

Some lessons learned in establishing the University of Rwanda

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The author spent five months in Rwanda as a Strategic Advisor to the Ministry of Education's Task Force for creating a single national university by amalgamating the existing seven public institutions of higher education located in various regions of the country, and in this article he outlines some of the main lessons learned during that engagement. After providing the contextual background for the project and his engagement by Academics without Borders to undertake it, he summarizes the main outcomes of that work. He then identifies the first lesson learned from this experience as 'conventional wisdom needs to be applied with pragmatic realism', particularly when interpreting the fundamental principles of academic freedom, institutional autonomy and participative decision-making. Secondly, he learned that 'managing expectations can be devilishly difficult'; and finally, it became clear that 'one should not undertake this kind of work without a local "champion" in place'. The article concludes with the author's main impressions of Rwanda and its people.

1. Background

In 2013 I left my home in Ottawa for a five-month engagement in Rwanda as a Strategic Advisor on their Ministry of Education's project to merge that nation's seven public higher education institutions spread across the country into an integrated national entity to be called the University of Rwanda, and this article is an effort to share a few of the main lessons I learned there about higher education and development. But first, let me provide a bit of the historical context as I understand it.

A few years ago the President of Rwanda (Paul Kagame) decided wisely that the country needed to beef up its higher education system if it were to achieve the ambitious post-genocide development goals he was setting for it, and he struck on the idea of amalgamating its disparate state providers of post-secondary education into a single national institution with its headquarters in the capital city (Kigali) and campuses throughout the country. It was hoped that such an endeavour would accomplish three main objectives: improving academic quality (which it probably will), enhancing Rwanda's profile (which is quite likely), and reducing university costs (which I doubt will happen). To implement this proposition the Rwandan Ministry of Education convened a Task Force, which decided that it needed some dedicated expertise to provide strategic advice on how to discharge its mandate. So it turned to the small Canadian NGO Academics Without Borders (AWB), probably because it had already conducted some successful projects at Rwanda's then-largest post-secondary institution where it had worked on upgrading the registrarial services and training administrative support staff among other things. Academics Without Borders was a good choice since it recognises that universities are crucial to a nation's development, it focuses on building the host country's own higher education capacity rather than parachuting in a branch campus from overseas or removing the brightest candidates

for studies elsewhere (thereby contributing to 'brain drain'), it is extremely cost-effective because its projects are conducted by unpaid volunteers, it provides assistance in all areas of university operation (academic activities, administrative support, strategic planning, etc.), it specializes in the least developed countries of the world, and it requires full engagement of the host institutions which are expected to identify and help design the projects and contribute to meeting their costs (if only in-kind).

AWB in turn asked me take on that role of Strategic Advisor to the University of Rwanda Task Force and allowed me to recruit as a partner Professor Anthony Morgan, a Vice-President Emeritus for Finance and Planning at the University of Utah with whom I had worked in several other international settings. Over half a year Tony and I reviewed extensive relevant documentation and travelled throughout Rwanda to visit all of the existing campuses and to seek the views of numerous stakeholders with an interest in this amalgamation. The outcomes of our work included the following:

- Legislation was revised and promulgated to create the University of Rwanda.
- An organisational structure and site management arrangements for the new institution were developed and operationalised.
- A Decision Matrix was produced to guide the distribution of authority and responsibility within the U. of R. as well as between it and the Rwandan Government.
- Descriptions and qualifications for the restructured senior management positions were determined and implemented.
- A Vice-Chancellor for the new institution was sought, selected and appointed.
- A Capacity-Building Plan was prepared that identified, analysed and proposed prioritised resolutions for the new university's numerous needs to upgrade its physical and human (especially leadership) resources.
- A comprehensive process for the University's strategic planning was delineated including a Mission Statement, a prioritisation of strategic issues for attention and an action program for addressing them.
- Advice and support were provided on financial integration at the new institution, on its academic and operational procedures and on facilitating the transition to and launch of the University of Rwanda.
- Other products included a proposed Policy on Academic Freedom, an analysis of gender imbalance among Rwandan students and a concept paper on Financial Management and Budget Models for the University of Rwanda.

