

Tackling the challenge of staffing young upcoming Public Universities in Kenya

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to identify mechanisms for young and upcoming universities in Kenya to address the challenge of hiring and retaining qualified and competent staff under severe financial constraints, poor housing conditions and unattractive remuneration. In the last five years, eight university colleges were started, mostly in the rural areas and these have now been elevated into full-fledged universities, as per the University Act of 2012. The study is motivated by the fact that university teaching and research is no longer seen as lucrative; and even old well-established universities are facing challenges in recruiting and retaining doctoral level staff. The number of students joining universities every year has been growing at a rate of 5% over the last 10 years. This rapid increase in access to university education has not been matched by any deliberate efforts to train and build capacity of university teaching staff. For some reason, it has been assumed that without the slightest input from government and other partners, in terms of training and capacity building, the problem will resolve itself. This has not happened, and young upcoming universities are in dire need of qualified staff. In the absence of such capabilities, Kenyan universities cannot expect to compete at any appreciable level with their counterparts, not only in the industrialized world, but also from other developing countries such as South Africa, Egypt and Nigeria that have programs for developing relevant capacities. A well-developed university teaching and research human capacity base is not only an asset that would enable the country to promote forward-looking ideas, initiate and guide action, and build on successes, but also make the country an attractive destination for investment and intellectual collaboration, both of which, can spur rapid economic development. It concludes that while student numbers have risen rapidly in the recent years, the country has not put in place any programs and systems for systematically training and building the capacity of university staff, which could be undermining the quality and long-term sustainability of the university education system in the country. Because of the rural nature of these young universities, it is important that efforts are put in place to create and maintain the diversity of staff to avoid in-breeding and complacency.

Key words: Kenya, staffing, young universities

Résumé

L'objectif de la présente étude était d'identifier des mécanismes permettant aux universités Kenyanes naissantes et à venir de relever le défi de recrutement de personnel qualifié et

compétent sous des contraintes financières, de mauvaises conditions de logement et une rémunération peu attrayante. Au cours des cinq dernières années, huit collèges universitaires ont été créés, surtout dans les milieux ruraux, et ont été entièrement transformés en universités, conformément à la loi 2012 sur les universités. La présente étude est motivée par le fait que la recherche et l'éducation à l'université ne sont plus considérées comme lucratives; et même les anciennes universités bien établies sont confrontées aux défis de recrutement du personnel de niveau doctoral. Au cours des 10 dernières années, le nombre d'étudiants entrant dans les universités a augmenté de 5% chaque année. Cette augmentation rapide n'a pas été accompagnée d'efforts visant à former et renforcer les capacités du personnel enseignant universitaire. Pour une quelconque raison, il a été supposé que le problème se résoudrait de lui-même sans un moindre apport en termes de formation et de renforcement des capacités, de la part du gouvernement et d'autres partenaires. Le problème ne s'est pas résolu et les nouvelles universités ont un besoin urgent de personnel qualifié. Dans de telles circonstances d'absence de capacités, les universités kényanes ne peuvent espérer rivaliser avec leurs homologues, non seulement dans le monde industrialisé, mais aussi dans d'autres pays en développement tels que l'Afrique du Sud, l'Égypte et le Nigeria qui ont des programmes de renforcement des capacités. Une base universitaire bien développée d'enseignement et de recherche sur la capacité humaine est non seulement un atout qui permettrait au pays de promouvoir des idées prospectives, d'initier et de guider les actions et de tirer parti des succès, mais aussi de faire du pays une destination attrayante pour l'investissement et la collaboration qui peuvent stimuler le développement économique rapide. Il a été conclu que si le nombre d'étudiants a rapidement augmenté ces dernières années, le pays n'a mis en place ni programmes ni systèmes pour former et renforcer systématiquement les capacités du personnel universitaire, ce qui pourrait compromettre la qualité et la viabilité à long terme du système éducatif de l'université. En raison de la nature rurale de ces jeunes universités, il est important que des efforts soient mis en place pour créer et maintenir la diversité du personnel.

