world-class university concept is also closely linked to globalization and the knowledge economy. In an increasingly interconnected world, universities are expected to compete internationally for students, faculty, research funding, and institutional prestige. Global university rankings such as the Times Higher Education rankings and the QS Quacquarelli Symonds rankings have intensified this competition by establishing measurable indicators of academic excellence. These rankings often emphasize research output, citation impact, internationalization, and institutional reputation, thereby shaping how governments and universities pursue world-class status.

However, scholars have also criticized the WCU model for overemphasizing research and global rankings at the expense of local relevance and social responsibility. Critics argue that many universities in developing countries may struggle to replicate Western models of excellence due to differences in historical, economic, and social contexts. Furthermore, the pursuit of global rankings can sometimes divert attention from addressing local community needs, equity, and access to higher education. Consequently, some scholars advocate for a more balanced and context-sensitive understanding of university excellence that integrates global competitiveness with national development priorities.

In the African context, the pursuit of world-class universities has become increasingly important as governments seek to strengthen higher education systems to support industrialization, innovation, and sustainable development. Countries such as South Africa, Kenya, and Nigeria have introduced reforms aimed at improving research capacity, institutional governance, and international collaboration. Nevertheless, challenges such as inadequate funding, brain drain, limited research infrastructure, and political interference continue to hinder the realization of globally competitive universities in many African nations.

Ultimately, conceptualizing the world-class university requires understanding it not merely as a highly ranked institution, but as a dynamic center of knowledge creation, innovation, leadership, and societal transformation. A truly world-class university should balance global standards of excellence with responsiveness to local and national development needs. In this regard, the future of higher education lies not only in achieving international prestige but also in producing graduates and research outputs capable of addressing the pressing challenges facing society.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is anchored on Human Capital Theory and the Knowledge Economy Theory to provide a lens through which the value of WCUs and CBE can be understood.

Advanced by scholars such as Gary Becker, Human Capital Theory posits that education enhances productivity and economic growth by developing knowledge, skills, and competencies within individuals (Becker, 1993). From this perspective, universities are the primary engines for producing the human capital necessary for innovation and development. The transition toward Competency-Based Education in Kenya can be viewed as a direct application of this theory, aiming to maximize the economic utility of graduates by ensuring they possess market-relevant skills.

Knowledge Economy Theory emphasizes the centrality of knowledge creation, dissemination, and application in modern economies (World Bank, 2002). In this context, WCUs are essential institutions not just for teaching, but for generating the research and innovations that drive the knowledge economy. Competency-based education aligns with this theory by emphasizing the practical application of knowledge, innovation, and the ability to participate in a knowledge-driven global workforce.

QUALITIES OF A WORLD-CLASS UNIVERSITY

Research productivity remains the defining feature of world-class universities. Such institutions produce high-impact scholarly publications, patents, and innovations that contribute to scientific and societal advancement (Altbach & Salmi, 2011). According to Altbach (2009), WCUs are research-intensive institutions deeply integrated into global knowledge networks. Research excellence enhances institutional visibility, international rankings, and academic prestige. Examples include the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), Harvard University, and the

University of Oxford, which consistently rank highly due to strong research output and innovation ecosystems. For Kenya, improving research funding, doctoral training, and publication output is essential in building globally competitive universities.

HIGHLY QUALIFIED FACULTY AND STUDENTS

World-class universities attract outstanding scholars, researchers, and students from across the globe. Salmi (2009) emphasizes that talent concentration is perhaps the strongest determinant of academic excellence. Highly qualified faculty contribute to quality teaching, research productivity, mentorship, international collaborations, and innovation. Conversely, Kenyan universities continue to face challenges relating to brain drain, limited doctoral capacity, and inadequate research incentives, which hinder talent retention (Mauki et al., 2019). Academic freedom and autonomy are fundamental characteristics of WCUs. Universities must possess the liberty to determine academic programs, conduct independent research, manage finances, recruit staff, and develop strategic priorities (Altbach, 2004). Salmi and Altbach (2016) argue that excessive state control undermines institutional innovation and competitiveness. Kenyan universities have historically experienced tensions between government regulation and institutional autonomy, particularly regarding appointments, financing, and policy direction, which poses a challenge to achieving world-class status.

World-class universities require substantial financial investment. Funding supports research laboratories, libraries, digital infrastructure, faculty development, student services, and international collaborations (Salmi, 2009). Altbach (2004) highlights the "costs" of excellence, noting that top-tier universities require significant per-student spending. Kenyan public universities continue to face severe funding challenges due to declining government support, rising enrolments, and infrastructural deficits, creating a gap between current realities and WCU standards.

