

Higher Education in Africa: Facing the Challenges in the 21st Century

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In 2009, the World Conference on Higher Education of UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization) noted the progress made in Africa since its previous conference, in 1998, but acknowledged that many challenges still existed to be met in the 21st century.

INCREASING ENROLLMENT

The tertiary student enrollment ratio in sub-Saharan Africa reached only around 6 percent in 2007, the lowest quantity of the world regions. Thus, a determined effort must be made to significantly increase tertiary enrollment in Africa.

In increasing enrollment, however, the intake to existing public institutions must be controlled, taking into account their capacity. The vast majority of public universities in Africa have student enrollment far beyond what they were designed to accommodate.

Further enrollment without adequately increasing the infrastructure and other resources can only worsen the situation and affect quality.

At the same time, in several African countries an effort has been taken to rapidly set up new universities that are almost copies of the existing ones. This is not the right approach, as in many cases this results in depleting the staff of the existing institutions and transferring them to the new ones. Yet another tendency is to create new universities by simply upgrading polytechnics and technical colleges. Africa needs differentiated institutions, ranging from research-strong universities to polytechnics and technical colleges, as well as diversified programs within each institution, to cater for different types of learners and needs of the country.

During increasing access, appropriate steps must be taken to ensure the success of the admitted students. The lack of resources, including faculty, often leads to high dropout rates. The time to complete a three-year degree program sometimes takes as much as five to six years. The situation is also exacerbated by frequent campus closures as a result of student unrests, which hamper revitalization initiatives. Both a national and regional approach to this challenge needs to be considered.

Clearly, the increasing demand for higher education in Africa will never be met by traditional face-to-face delivery alone. Other approaches such as open, distance, and online learning will have to be met, especially for continuous adult education and teacher training. This is already happening with the creation of open universities in several countries and the use of distance education in traditional universities to complement face-to-face teaching.

FUNDING

The dramatic increase in student enrollment in higher education in Africa has not been matched by public funding. Effectively, the public expenditure per student has declined considerably, and this has inevitably led to deterioration in quality. The daunting challenges facing African higher education involve the ongoing increase in student numbers, the more faculty needed to be recruited, additional infrastructure to be built; and yet, the availability of public funds will be limited.

Paradoxically, public spending per higher education student in Africa is much higher than in other developing countries, indicating overspending and inefficiency in the use of resources. Reduction in expenditures and promoting efficiency in the institutions should therefore be the first step in coping with the shortage of funds. Changing the method of budgeting is another approach. Currently, in most countries the annual institutional budget allocated by government is determined by simply adjusting the previous year's budget by a percentage, depending on the availability of public funds. The use of formula funding, for example, based on the unit cost per student, can stimulate improvement in institutions and help to achieve more accountability and transparency.

Ultimately, however, public institutions will inevitably have to resort to the charging of tuition fees from students if they are to provide quality education. The danger here, moreover, is that public higher education then will eventually be regarded as a private enterprise, receiving decreasing contribution from the state. African governments should recognize that higher education is a "public good" and, accordingly, must benefit from state support. While fees should be introduced, they

should represent only a proportion of the actual economic cost and should be accompanied by appropriate loan schemes or scholarships for the socially disadvantaged students.

The income from cost-sharing measures, however, will never sufficiently cover the huge cost of physical infrastructural development. Capital expenditure funding to a large extent must come from government. Some countries—for example, Ghana—have served an innovative approach of using a small proportion of the national contribution from the value-added tax for funding capital projects in higher education.

Public-funded institutions alone will never manage to meet the huge demand for higher education. Private and cross-border higher education institutions, which already operate in significant numbers in Africa, should be encouraged and can be beneficial in many ways. However, many of them are profit motivated and offer poor-quality education. They, therefore, need to be regulated and quality controlled.

RESEARCH

The research output from African universities is very low. The reasons include a lack of research-experienced faculty, given brain drain, heavy teaching load, moonlighting by faculty, and lack of resources—such as, library facilities, information and communications technology infrastructure, and well-equipped laboratories.

The relevance of the research carried out is also questionable. Most faculty undertake research for personal gain, with the aim of publishing in internationally refereed journals for promotion purposes. The chosen topic is often not appropriate to national development. Most faculty do their research as individuals; there is insufficient

multidisciplinary research, essential for solving development problems. Much of the research is externally funded, and being determined by the funders, the topics may not be of direct relevance to national development.

Research publication comprises another challenge. Most of the research results end up on university library shelves—in theses and dissertations or advanced research journals. They are, thus, not accessible to or understood by policymakers or communities. There is a dearth of African research journals; those that are started are often not sustainable.

Several steps need to be taken to redress the situation. Adequate provision should first be made for funding research at the national level. The setting up of national research councils can extend toward mobilizing resources and identifying national priorities for research. At the institutional level, universities should incorporate research in their strategic planning and ensure that it is given the same priority as teaching. Each university should also create a central research office to coordinate, promote, facilitate, and manage research. A process of upgrading the research qualification of university staff—through, for example, split-site PhDs—is already under way in many institutions and needs to be expanded. With regard to accessing publications on and in Africa, efforts should be made for greater online access to research publications and theses in Africa.

QUALITY ASSURANCE

Quality assurance in higher education is a relatively new phenomenon in Africa. In 2007 only 16 out of 52 countries in sub-Saharan Africa had national quality assurance

agencies, most of them recently set up. The agencies have been created mainly to regulate the development of higher education provision, especially by the private sector, rather than ensuring accountability or improving quality.

The main challenges facing quality assurance in Africa are a dearth of adequately trained professional staff in the national quality assurance agencies, lack of knowledge about the related process among the staff in the institutions, resistance from faculty to get fully engaged in the very time-consuming process of data collection and processing, and lack of funds to establish quality assurance systems in the institutions. Sensitization, capacity building, and funding are, thus, the main issues that need to be addressed in promoting quality assurance.

CONCLUSION

Some of the challenges faced by African higher education can be dealt with at the institutional level, a number at the national level, and yet others require a regional approach. If African governments and higher education institutions are to meet those challenges, they need to plan and innovate. Their policies require commitment and collaboration of all the stakeholders. There is no reason why African countries cannot transform these challenges into opportunities to make their higher education sector a vibrant and productive one.