Mots-clés: Kenya, personnel, universités naissantes

Introduction

Previous studies have recommended that universities should insist on an optimum level of student intake, to address workload problems (Barnes *et al.*, 1998; Ayee, 2005). There is also need to provide institutional support for mentoring programs, especially for research and outreach programs that give professionals necessary hands on skills so that they can start to make impact at the communities where universities are located (Costello and Zumla, 2000; Africa Commission, 2005). These will go a long way in improving university-community relations which in the long term will translate into good working conditions for staff especially those who do not come from communities located near universities (Arulkamaran, 1999; Applebaum, 2000). Government and development partners can also institute starter grants and "Innovation Grants" for low cadre academic staff to help them make academic advancements, and personal capacity building. On the research side, there is need to increase research and conference grants, forge research linkages with other institutions in Kenya and abroad, as well as with county and national governments and the private sector (Cox, 1991; Afenikhe *et al.*, 2002).

It is imperative that for young universities to build their capacity and play the crucial role that they are expected to perform to transform the lives of young Kenyans and communities within which they exist, serious thinking needs to go into training, mentoring and capacity building of young academicians (Applebaum, 2000) both in the short and long term. Access to university education alone is not enough (Mukhwana *et al.*, 2016a). It is incumbent upon the university management to deliberately provide students with high quality and motivated staff to help students achieve their objectives within the academic environment (Amey and Marilyn, 1996).

Although the problems are widespread among upcoming universities, specific programs in the areas of science, mathematics, engineering and medicine are more severely affected (Laskin, 2000; Dovlo, 2003; Kupfer *et al.*, 2004). Indeed, it is now not possible for any university to start a program in engineering owing to lack of qualified personal trained at the right level (Mukhwana *et al.*, 2016b; Mukhwana *et al.*, 2017). Unfortunately, these programs are also vulnerable to brain drain and high turn-over in Kenya and other African institutions (Kupfer *et al.*, 2004; Koskei, 2013). Data suggest that universities are finding it difficult to attract younger academics and that those academics in this demographic group are the most likely to leave their posts (Coates, 2000). There is evidence that some academic staff, approaching the decade prior to retirement, get very anxious about the financial trepidations that tend to accompany retirement (Chikuni and Madungwe, 2002). They, therefore, make decisions about quitting academia in good enough time and taking up positions that are better paying and consequently are more likely to enable them to accumulate enough to ensure a more comfortable retirement, even if they do not get a large pension (Blackburn and Havighurst, 1979; Bhorat *et al.*, 2002).

There were widely-held views amongst respondents that the criteria and procedures for promotion and permanent appointment were long, stressful and cumbersome (Dovlo, 2003; Mureithi, 2009). Whilst some of the concerns expressed above are genuine, it also appears that there are misperceptions about the processes which come from a lack of effort on the part of academic staff to consult the relevant guidelines (Onsongo, 2002; Okubo, 2005). It is instructive to note that while most respondents below the rank of senior lecturers tend to think that the criteria for promotion are not reasonable, those at professorial levels thought otherwise. In some institutions, respondents were unhappy about the fact that they have had no hand in the appointment of heads of departments (Devoe, 1995; Ikama, 2010), while in others, were content with their participation in the selection of their heads of department (Kanuola and Fullertom, 1998). The findings reveal that benefits can be generated by devolving some decision-making authority to units, instead of centralizing everything at the top.

