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Spontaneous introduction of Christian Private Universities in Malawi and the quality of education provided

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Abstract:

Christian private higher education institutions in Malawi are established to address the dire need for higher education of qualified Malawi's populace who are left out due to the acute shortage of space in the few existing public universities. Approximately 20,000 students qualify for university education every year, and yet the two Malawian public universities can only absorb about 8,000 students per year. For example, in 2008, only 38.1 percent of the students who passed Malawi School Certificate of Education were admitted into public universities. This means that 61.9 percent of the students eligible for higher education could not be admitted due to limited space (Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, 2009). Again in 2013, 10,328 candidates passed the University of Malawi Entrance Examinations, but only 1,905 candidates were selected to continue their studies at the university (University of Malawi, 2013). At Mzuzu University, another public university in Malawi, had 5,161 candidates who qualified for entry into its programs in 2011, only 366 were selected to study at the university (Muzuzu University, 2011).

The scenario above therefore justifies the introduction of private universities to complement the efforts that the government is making. While it is a fact that the increasing number of private institutions is providing access to higher education to many eligible students, the spontaneous introduction and/or opening of such institutions poses a lot of challenges as regards the quality of education that they offer. There is always that urgency to open the institutions, and it appears that adequate planning is not given a thought. In some cases, these Christian higher education institutions develop as a reaction to a situation which is basically perceived as doing the prospective students a "favor", but in most cases, the students are given a raw deal. Institutions are so much in a hurry to start running without putting in place the necessary amenities. These institutions are characterized by low quality infrastructure, inadequate staff, equipment, teaching and learning materials, and other

necessities. For instance, one institution that was part of this study started without adequate classrooms, hostels, library, science laboratory equipment, and many others. Initially, the institution was sharing resources with a secondary school, and the resources were not even fit for university education. Much later, the proprietors closed the secondary school and the university took over the premises completely. Even though the situation has improved and keeps on improving, the institution still has a few more things to accomplish in order to meet all the requirements laid down by the National Council of Higher Education in Malawi.

The pattern is the same for several other Christian private institutions that have been established in Malawi so far. Some have turned secondary schools into universities while others have turned primary school teachers' training colleges into degree granting institutions, while others turned offices into universities. This paper argues that spontaneous introduction of Christian private higher education institutions affects the quality of education that such institutions provide. There is a correlation between proper planning of the establishment of institutions of higher education and the quality of education that the institutions can offer. Therefore, there is need for adequate planning if the private higher education institutions are to offer quality and credible education, thereby gaining the confidence of the members of the general public, as well as the accrediting bodies of higher education.

Key words: planning, quality, amenities

1. Introduction

The role played by higher education institutions cannot be over emphasized. Higher education is considered to be a key agent for national development in Malawi, regardless of whether it is provided by public or private sector. It must be noted that in Malawi, the public institutions cannot meet the demand for higher education that is out there; there is need for private institutions to come in to support the efforts that the government is making to provide higher education to eligible Malawians.

The origin of higher education in Malawi can be traced back to 1964 when University of Malawi was established. Malawi attained independence in 1964, and it was in the same year the university was introduced. For a long time, there had been only one public university (University of Malawi) which had three constituent colleges, namely, Chancellor College, Bunda College of Agriculture and Kamuzu College of Nursing. In 1992, College of Medicine was also introduced to train medical doctors and other professionals associated with medicine. The intake for all the colleges under University of Malawi was limited, so much so that many who qualified were left out. This, therefore, prompted the government of Malawi to establish a second university in 1999, Mzuzu University, which offers a variety of programs. The introduction increased the enrolment at tertiary level even though not many could be absorbed into these institutions. The government has plans to construct several other universities and it is hoped that this move will help to offer opportunities to many Malawians who want to access higher education.

Considering the fact that many students who qualified to go into university were being left out due to limited space, churches in Malawi and individuals thought of introducing private universities to supplement the efforts that the government was making to offer higher education. While such a move is welcome, there has been a challenge in the way some of these institutions started. The spontaneous introduction of some of the Christian private universities hinders them from providing the quality of education that meets the required standards laid down by the National Council of Higher Education in Malawi. There appears to be a pattern where some institutions start without the basic essentials, thereby compromising the quality of education that they in turn offer to those who enroll. It is important to note also, that there is great hunger for higher education in Malawi and many students are prepared to put up with several challenges in order to get the qualification they desire in life, because it promises a lot in life: high paying employment and other benefits (Kadyakapita, 2013).

