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# Varsity tax not a sound option

By MBATAU wa NGAI

The word "crisis" has already been over-used in Kenya, but the country's problems are far from over.

Having suffered 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 admission 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 pictures of students fighting police in protest at the poor catering, teaching and library services they get despite paying ever-increasing fees.

What surprised many Kenyans, however, was the vice-chancellors' suggestion, articulated by Nairobi's Prof 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.

The politically-correct vice-chancellors' suggestion that the education levy could be paid directly by individuals and also companies employing graduates of the universities begs several questions.

First, are the vice-chancellors making the most economical use of the funds given to them from the Exchequer and donors? If they were honest, the answer would be no.

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 rationalise expenditure.

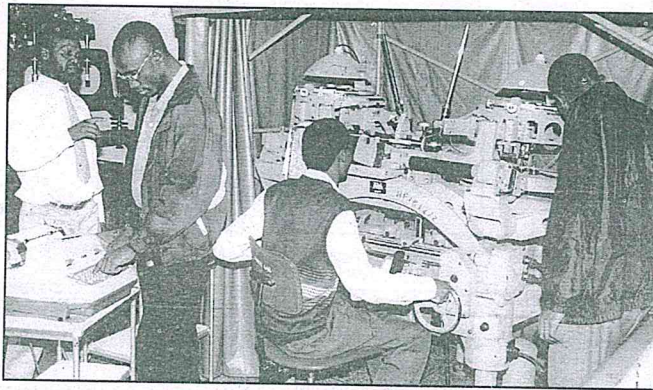
The phenomenal growth of support staff at the universities that are crying out for professionals is another giveaway to the university administrators' spendthrift ways.

The murky circumstances under which a number of inappropriate buses 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 unwelcome reminder that the senior staff in these institutions have borrowed a leaf from the

## Are university administrators making economical use of available funds?



Nairobi V-C Prof Francis Gichaga



Engineering students at the University of Nairobi: "Kenyans are left to speculate that the fall in national productivity has something to do with the decline in the quality of education."

rest of the Civil Service and are only looking out for Number One: Their stomachs. And the public be damned.

But, perhaps insulated in their ivory towers, the top administrators are unaware of the prevailing poverty, even 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 rationalise taxes to bring the taxation levels lower in hopes of persuading more people to pay. Higher taxes, and that is what the new levies amount to, lead to greater numbers of people and firms looking for ways in which they can avoid paying them. While the better-heeled ones 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 protest mantra — no services, no taxes — that is taking root 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 graduated then are repaying those monies in addition to the already steep taxes. No wonder little is left for anything else.

Thirdly, have the university bosses demonstrated they have tried to raise any significant amounts of money from sources other than the Treasury?

Sadly, an honest answer can, once

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 profit centres set up at the University of Nairobi in the 1960s and early '70s were also mismanaged 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 morale of those who remained fell and remained at an all-time low.

The Government's determination, a few years ago, to bring striking lecturers to heel did nothing to inspire public confidence in itself or the institutions, either.

Fourth, reports of rampant favouritism in selection into the universities, cheating in examinations and outright theft and sale of university degrees and certificates to those who failed to do well and others who did not attend any classes call for a credible explanation.

In the absence of such an explanation, Kenyans are left to speculate that the fall in national productivity has something to do with the decline in the education standards. The way forward then, seems obvious.

The universities should, as with the rest of the country, cut their coats according to their cloth. Retrenchment of all but the most necessary expenditure items should be the order of the day.

The hard times provide the best opportunity to screen the academic credentials of the university staff and to let go those who may hold questionable qualifications or are otherwise unsuitable to teach at such institutions. It is time to explode the myth that one is qualified to teach in a university simply because one holds a higher degree, or degrees, in a particular field. One may be better suited for research!

The appointment of qualified, hard-nosed academic staff and top administrators may provide an atmosphere best suited to canvass for financial support from industry, business and wealthy individuals by setting up respective chairs in different disciplines.

Provided the Government has itself gone through a similar restructuring programme in which it has become lean and efficient, it could consider assisting in fund raising by giving such university benefactors tax credits. The proposition that the number of such benefactors would increase with the growth of the economy is incontestable. But this can only happen if the size of government, and its role are redefined and reduced to fit the lean times the country is going through.

The last thing Kenyans want to hear is that they will be required to pay more for an education system that has fallen into disrepute.

This behoves the vice-chancellors to climb down from their ivory towers and go back to the drawing board.