Devolution helps expedite action on issues and gives the units the latitude to be innovative in ways that are practical to their circumstances (Koskei, 2013). Expanded enrolments, without a commensurate increase in the capacity of universities to handle the increased students numbers, have contributed to an atmosphere that is not conducive to learning in these Universities (Laskin, 2000; Kupfer *et al.*, 2004), and to a deterioration in the quality of teaching and learning (Mukhwana *et al.*, 2017). Complaints about workload seemed

to center not so much on the number of courses that staff members teach, but more on the burden that is imposed by teaching large classes; and yet the same staff are expected to carry out research and advance their careers (Koskei, 2013; Mukhwana *et al.*, 2016a). Frustration was also encountered in some institutions with regard to inadequate facilities for teaching, research and publishing, and yet these are the parameters that are used to assess their performance (Ayee, 2005). This study seeks to understand the challenges facing young and upcoming universities in Kenya in hiring qualified and motivated staff to help them grow in a sustainable manner.

Methodology

This survey used both quantitative and qualitative techniques. Quantitative techniques involved the collection of quantitative data from universities and the analysis of the same. The survey population for this research included eight newly (in the last 10 years) established university constituent colleges. The study relied primarily on structured questionnaire to collect data from the constituent colleges. The staffs were divided into: management staff, academic, administration staff and casuals/temporary staff. Each university was expected to provide information on all its staff. The questionnaire required each university to provide about each staff the following information: name, highest qualification, designation, age, ethnicity, gender, disability status and profession. Also included were questions on challenges being experienced in hiring and retaining of high quality staff, and suggestions to improve the situation.

There are 42 ethnic communities in Kenya. In addition, there are groups such as Swahili and Asians/Indians who have also been considered as ethnic groups in this report. A distinct group of non-Kenyans have been grouped into “foreigner” category. This group includes people from other countries other than Kenyan. This study used the Housing and Population Census, 2009 to operationalize the ethnic categories. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics aided by the SPSS version 22 and are presented in frequencies, percentages and tables. Staff qualification in public chartered universities is analysed based on university location. On this basis the universities are categorised as either urban or rural. Urban universities are those located within a 30 kilometres radius of Nairobi, Mombasa and Kisumu cities. Any university located beyond this radius is considered rural.

Results

Staff Qualification in Public University Constituent Colleges. Public university constituent colleges have fewer academic staff with PhD qualification. In total there are 154 staff who are holders of PhDs. This is against the academic staff establishment of 581 representing a mere 27%. There is no constituent college with more 50% of their academic staff holding PhD qualification except Embu University College with 60%. Machakos University College and Kirinyaga University College have the least staff qualification at 6% and 11%, respectively. This has been attributed to their young age and rural setting, which makes it difficult to attract staff with PhDs (Ikama, 2010).

Table 1. Ratio of Academic Staff with PhD to Total Staffing in Public University Constituent Colleges

| S/No. | Constituent College | PhDs holders | Academic Staff | Total Staff | % PhDs to Academic Staff | %Academic Staff to Total Staff |
|-------|---|--------------|----------------|-------------|--------------------------|--------------------------------|
| 1. | Murang'a University College | 33 | 89 | 318 | 37% | 28% |
| 2. | Machakos University College | 11 | 179 | 424 | 6% | 42% |
| 3. | Cooperative University College of Kenya | 18 | 52 | 255 | 35% | 20% |
| 4. | Embu University College | 28 | 47 | 298 | 60% | 16% |
| 5. | Kirinyaga University College | 6 | 57 | 253 | 11% | 23% |
| 6. | Rongo University College | 30 | 72 | 516 | 42% | 14% |
| 7. | Kibabii University College | 20 | 58 | 276 | 34% | 21% |
| 8. | Taita Taveta University College | 8 | 27 | 214 | 30% | 13% |
| | Total | 154 | 581 | 2,554 | 27% | 23% |

When academic staff are compared to total staff in public university constituent colleges, all university colleges have less than 50% of their staff being academic staff. The highest proportion was in Machakos University College at 42%. This raises questions on the priorities of these university colleges. It is expected that the universities should have more academic staff than teaching staff, as knowledge creation is the core mandate of the universities. Table 1 gives number of academic staff with PhD and the ratio of PhD holders in comparison to total number of academic staff and that of academic staff to total number of staff in public university constituent colleges. It has also been noted that pressure for universities to provide employment is more acute in younger and rural universities than in those near or around cities (Mukhwana *et al.*, 2016b).