This new institution was accordingly established and is now operating under its own Board of Governors, with an excellent Vice-Chancellor as its executive head. It consists of six academically differentiated Colleges offering a comprehensive mix of programs on fourteen campuses spread throughout the country, with about 1500 academic staff and a total enrollment of just over 30,000 students. The University of Rwanda's language of instruction is English and it holds membership in the Association of Commonwealth Universities, whose support through benchmarking and other services should help in its future development.

2. Learnings

Predictably, we encountered several challenges in undertaking this work: some of those in positions of authority at the existing independent institutions were understandably concerned about relinquishing power to the new university's central administration; the communities in which they were located feared some diminution in the service and prestige they enjoyed by virtue of hosting an autonomous institution of higher education; and many employees felt threatened by the uncertainty of how the merger would be operationalized and by the insecurity of their jobs as redundancies and duplications were reduced. In an effort to combat such concerns, we devoted considerable time to visiting all of the areas where the constituent entities were located, listened carefully to the views expressed by a wide range of stakeholders, and tried to persuade them of the merger's positive features and potential – not the least of which were the importance and excitement inherent in the venture they were undertaking, the promise of improvement that it embodied, and its international significance as an opportunity to avoid mistakes in institution-building that had been made at many western universities where it was now too late to reverse such errors. We were impressed by the receptiveness to such messages by most of those with whom we met, although there were certainly some who remained to be convinced.

In doing this work Tony and I learned some lessons about higher education in developing countries that we considered valuable, so I'll share three of them below.

2.1 Conventional wisdom needs to be applied with pragmatic realism

There are three principles that we traditionally consider to be definitive features of a 'true' university: *academic freedom*, which we value so highly that we create elaborate tenure policies to protect its exercise; *institutional autonomy*, which we ensure by assigning governance authority to statutorily independent boards and in some cases even by placing intermediary bodies between our governments and these boards; and *participative decision-making*, which we guarantee by forming the countless representative committees that determine what our universities do. Going in, it was our view that if the University of Rwanda did not feature these three principles in all the 'purity' we strive for at home we would have failed in discharging our mandate.

In reality, the principle of **academic freedom** posed no problem for us; our Rwandan colleagues embraced its indispensability, and the Ministry officials recognised and accepted its necessity. The principle of **institutional autonomy** was another matter, however; Rwanda's public higher education institutions had traditionally operated as branches of the national government with their heads reporting to the Ministry of Education's Permanent Secretary (our Deputy Minister), and the authorities were loath to relinquish this control over their operation. We reluctantly came to agree with them because the history of entrenched Ministry control over Rwandan higher education had hindered the evolution of self-governing capabilities and we concluded that immediate full autonomy for the new institution would be premature; so we compromised with a phasing-in approach whereby there would initially be a Board of Governors between the Ministry and the University, but the Board's membership and authority were determined directly by the government – a circumstance that would gradually evolve

toward greater autonomy as trust and capabilities improved, a goal that interestingly seemed more palatable to the country's Ministry of Finance than to the officials in Education. The principle of **participative decision-making** required some similar 'fudging'; as with many developing countries, decisions in Rwanda are customarily reached through a top-down bureaucracy that is very hierarchical with numerous procedural regulations that retard and constrain the results, a condition that we generally consider antithetical to good university management. However, we recognised that this system is culturally ingrained in people's mentality there - and we also appreciated that there are some good reasons for it, not the least of which is its importance to achieving the commendable goal of zero tolerance for corruption. So again, we capitulated by recommending the committee structure we believed necessary to eventual participative decision-making while accepting that in the first instance most of these committees would probably operate in an advisory capacity only.

2.2 Managing expectations can be devilishly difficult

Arriving at this realisation was quite frustrating for us, which is well illustrated by our grappling with the concept of a 'world class' university. In committing to the 'one university' initiative Rwanda's top leadership frequently stated that the new institution would be a 'world class' centre of higher learning, and its various stakeholders became enthusiastic about this designation. The problem with it is that for many of them it had little practical meaning, whereas in reality the concept has been thoroughly studied and defined by such experts as a former Vice President for Human Development at the World Bank (Jamil Salmi) who determined that becoming a 'world class' university requires a high concentration of talent (faculty and students), abundant resources to offer a rich learning environment and conduct advanced research, and favorable governance features that encourage strategic vision, innovation and flexibility and that enable institutions to make decisions and manage resources without being encumbered by bureaucracy. These criteria could not possibly be met by the University of Rwanda in its foreseeable future, and indeed on the financial front the country's meager provision for universities had recently been reduced by reallocating 25 percent of it to the technical-vocational sector.