In this paper, a university is defined as “an institution of higher learning designed for the preservation, advancement and dissemination of

knowledge” (Das, 2000). Basically, it is involved in teaching, research, and then transmits the ideas generated there in to the members of both local and wider community. Christian private higher education institutions are those which are independent; they do not get any government subvention; and they are owned by Christian religious bodies.

2. Emergence of private higher education institutions in Malawi

The two public institutions adequately provided higher education to Malawians for a number of years, but the situation became worse as the Malawian population continued to increase. Increase in population resulted into increase in the number of students who qualified for entry into university. This is evidenced by the number of students who sit for Malawi School Certificate of Education examinations every year. Unavailability of space at the institutions led to frustrations to many who felt that they had the right to university education. Although there were other forms of tertiary education which offered certificates and diplomas, some resented the idea of going to such institutions because they felt that they deserved the best—to be awarded a degree. This then led to great demand for higher education and private institutions moved in quickly to meet the need.

The first private institution of higher education to be established was Share World Open University, located in Blantyre, Malawi’s commercial city, but it later opened centers in the major cities of Malawi. It opened its doors in August 1994. Later, religious institutions also joined the band wagon by establishing their own institutions of higher education. The first to do so was the Church of Central Africa Presbyterian, Synod of Livingstonia, which established University of Livingstonia in 2003. The Seventh-day Adventist Church established the Malawi Adventist University a year later, in 2004. This was followed by the establishment of the Catholic University of Malawi in 2006, owned by the Catholic Church in Malawi. The church of Central Africa Presbyterian, Nkhoma Synod has recently opened its own university, Nkhoma University

(Nation online, 2012). Many other private universities, both faith-based and non-faith-based, have been established across the country.

The reasons for establishment of the institutions were to:

1. Supplement government efforts in its provision of higher education in the country.
2. Train church workers (teachers, accountants, managers, pastors, etc).
3. Provide access to students who had completed secondary school education but could not access higher education despite having acquired the necessary admission qualification into public universities.
4. Respond to the increasing demand for higher education.
5. Address the critical need for university of education. There was need to fill the gaps that existed. Programs were introduced after doing a needs assessment exercise.

The programs that the private institutions offer are in response to the needs of the country and the challenges that were/are affecting the country. It is important to note that churches claim that it is their responsibility to establish universities because they are the ones that pioneered the establishment of education institutions in Malawi starting from the primary to secondary school levels. Establishment of universities is therefore regarded as a continuation of what they had already started.

3. Quality assurance procedures for higher education in Malawi

Quality is the most important element in the delivery of higher education in Malawi. This is the reason why quality assurance procedures are put in place to ensure that quality education is what students get in the institutions of higher learning. The quality assurance involves two facets: Internal and external. Internal quality assurance is the responsibility of the universities themselves, while external quality assurance is the responsibility of the National Council of Higher Education (NCHE) and other agencies. Even though Malawi has taken a long time to establish

the National Council for Higher Education, the country put in place a provisional committee which took care of quality assurance. This committee has since been dissolved. Parliament passed into law Bill 31 of 2010, authorizing the creation of the council, in June 2011. The council has since been established and recruitment of staff was done in 2013. The council was established by NCHE Act No. 15 of 2011 and has rolled out its operations with the following mandate:

- a) To promote and coordinate education provided by higher education institutions;
- b) To register and deregister higher education institutions;
- c) To harmonize selection of students to all public universities;
- d) To regulate, determine and maintain standards of teaching, examinations, academic qualifications and academic facilities;
- e) To develop a national qualification framework which is compatible with regional and international standards;
- f) To determine minimum criteria and procedure for registration and de-registration of higher education institutions; to accredit both public and private higher education institutions.

The Council has so far developed standards and guidelines for quality assurance in Malawi's higher education institutions which focuses on internal quality assurance, external quality assurance, and external quality assurance agencies (National Council for Higher Education, n.d.). This is also done for purposes of accreditation. It believes that the quality of education depends on various factors, such as the level of infrastructural facilities, the qualification levels of teachers, academic support systems, assessment systems, and other factors.