Staffing by Gender in Public University Constituent Colleges. Overall, all public university constituent colleges meet the two-thirds gender rule as stipulated in the Constitution with Kibabii University College having the highest male-female ratio of 54% and 46%, respectively, the best among the constituent colleges. Table 2 gives the overall gender diversity in public university constituent colleges.

It is imperative that all public universities strive to fulfil the two-thirds gender rule in all appointments (NCIC, 2013). This should be reflected in all cadres of staff: management, academic, administration and casual/temporary staff. This should be achieved by progressively increasing the number of those disadvantaged in any new appointments (Koskei, 2013).

Staffing by people living with disability. Like in public chartered universities, constituent colleges too do not meet the constitutional provision of hiring at least 5% of people with disability. The highest representation of people living with disability is in Murang'a University College at 1.9%. Kirinyaga University and Machakos University did not declare any member of staff with disability. Table 3 represents staff living with disability in public university constituent colleges.

Table 2. Gender diversity in Public University Constituent Colleges

| S/No. | Public University Constituent Colleges | M | F | Total | % M | % F |
|-------|---|------|------|-------|-----|-----|
| 1 | Murang'a University College | 203 | 115 | 318 | 64% | 36% |
| 2 | Machakos University College | 236 | 193 | 429 | 55% | 45% |
| 3 | Cooperative University College of Kenya | 145 | 110 | 255 | 57% | 43% |
| 4 | Embu University College | 185 | 113 | 298 | 62% | 38% |
| 5 | Kirinyaga University College | 157 | 96 | 253 | 62% | 38% |
| 6 | Rongo University College | 299 | 217 | 516 | 58% | 42% |
| 7 | Kibabii University College | 150 | 126 | 276 | 54% | 46% |
| 8 | Taita Taveta University College | 134 | 80 | 214 | 63% | 37% |
| | Total | 1509 | 1050 | 2,559 | 59% | 41% |

Table 3. Staffing by disability in Constituent University Colleges

| S/No. | Constituent Colleges | Staff with disability | Staff Total | % Total |
|-------|---|-----------------------|-------------|---------|
| 1 | Murang'a University College | 6 | 318 | 1.9% |
| 2 | Machakos University College | 0 | 424 | 0.0% |
| 3 | Cooperative University College of Kenya | 1 | 255 | 0.4% |
| 4 | Embu University College | 4 | 298 | 1.3% |
| 5 | Kirinyaga University College | 0 | 253 | 0.0% |
| 6 | Rongo University College | 8 | 516 | 1.6% |
| 7 | Kibabii University College | 1 | 276 | 0.4% |
| 8 | Taita Taveta University College | 3 | 214 | 1.4% |
| | Total | 23 | 2,554 | 0.9% |

It is recommended that universities must strive to ensure that they meet the provision of the law that requires non-discrimination based on disability. An affirmative action in recruitment need to be done in order address this gap (Okubo, 2010).

Ethnic diversity. When ethnic diversity is analysed for public university constituent colleges, it is noted that the Kikuyu community ranks highest at 26%. This is followed by the Luo at 19.1%, the Kamba at 14.9%, the Luhya at 14.4% and the Embu at 6.6%. The communities which are least represented in public universities constituent colleges are the Swahili, the Turkana, the Asian/Indian, the Samburu and the Somali each at 0.04%. Table 4 and Figure 1 show ethnic diversity in public university constituent colleges disaggregated in terms of gender.