Internationalization enhances global visibility and competitiveness. WCUs promote international student mobility, academic exchange programs, collaborative research, global partnerships, and international curricula (Wang, Cheng, & Liu, 2013). This process improves cross-cultural competencies, which are essential components of competency-based education. Effective governance structures promote strategic planning, accountability, innovation, and quality

assurance. According to Salmi (2009), good governance involves visionary leadership, organizational learning, and institutional adaptability. Weak governance, political interference, and corruption are identified as significant barriers to institutional excellence. World-class universities provide learner-centered, innovative, and transformative education. Competency-based education reinforces this by emphasizing critical thinking, creativity, problem-solving, communication skills, collaboration, and practical competencies (KICD, 2017). The transition from content-based to competency-based approaches reflects global educational reforms aimed at producing adaptable graduates for dynamic labour markets.

COMPETENCY-BASED EDUCATION AND THE KENYAN CONTEXT

Competency-Based Education (CBE) focuses on the acquisition and demonstration of competencies rather than mere content mastery. Learners progress based on demonstrated skills, knowledge, and attitudes. Kenya introduced the Competency-Based Curriculum (CBC) in 2017 through reforms spearheaded by the Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development (KICD) and the Ministry of Education (KICD, 2017). The CBC framework seeks to nurture competencies such as communication, critical thinking, creativity, citizenship, digital literacy, self-efficacy, and learning to learn.

Universities play a critical role in the success of CBE by training teachers for CBC implementation, developing competency-based pedagogies, conducting educational research, producing innovative graduates, and aligning curricula with industry needs. According to Mauki et al. (2019), universities must redesign their programs to support competency development and practical learning to ensure the vertical alignment of the education system from basic to tertiary levels.

KENYA'S DRIVE TOWARDS WORLD-CLASS UNIVERSITIES

Kenya has experienced rapid expansion in higher education over the last two decades. The establishment of new public and private universities has significantly increased access. Notable institutions such as the University of Nairobi, Kenyatta University, Moi University, and Jomo Kenyatta University of Agriculture and Technology (JKUAT) aspire to enhance global competitiveness through research, innovation, and international collaborations.

Kenya's Vision 2030 recognizes higher education as central to national transformation into a middle-income economy. The government has implemented reforms involving quality assurance,

university accreditation, research funding, digital learning, and curriculum transformation. These reforms align with competency-based education objectives and aim to position Kenyan universities as regional leaders (Douglass, 2016).

Kenya has strengthened innovation through research grants, innovation hubs, university-industry partnerships, and technology transfer initiatives. Institutions such as JKUAT have invested significantly in innovation and applied research. However, research output from Kenyan universities remains comparatively low globally, highlighting the need for a more robust research culture (Altbach, 2009).

CHALLENGES FACING KENYA’S QUEST FOR WORLD-CLASS UNIVERSITIES

Despite notable progress, several challenges hinder Kenya’s aspirations for world-class status:

- 1) **Inadequate Funding:** Underfunding affects infrastructure, staffing, research, and quality assurance (Altbach, 2004).
- 2) **Limited Research Productivity:** Many universities struggle with low publication rates, limited patents, and inadequate research facilities.
- 3) **Brain Drain:** Highly skilled scholars often migrate to better-funded institutions abroad, depleting the local talent pool (Salmi, 2009).
- 4) **Governance Challenges:** Political interference and bureaucratic inefficiencies undermine institutional autonomy and strategic leadership (Salmi & Altbach, 2016).
- 5) **Massification of Higher Education:** Rapid expansion has strained facilities and compromised quality, a common challenge in developing nations (Altbach, 2009).
- 6) **Weak Industry Linkages:** Universities still face challenges aligning curricula with labour market needs despite CBC reforms.

CONCLUSION

World-class universities are critical institutions within the global knowledge economy, defined by research excellence, talent concentration, quality governance, adequate funding, innovation, and internationalization (Salmi, 2009). Kenya’s transition toward competency-based education presents significant opportunities for aligning university education with global competitiveness and labour market demands. Although Kenya has made commendable progress through educational reforms and expanded access, significant structural and financial challenges continue

to impede the realization of world-class universities. Achieving this goal will require sustained investment, visionary leadership, academic freedom, robust research support, and the effective integration of competency-based approaches within higher education institutions. Ultimately, the pursuit of world-class universities should focus not merely on global rankings, but on producing transformative education capable of addressing Kenya's developmental needs while contributing meaningfully to global knowledge production.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To strengthen Kenya's pursuit of world-class universities, the paper recommends the following:

- i. Increased investment in research and innovation infrastructure.
- ii. Strengthening doctoral education and faculty development programs to retain talent.
- iii. Enhancing institutional autonomy and reducing political interference in governance.
- iv. Expanding international collaborations and faculty exchange programs.
- v. Integrating competency-based pedagogies across all university programs.
- vi. Strengthening university-industry partnerships to enhance graduate employability.
- vii. Improving digital infrastructure and e-learning systems.
- viii. Promoting merit-based recruitment and leadership succession planning.

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