On internal quality assurance, institutions are supposed to work out their own policies and procedures for quality assurance in higher education institutions. These among others include approval, monitoring and periodic review of programs and awards, assessment of students, quality assurance of staff, learning resources and student support, information systems and public information. These vary from one institution to another; there is no generic quality assurance process or tool used by all

higher education institutions within the system. For instance, the University of Malawi developed its own policies which have since been approved. The university is currently engaged in the formation of a Quality Assurance Unit to monitor the quality assurance arrangements intended to maintain and elevate quality, and monitor, review, analyze and make available to the public reports on the quality of outcomes at the University of Malawi. The availability and quality of student support services seem to be high, even though most of the services are insufficient for the many students that need them (Kotecha, 2012). Mzuzu University also has its own quality assurance and enhancement department which was set up on 22nd December 2008, “whose purpose is to look at all functions of a university in delivery of goods and services offered by the same to its consumers” (Muzuzu University, 2011 *online*). One of the private Christian institutions indicated that it has a department of quality assurance that ensures the conditions of teaching and learning are adequately adhered to, and that they are not compromised in any way.

It is important to note that even in the absence of quality assurance procedures, some Christian private universities strive to ensure that they deliver high quality education. The following are some of the ways that the institutions utilize to ensure quality of their education:

1. Employ lecturers with adequate qualifications and experience
2. Attempt to procure enough teaching and learning materials for the programs they offer
3. Ensure that good Information and Communications Technology (ICT) systems are in place for use by students.
4. Establish departments of quality assurance that monitors the activities of the institution.
5. Provide staff training through sponsorship to seminars/conferences, short courses, and in some cases sponsorship into programs of upgrading, e.g. those with masters to PhD, those with Bachelors to Masters, etc.
6. Subject examinations to external moderation
7. Regulate the workload that a teacher can handle in a semester

8. Regulate the number of credit hours a student can take in a semester
9. Regulate class attendance
10. Provide timely feedback to students
11. Obtain feedback from students on the quality of teaching.

4. Pattern of the introduction of selected Christian private universities in Malawi

One common characteristic of private institutions has to do with the way they are established. In many cases, there is inadequate planning, and this always has long lasting effects on the operations of the institutions. The factor of inadequate planning has also been highlighted by Mozecie Kadyakapita in his study (Kadyakapita, 2013). Instead of putting down a proper plan of infrastructure development and other important amenities, institutions choose to turn existing facilities, infrastructure and resources that proprietors previously used for other purposes. For instance, the proprietors of one of the Christian private higher education institutions turned a secondary school into a university. Initially, university students co-existed with secondary school students. The environment was not very conducive for university education because they were sharing resources with secondary school students which were not of its level. Another university started on premises that previously housed a primary school teacher training college, a certificate granting institution. It appears that the proprietors wanted to open the university quickly, and in the process the quality of education was compromised. While it is true that ‘Rome was not built in a day’, it is important to uphold the standards and guidelines of quality assurance. The issue is that there are some things which can wait, but quality is not one of them. Kadyakapita made the same observation in his work:

“At the time I carried out the study, there were five government-accredited private institutions of higher education in Malawi. Almost all the institutions started their operations from existing physical facilities, infrastructure and resources that proprietors previously used either as office buildings, houses or tertiary and vocational

education institutions. In some cases the available infrastructure, facilities and personnel tended to be unfit for the purpose of offering higher education” (Ibid, p. 6-7).

Some institutions start enrolment while under construction, with incomplete facility. Some do expand the existing structures to accommodate more students, while others do not. While it is a fact that many institutions start small, and keep on expanding and become big institutions later, it is the planning part that is lacking. Starting an institution without any idea of where the money for further expansion would come from is attributed to the faith that the church institutions have in God which may not really come to reality. Through my interaction and experience in Christian private higher education institution, I have observed that many, especially church faithfuls, are not willing to give towards the activities of the university because it is believed that universities have a lot of money. Additionally, donors can assist for a while but there comes a time when they pull out and the institution must stand on its own.