Table 4. Ethnic diversity in Public University Constituent Colleges

| Ethnic Diversity Public University Constituent Colleges | | | | |
|--|-------|--------|-------|---------|
| Tribe | Male | Female | Total | % Total |
| Kikuyu | 410 | 255 | 665 | 26.0% |
| Luo | 285 | 205 | 490 | 19.1% |
| Kamba | 210 | 171 | 381 | 14.9% |
| Luhya | 196 | 173 | 369 | 14.4% |
| Embu | 111 | 59 | 170 | 6.6% |
| Kisii | 80 | 38 | 118 | 4.6% |
| Taita | 57 | 47 | 104 | 4.1% |
| Kalenjin | 58 | 41 | 99 | 3.9% |
| Meru | 40 | 43 | 83 | 3.2% |
| Mijikenda | 27 | 8 | 35 | 1.4% |
| Suba | 17 | 8 | 25 | 1.0% |
| Teso | 4 | 2 | 6 | 0.2% |
| Kuria | 5 | 0 | 5 | 0.2% |
| Borana | 2 | 0 | 2 | 0.1% |
| Maasai | 2 | 0 | 2 | 0.1% |
| Somali | 1 | 0 | 1 | 0.04% |
| Samburu | 1 | 0 | 1 | 0.04% |
| Asian/Indian | 1 | 0 | 1 | 0.04% |
| Turkana | 1 | 0 | 1 | 0.04% |
| Swahili | 1 | 0 | 1 | 0.04% |
| Total | 1,509 | 1,050 | 2,559 | 100% |

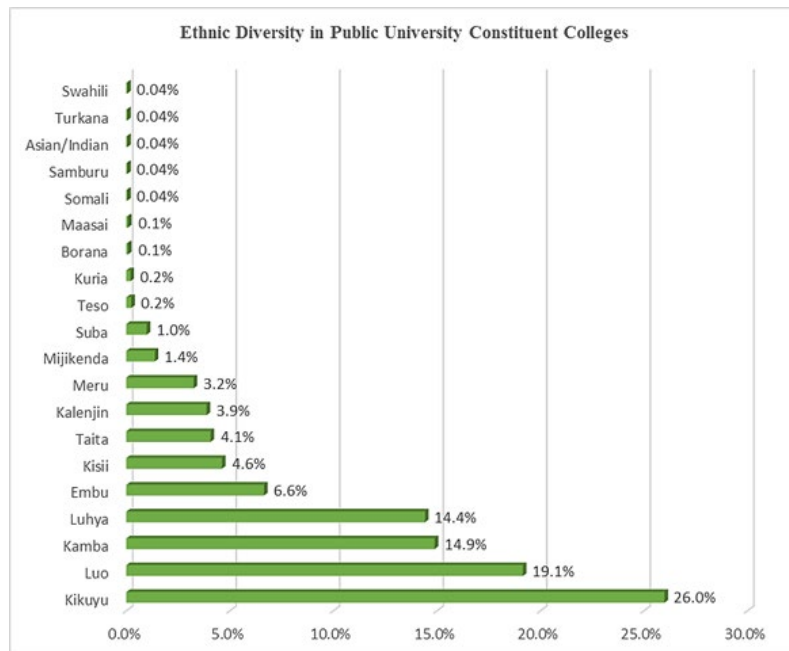


Figure 1. Ethnic diversity in Constituent University Colleges

Figure 1 is a graphical representation of the ethnic communities in public university constituent colleges.

Link between majority ethnic group and dominant ethnic community in the location of constituent colleges. Like in public chartered universities, there is a strong correlation between the ethnic community of most employees in public university constituent colleges and the dominant community in the area in which the university is domiciled. This is represented in Table 5.