When asked how they would know whether or not UR was 'world class', our Rwandan colleagues typically said it would show up in the world university rankings. Some experts agree that this designation is limited to the top-ranked five percent of universities in the world, but at present no African institution makes it into even the top 300 - so this aspiration is not realistic for the new University of Rwanda and it is misleading to promote it as such. Raising expectations for glory that are patently unattainable is irresponsible, and can lead to a substantial drop in the morale and motivation that are so crucial to success in such a bold endeavour as creating a new institution. Moreover, the features that are requisite to becoming 'world class' (especially a concentration on research-intensiveness) are not what most developing countries need from their universities; rather, they require a range of well-taught undergraduate offerings and carefully selected high-quality professional programs supplemented by certain strategically-determined graduate studies and an applied research capability that can generate solutions to the country's various social, economic and technical

problems. To divert scarce resources from such offerings to a quixotic quest for 'world class' status would in our minds be foolish, and we tried to steer our Rwandan colleagues away from promising what they could not deliver. However, we failed and were accused of taking the joy out of the 'one university' project. So we eventually backed off and instead focused on the 'path' they might follow toward that remote objective, suggesting that they concentrate initially on addressing Rwanda's most immediate developmental needs while seeking in the intermediate term to become a 'leading African university'.

2.3 One should not undertake this kind of work without a local 'champion' in place

The importance of this is reflected in Academics Without Borders' insistence that the projects it does in developing countries be initiated and 'owned' by the host institutions, and when we agreed to accept this assignment such a person was there (the Rector of the merger's largest constituent institution, who served on the University of Rwanda Task Force and directed the Secretariat set up to work with us in implementing the 'one university' concept). Unfortunately, on our arrival in Rwanda we found that this man had been reassigned to become the national Minister of Infrastructure and he had not been replaced by someone who was as enthusiastically devoted to the project and committed to our job in carrying it out. We consequently encountered significant obstacles in doing our work and had to spend far too much time and energy on resolving or circumventing logistical and other problems that should have been devoted to discharging our mandate: some of our office equipment was inoperable and it took three months before we could locate a technician to provide a makeshift solution; we had very limited office supplies (like no paper for printing) and when we followed the laborious requisition process that we were told was necessary no supplies arrived, so we ended up buying them ourselves; and with rare exceptions the staff assistance and travel facilitation we were promised did not materialise, so we had to make many of our own logistical arrangements with no contextual familiarity.

We nevertheless surmounted these challenges and managed to fulfill our Terms of Reference, but we could have done much more and been more helpful if a local 'champion' had been designated to support our work as we originally expected. For a complex initiative as important as this one supposedly was to the government of Rwanda, such a person is needed – someone on-site who 'owns' the project, has a clearly and widely recognised responsibility for overseeing it, is granted sufficient authority and resources to resolve the kinds of difficulties that we encountered, is allowed to remain in place throughout the project's duration, and bears some accountability for its success or lack thereof. Without such an arrangement, precious time and other resources can be wasted and the results will be less than optimal.

3. Conclusion

The lessons one learns often arise from the problems one encounters, so I have focused here on some of the challenges that we faced in doing this work. But let me conclude by emphasizing the up-side of that experience. Learning is a good thing and we learned some good lessons, for which we are grateful. Rwanda is a delightful country in which to live and work, and we were most fortunate in having this opportunity to spend several months there with a chance to assist in pulling off the boldest and most promising initiative in higher education for

development that I've ever seen. And the Rwandan colleagues we met were impressive in their competence, commitment and determination – we developed great admiration for the country and its people, and I'm confident that it will continue to progress quite rapidly with the new University of Rwanda playing a major national role in advancing its development.

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