The turning of existing structures into universities deprives the community of other equally important services. For instance, when the proprietors closed the secondary school to open a university in its place, there was a big outcry from the surrounding community, and there were tensions, because there are limited boarding secondary schools in the district. Many deserving students are now deprived of quality education because the secondary school is no more. Some looked at effects of the closure of the secondary school from an economic point of view. Since the institution is located in the rural area, many used to sell their cooked food stuffs to students and could therefore earn some money through that. When university students came, first, the numbers were small for a long time, and secondly, they were very choosy in the kind of food they would buy for fear of eating contaminated food. In addition, most of those who can afford private university education have money because education is expensive, and as a result, they could afford better but

also expensive food stuffs compared to secondary school students who normally have very little money.

Another example is that of closing other established institutions like Teachers Training Colleges. These colleges train primary school teachers, and there is still very high demand of trained teachers, if the teacher-pupil ratio is anything to go by (Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, 2011). Universities normally train teachers who teach at secondary school level so what this means is that the community is deprived of trained primary school teachers because there are fewer institutions training teachers. So, while the universities are meeting needs at one level, in this case the higher level, they end up creating more gaps at the bottom level.

It is important to note that even though proper planning was not made in the first place, massive improvements have been registered. In some cases, institutions had very small libraries but now they boast of huge libraries, more hostel, classrooms and office space. However, there is still much which needs to be done to improve the quality of education offered.

5. Challenges of private universities

B.C. Das highlights some of the issues that disturb the system of higher education in India (Das, 2000). Some of the problems include:

“Many of the universities and colleges do not have a minimum level of infrastructure for the maintenance of quality and standards. The system does not accord teachers a proper economic and social status, opportunities for professional and career development, initiative for innovation and creative work, proper orientation in concept, techniques and value system to fulfill their role and responsibilities. The phenomenal expansion of higher education has posed a threat to its quality. The tension between numbers and quality dominates the debate about higher education in most countries. The institutions are unable to carry on themselves due to insufficient funding and this

affects the quality of education, since a lot of compromises [were] made to make the ends meet. Often students, parents, teachers and employees are dissatisfied with the existing educational services offered by higher education.” (p.114)

This shows that universities face similar problems regardless of geographical location. Higher education institutions are facing a lot of challenges, and these challenges are not restricted to private institutions alone, public institutions do have their own share. The challenges are varied; they range from human resource, infrastructural, technological, to lack of teaching and learning material. However, most of the challenges hinge on finances. Kadyakapita has proposed that the financial challenges are attributed to “Lack of adequate strategic planning and action” (Kadyakapita, 2013 P.239). Below are the challenges that institutions of higher learning face, among others:

- a. Inadequate funding: Most private institutions are dependent on tuition. Added to this, the money trickles in slowly and it makes financial planning very difficult.
- b. Inadequate teaching and support staff
- c. Inadequate teaching and learning materials: Text books, reference materials, ICT facilities like LCD projectors, are inadequate.
- d. Inadequate staff facilities-office space is a major challenge. Lecturers tend to be overcrowded in one place like they are in a secondary school setting. Most of them lack computers, etc.
- e. Inadequate research undertakings
- f. Very few or no postgraduate programs
- g. Inadequate hostel space
- h. Lack of training due to financial challenges
- i. Retention of qualified and experienced lecturers is a challenge due to lack of adequate incentives such as low salary, housing, transport and sponsorship to upgrade in their various fields.
- j. Some students fail to meet the cost of payment for their tuition, accommodation and food at the university making them withdraw untimely. It leads to loss of income.

- k. Inadequate funding due to overreliance on tuition fees for operational costs.
- l. Limited or no sports facilities.

6. Effects of challenges on the quality of education

The challenges have a number of effects on the quality of education that the Christian private higher education institutions offer. Most of these challenges, if not all, hinge on finances. Education that is offered to students must meet the standards, but in many cases, due to those challenges, quality is compromised.

a. Academic and non-academic staff

Growth in the private higher education sector brings with it the demand for qualified and experienced staff. To deliver quality outputs, higher education institutions face a tremendous challenge in recruiting, developing, renewing and retaining capable human resources. Responding to the demand for higher education without addressing the human, infrastructural and technological implications that flow from this response will compromise quality (Kotecha, 2012). First, due to inadequate financial resources, institutions are unable to recruit and retain qualified academic and non-academic staff, because they may not be able to give them remuneration that is commensurate with their qualifications. Some times less qualified are recruited because it is affordable to retain them. This in turn compromises the quality of education. This problem ends up having far reaching effects: The few who are on the ground end up carrying heavy teaching loads, and some of the loads may not fall under the area of expertise of a particular staff member.