Table 5. Majority ethnic group and dominant ethnic community in the location in constituent colleges

| S/No. | Name of University | County | Dominant ethnic community | Majority ethnic community |
|-------|---------------------------------|--------------|---------------------------|---------------------------|
| 1 | Cooperative University College | Nairobi | Maasai | Kikuyu |
| 2 | Embu University College | Embu | Embu | Embu |
| 3 | Kibabii University College | Bungoma | Luhya | Luhya |
| 4 | Kirinyaga University College | Kirinyaga | Kikuyu | Kikuyu |
| 5 | Machakos University College | Machakos | Kamba | Kamba |
| 6 | Murang'a University College | Murang'a | Kikuyu | Kikuyu |
| 7 | Rongo University College | Migori | Luo | Luo |
| 8 | Taita Taveta University College | Taita Taveta | Taita | Taita |

Compliance with the law on ethnic diversity in Public University Constituent Colleges. When ethnic diversity criteria are applied in public university constituent colleges, none of them complied with the law (Table 6).

Table 6. Compliance with the Law on Ethnic Diversity in Public University Constituent Colleges

| S/No. | Name of University | Majority ethnic community | % of majority ethnic group | Status of compliance |
|-------|---------------------------------|---------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------|
| 1 | Cooperative University College | Kikuyu | 36% | Contravenes |
| 2 | Embu University College | Embu | 49% | Contravenes |
| 3 | Kibabii University College | Luhya | 81% | Contravenes |
| 4 | Kirinyaga University College | Kikuyu | 88% | Contravenes |
| 5 | Machakos University College | Kamba | 73% | Contravenes |
| 6 | Murang'a University College | Kikuyu | 75% | Contravenes |
| 7 | Rongo University College | Luo | 74% | Contravenes |
| 8 | Taita Taveta University College | Taita | 46% | Contravenes |

Discrimination based on ethnic background is prohibited by the Constitution (NCIC, 2013). The Constitution envisages inclusivity in public appointments. The affected public universities should therefore as a matter of urgency address these disparities in their new appointments.

Staffing by age in University Constituent Colleges. This analysis was conducted to determine the age of various cadres of university constituent college staff. University Constituent colleges’ staffs are also categorized into management, academic, administration and casual/temporary. A sample of three constituent university colleges have been reported to represent the others (Figure 2).

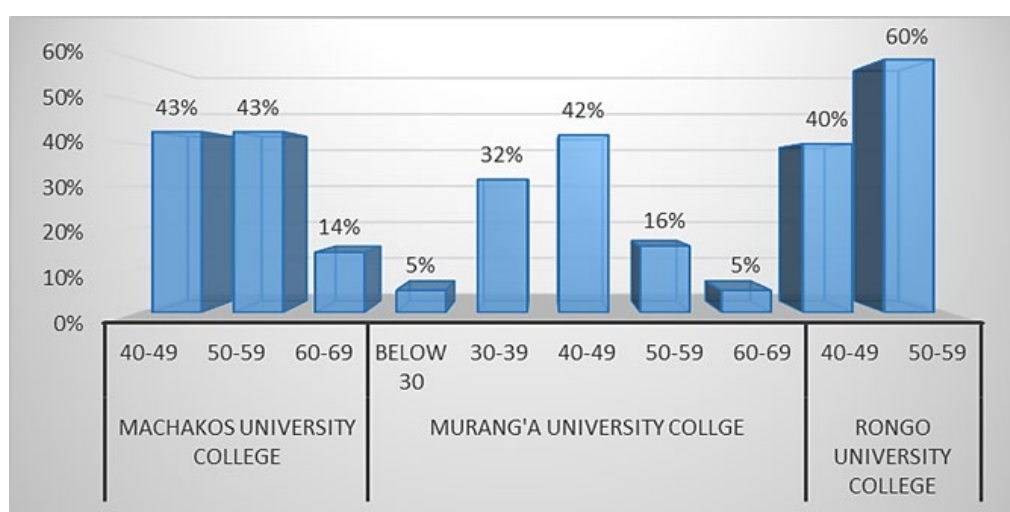


Figure 2. Management staff age cohorts for Machakos, Murang’a and Rongo University Colleges

In Machakos University College, 43% of the management staff are less than 50 years. Another 43% are aged between 50-59 years. The remaining 14% are aged between 60-69 years. This is therefore a relatively youthful management staff. In Murang’a University College, 79% are aged below 50 years. Only 21% of the management staff are above 50 years. In Rongo University College the highest age cohort is 50-59 years constituting 60% of the management staff. The remaining 40% are aged between 40-49 years. The average age of the management staff in university constituent colleges is 47 years. Compared with Public Chartered Universities, constituent University Colleges have relatively young members of staff at the level of management. Succession is therefore assured (Ikama, 2010; Koskei, 2013).

