Are university administrators making economical use of available funds?

By MBATU wa NGAI

The word "crisis" has already been overused in Kenya. But the problems are far from over.

Suffering a crisis in public finances, a crisis in the delivery of public services, a crisis in the security of persons and their property, the vice-chancellors of the five public universities admitted last week that the country is facing yet another crisis: Financing higher education.

The administration did not come as a surprise to Kenyans long used to a yearly revision of criteria for selection into the public universities in efforts to admit the number the universities can afford and cover the cost of education. The universities ask for more money, but the country can only pay a fraction of the actual cost.

What surprised many Kenyans, however, was the vice-chancellors' sugges-
tion, articulated by Nairobi's Prof Francis Gichaga on behalf of the others, that the government should consider establishing a higher education levy to assist needy university students to pay their tuition and accommodation fees.

Any Kenyan familiar with the way the vice-chancellors attempt to mimic the profligate life-style of Cabinet Ministers to whom spending (public) money is of little consequence would find it hard to believe these bosses are making any attempt to rationalize their expenditures.

The phenomenal growth of support staff at the universities that are crying out for restructuring is a giveaway to the university administrators' tax-dodging ways.

The meek circumstances under which a number of inappropriate bases were imported for the universities a few years ago, some of which could not be driven to their destinations before breaking down, have never been explained. They are yet another unwarranted giveaway to those institutions that have bestowed a leaf from the rest of the Civil Service and are only looking out for Number One: Their stomachs. And the public be damned.

But, perhaps frustrated in their ivory towers, the top administrators are unaware of the growing poverty creeping among employed graduates, and the harsh economic conditions most companies are grappling with which make paying of ordinary taxes, leave alone new ones, a nightmare.

They may be unaware, too, that the tax authorities have been trying to rationalize their demand for taxes to bring the taxation levels lower in hopes of persuading more people to pay. Higher taxes, and that is what the new taxes amount to, lead to greater numbers of people and firms looking for ways in which they can avoid paying them. While the better-heeled pay expensive tax consultants to identify and exploit loopholes in the tax system their poorer counterparts simply go without paying.

The immediate result of the education levy would be that employers would shy away from either employing graduates of public universities or seek ways of hiding the fact.

Faced with the new postures many — no salaries, no taxes — that are taking most among Kenyans, the Government has announced austerity measures that will, hopefully, cut down government expenditure.

Secondly, what happened to the revolving loans fund? Higher education and university authorities have also yet to come clean on what happens to the millions of shillings paid every month in repayments for loans advanced beginning in the 1974/75 academic year, more than 20 years ago.

The majority of students who graduate are repaying those loans in addition to the already steep taxes. No wonder little is left for anything else.

Thirdly, have the universities, basing themselves on statistics that they have raised, demonstrated the need to raise more funds for the sake of their students, the ones who remained fell and remained at an all-time low.

Nairobi V-C Prof Francis Gichaga

Engineering students at the University of Nairobi: "We are left to speculate that the fall in national productivity has something to do with the decline in the quality of education. Again, only be No. Evidence on the ground suggests that most traditional donors, including the World Bank, have all but given up attempts to move the public universities along the road that would qualify them for assistance. The bilateral donors gave up a long time ago when the universities, even the better-known University of Nairobi, became political playgrounds where only government supporters got tenures and promotions."

Perhaps one may be right to conclude that none of the people running universities today inspire the kind of confidence required to get money from outside sources. The privileged centres set up at the University of Nairobi in the 1950s and early 1960s were also mismatches to the ground.

Not surprisingly, many good lecturers and other non-academic staff left the local universities long ago, not necessarily for greener pastures. The vacancy of those who remained fell and remained at an all-time low. The Government's determination, for a few years ago, to bring the revenue to be channelled to universities to build a system that has fallen into disuse.

The last thing Kenyans want to hear is that they will be required to pay more for an education system that has fallen into disuse. This between the vice-chancellors, to climb down from their ivory towers, and go back to the drawing board.