For instance, due to the fact that the institution is low on cash and cannot recruit full time academic staff, adjunct lecturers (part time) are engaged. The challenge is that most of these have their own permanent jobs elsewhere, and as such they may not be as committed to ‘the extra’ job as they would be to their permanent job. They show up to teach only when they have time, not when they are needed to be in class. Students have very little or no time at all to interact with the lecturer outside class. Most

of the times they come towards the end of the semester and overload students with a lot of information within a very short period of time, just before they sit for their end of semester examinations. Students have very limited time to meaningfully interact with the material that they learn, and in turn the institutions produce 'half-baked' graduates.

In some cases, there is a temptation for part time staff to put monetary benefits before the welfare of the students. Some do focus much on the financial gains and just rush through the material or sometimes they subject students to a lot of pressure, and they (students) normally have limited time for library research. College education is far much different from secondary school one, for much of the learning experiences must be facilitated by the students—not spoon feeding as it were. Therefore, students miss out on that aspect, and they just wait to receive from the teacher.

Another challenge is that when one wants to engage adjunct lecturers, he/she may go for those who are available, not necessarily the best. Some are willing to teach courses even when they are not competent, for the sake of financial benefits. While efforts are made to employ qualified ones, availability becomes a determining factor at the end of the day. This in turn compromises the quality of education that those particular lecturers deliver.

Inadequate funding hinders institutions from giving enough incentives to staff, and this ends up demoralizing staff. Their commitment to the institution goes down, and instead they focus their attention and efforts towards making more money through other means. There have been cases where teaching staff go out doing consultancies which is aimed in one way at raising some funds for their personal use. While consultancies are an important component of university education, some of them are done at the expense of student learning. Lecturers are always on the move, neglecting their core duty of teaching. This therefore compromises the quality of education that students get at the end of the day. Students pay a lot of money for them to access private higher education and they may not get their money's worth at the end of the day. Some become

very busy conducting short courses, while neglecting generic students, and others personal businesses which take much of their time.

High staff turnover is also another challenge. This leaves the institution impoverished in terms of institutional memory which in a way denies continuity of planned programs meant at improving the quality of teaching and learning. When staff leaves the institution through resignation, they force the university to more or less restart issues that should have been continuing with officers who hatched the ideas. In addition, departure of lecturers due low salaries and other incentives demotivates other lecturers, and this weakens their teaching capacity.

Due to inadequate members of teaching staff, some courses are not offered even though they are important to those doing a particular program. This therefore compromises the quality of products at the end of a full program. Graduates will go out not having the competencies that they were intended to have when they entered the university.

b. Increased student population

Due to inadequate funding, and based on the fact that finances normally come from tuition fees, the common way that is used to improve the institution's financial base is to increase the student population. In private institutions, numbers do matter, if an institution does not have the numbers, its survival will be endangered. Institutions diversify their programs with the aim of attracting more students. The main problem is that there is a disproportionate development where institutions want to have more numbers and yet they do not have enough facilities to accommodate such large numbers. This results into overcrowding in the halls of residences, classrooms, cafeteria, library, ICT facilities, and other places. In some cases, due to inadequate classroom space, large classes are conducted in big halls, with no sound system, and students may not be able to hear what the lecturer is saying, either due to the lecturer's low voice, or echo coming from the walls of the hall. There is always a scramble for learning materials, for it now becomes the survival of the fittest. This therefore compromises the quality. Large numbers require a large number of both academic and non-academic staff, but in most cases

the numbers remain the same. Academic staff will give assessments sparingly because grading papers of such big numbers can be tedious. Student support may be minimal because lecturers cannot afford to give the support that students need; they will be overwhelmed. If students cannot access the required facilities they will end up getting a raw deal.

c. Insufficient teaching and learning materials

Inadequate teaching and learning materials also compromise the quality of education that is being offered in the universities under study. Some Christian private universities lack relevant text books, LCD projectors which aid in teaching and learning, for those offering science subjects, they have inadequate laboratories and laboratory equipment, ICT facilities which complement libraries are also in short supply. This shows that there is a shortfall in the type of education that institutions can offer. Quality education is only possible with the availability of teaching and learning resources.