Discussion and Conclusion

Young upcoming universities face a huge challenge is staffing their institutions with qualified and competent staff that represent the face of Kenya as envisaged in the law (Laskin, 2000; Mukhwana *et al.*, 2017). The percentage of staff with PhD is way below

the 50% threshold for most of them, and it will not be possible to close this gap in the short term. However, these young universities are doing much better than their old counter parts on the issue of gender and age of staff. The gender threshold of 33.3% is met by all of them (Koskei, 2013), and most of their staff are young. However, young staff are associated with high turn-over and it will be interested to see how this works out both in the short and long term. Data on the number of people living with disability is being under reported. There is need to keep accurate and dependable data on this aspect. Most of the universities are staffed by people coming from the tribes that live around the university both as academic and other staff (NCIC, 2013). This is an issue that needs to be addressed for purpose of inclusivity. It is imperative that while Government and the constitution has imposed limits on employment of staff predominantly from one ethnic group, it is not enough to have this in law and policy. There is need for the government to put in place deliberate programs and activities to mitigate against universities employing people only from their immediate vicinity.

Several factors have been attributed to the rampant employment of people within the vicinity of the universities (Mukhwana *et al.*, 2017). These include low enumeration which allows those from the vicinity to stay in their homes, thereby saving costs, and some communities feel insecure working away from their homes among other communities that they consider hostile. This is especially true for low cadre staff. Also some academic staff run to home based universities, when they feel that they are deliberately being denied promotion in universities away from home; other staff staying near their homes have opportunity to engage in other income generating activities such as farming or even running “matatus”; some move to work close home as they prepare themselves for retirement. It is psychologically important to prepare oneself for retirement, nearer home and some move closer home as they search for more lucrative employment opportunities, and consultancies especially from the county governments.

A strong higher education base is crucial for transformation of Kenya and the region into a knowledge based economy as envisaged in the 2030 Kenya vision (Mureithi, 2009; Mukhwana *et al.*, 2016a). Unfortunately, much of the expertise base of older Kenyan universities has stretched beyond limits and addition of new universities can only make this situation worse. This has led to unqualified people being hired to teach and carry out research in universities. These include staff that have questionable masters and doctoral qualifications such as executive masters (Roberson, 2006; Mukhwana *et al.*, 2017), and doctoral degrees and/or staff with qualifications from universities that are not properly accredited and recognized by the country’s university regulators. Although universities in Kenya have a strong academic staff union (the Universities Academic staff Union (UASU)), staff especially from small and upcoming universities are yet to benefit fully from negotiations made between the universities and the union. Some of the challenges that are making hiring of staff in new and upcoming universities difficult include but are not limited to (i) inadequate and non-competitive salaries vis-à-vis county and international organizations, and (ii) lack of job satisfaction due to non-monetary reasons including poor hiring and promotion practices; high teaching loads owing to large student numbers; low funding for research activities; lack of scholarship for academic advancement; lack of

basic amenities such as for medical needs and schools in the rural areas; and rampant nepotism and tribalism that seems to be affecting rural based universities.

It is noteworthy that while it has been noble to establish new universities to increase enrolment and absorb the ever increasing number of students seeking university education, there is need to put in place solid training and staff development programs (Mukhwana *et al.*, 2016b) to get many of them trained up to the right levels (PhD). There should also be deliberate efforts to lure academicians from different ethnic background into these rural universities, and ensure their retention, so as to improve the quality of university education being offered.

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