d. Limited research activities

Due to inadequate funding, research activities, an important component in university education, is lacking. A university is expected to create and generate knowledge through research, but the private universities are struggling financially, and research is given little or no money at all. This then just turns these universities to ‘glorified high schools,’ with very little to show in the area of research.

e. Inadequate staff facilities

Many staff members do not have offices, and some do share offices, and this makes preparation very difficult, especially where concentration is required. In addition, there are some instances where counseling is required but a lecturer cannot counsel a student in the hearing of everyone. Lack of appropriate facilities compromises quality. Some lecturers are forced by circumstances to prepare for lectures at their residences and this inconveniences their family members and even their concentration as there are several things competing for their attention in

their homes. Staff housing is another major challenge. Campuses normally have limited housing for staff and the houses are too small for academic staff. The challenge of using existing facilities is that initially, the facilities were not meant for senior members of staff, but now that the institution has been turned into.

f. Quality assurance

Quality assurance processes are not adequately adhered to, not because the Christian private higher education institutions don't want to, but due to inadequate funds. Even though these providers of education are aware of such procedures and their importance, shortage of funds may not allow them to proceed with some of the activities which may ensure quality. For instance, employment of lecturers with adequate qualifications and experience ensures quality, but retaining them can be a challenge in the face of limited financial resources. External moderation of examinations is key to ensuring quality, but it is an expensive exercise. Training staff improves quality; however, funds may not permit all this to take place.

g. Infrastructure

One other challenge is that Christian private higher education institutions which inherit infrastructure not meant for college level spend a lot of money refurbishing or renovating the existing structures to make them fit for university education. For instance, one university inherited staff houses which were in a dilapidated state. A lot of money was spent on rehabilitating the houses and some structures to make them habitable, instead of spending on teaching and learning materials or recruiting more staff that could help improve the quality of services at the institution.

7. How universities deal with the challenges

It is pleasing to note that universities under study are not just watching over these challenges, but they are doing everything possible to find solutions. For instance, the major challenge is funding, and the institutions are engaging in various activities to generate more income.

Some of the ways that have been highlighted by the universities under study include:

1. Diversification of programs: This makes the programs attractive rather than focusing on one.
2. Introduction of distance learning programs which apart from assisting people to upgrade, it also helps both the university and staff to gain additional income. It provides opportunity to those who cannot leave their home to stay on a campus.
3. Increasing the frequency of student-intakes: This ensures that the institution will always have cash flowing into their coffers.
4. Identifying sponsorship for staff to upgrade their qualifications. This assists in staff retention.

8. Conclusion

Provision of higher education is a noble task. Christian Private Higher Education Institutions are playing an important role in providing students opportunities to continue with their education to high levels. However, this task is not without challenges. Some challenges are common to many universities (both public and private); while others are brought about by the owners of the universities due to inadequate planning at the time of establishing the institutions. Inadequate planning leads to lack of solid financial base and essential amenities. It is pleasing to note that the proprietors, administrators, and all those involved are aware of the challenges and they are doing everything possible to find solutions because they know that the effects are a threat to quality education which each and every institution of higher education must provide. It is advisable that those who plan to establish private institutions of higher education must give attention to adequate planning and fundraising to ensure sustainability, which will in turn enable the institutions to deliver quality education.

9. Recommendations and Conclusion

Despite the challenges that institutions face, there are a few things that could be noted for the future:

1. There is need for adequate planning to ensure that quality education is offered. More time and finances are spent on renovations and expansions which sometimes disrupt the lectures and other activities. This means also that serious fund-raising must be carried out before opening/establishing the institutions. Having a good financial base ensures that quality of education is delivered to learners.
2. Most Christian private institutions live on hand to mouth kind of life, since they solely depend on tuition fees. There is need for them to diversify fundraising activities before and after establishing the institutions. This will ensure sustainability of the institutions.
3. Private institutions should take quality assurance guidelines seriously, and should stop comparing themselves to public universities whose standards may also be wanting. Being private, they should strive to provide the best education ever with the aim of attracting more students. Training and graduating students must not be the only goal; the quality of such products is at stake here. Money is important but it should not be the priority.

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