Private Higher Education in Uganda: The Case of its Distribution, Contribution to Access and Costs

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ABSTRACT

The paper present the factors underpinning the emergence of private higher education. the context in which it is called to fulfill its mission, the role in development in Uganda, and the distribution and cost implications. The driving variables of this paper are basically, private higher education costs, distribution and access. These three are handied holistically. The basic conclusion of this paper is that Uganda's private higher education institutions need to acquire complaint survival instincts by reducing their dependence on a sole source of funding, diversifying their funding mechanisms, turning themselves into suppliers and providers of quality relevant education, positioning themselves in strategic demographic areas, and diversifying mechanisms of access.

Private Higher Education: The emergence factors

In this paper, I shall try to narratively present the factors underpinning the emergence of private higher education, the context in which it is called to fulfill its mission, the role in development in Uganda, and the distribution and cost implications. The driving variables of this paper are basically, private higher education costs, distribution and access. These three are handled holistically.

The 21st Century is witnessing a growing thirst for higher education as a consequence of the changing patterns of social demands on education. The underpinning factor of these demands is the need to survive and maintain identity. Survival has become the guiding principle for all human activity. It is this need for survival that has brought about changes in the concept of competition.

In the face of globalization in all its respects, rapid technological changes, increased dependence on knowledge economy, and changes in economic and social structures, states, especially the developing states, are increasingly finding it difficult to survive. They are seeking for ways and means of survival. The World Bank (2003) outlined four basic factors in which the states development survival is anchored. These are:

- a. The economic incentives and institutional regime.
- b. The ICT infrastructure
- c. The innovation system.

Higher education is currently perceived as the mechanism by which states can achieve those development drivers. Thus the need to expand higher education sector.

However, higher education institutions need to survive in the rapidly changing and competitive environment in which they operate. They have to acquire and develop compliant survival instincts to the changing world. Among such instincts is the ability to respond to the general problems facing humanity and the needs of economic and cultural life, and to be more relevant in the context of specific problem. In the face of globalization of the economy, rapid technological advances, deteriorating economic situations, unstable political situations, and various scourges such as AIDS, many states and people are finding it difficult to survive and protect their identity.

Inability to survive and compete in the changing environment has been attributed to the rampant poverty among the people in developing countries. In an effort to overcome this human problem, higher education is increasingly perceived as one of the major source of answers. This is based on the perception that higher education is an instrument of developing the people, the society and the economy. This perception has led to a number of structural and functional changes in higher education in many countries, Uganda inclusive. Among these changes include policy changes to allow the operation of private higher education institutions along sides public institutions.

Today there are over 10 private universities and also the number of public universities has risen from one to four as shown in Tables 1 and 2. The number of privately

sponsored students in private and public universities has also gradually expanded. Old courses have been restructured to suit the students' interests and market demand; many new academic programmes have been introduced in the public and private universities as evidenced in the different university academic prospectus and academic registrar's reports and the many news papers programme advertisements.

Table 1: Expansion of private and public universities in Uganda 1987 - 2002

Year	1987	8801	1989	1990	1991	1992	1993	[994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002
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The Context

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The context in which private higher education is operating in Uganda cannot be divorced from the global, regional and international context in which it is called to fulfill its

mission. There are a number of factors that impact the environment in which private higher education has to operate, which impacts accessibility, funding and equitable distribution. Allow me to mention only two.

Globalization

This includes economic, political and social changes that are sweeping throughout all countries, Uganda inclusive. Higher education is no longer conceived solely in terms of national situations but internationally embracing all contexts. This poses one of the major challenges to private higher education institutions (SPHE 2003). There seem to be a growing trend for problems to become globalized in not only private university sector but also in public sector in this country. Private higher education institutions need to secure adequate funding and other resources to facilitate expansion in response to increased pressure for more and better higher education, seeking ways to resolve the quantity and quality dilemma, to cope with increased responsibilities of higher education in knowledge based society, to make full use of ICT, which are now the major drivers of change, (UNESCO 2003). In an effort to meet these global challenges, private higher education institutions in Uganda need to take steps to plan and direct their plans towards meeting these global challenges. This will automatically require them to make desirable adjustments in their institutional operational structures especially in areas concerning access and admission, organization of studies, curriculum content, course delivery, teaching learning methods, management practices, evaluation process and accountability. They need to adopt an entrepreneurial approach in search for resources, establishing profitable links with the world of work, setting up partnerships and consortia of institutions with a view to increase relevance and better respond to societal needs, and to assure quality and comparability of studies and qualifications within and between systems. Faced with challenges, private higher education in Uganda seem to be making remarkable moves to change, adapt and adjust under the guide of the National Council for Higher Education, though under numerous difficulties. A strategic plan for higher

The role of higher education as a key factor and major driving force for sustainable development in knowledge-intensive and information societies is fast growing in this country. To generate a functionally literate work force that can support the economy is one of the principle functions of higher education. Private higher education has to contribute to the solution of major national and international problems. These include removing inequalities, alleviating poverty and environmental degradation, improving health etc. It also plays an important role in building social cohesion and in laying the foundations of healthy civil societies, based on good governance and participatory democracy.

The implications for private higher education are that there is need for in-depth change in the nature and character of private higher education so that it becomes more qualitative and relevant to societies and also provide solutions to challenges of Ugandans. Due to the weak social economic base, access to higher education is largely by people from well to do families. Most institutions are around urban areas and rural areas are starved of the influence and impact of these institutions. One of the challenges government has is to interest private investors to set such institutions in a better evenly distributed manner.

Private institutions also need to diversify access mechanisms so as to accommodate diverse categories of students. Among such mechanisms include distance education programmes, weekend programmes, summer courses, e-learning driven programmes etc.

The Role of Private Higher Education in Uganda

Private higher education has played a very important role in development in the so called Tiger Countries such as Philippines, Japan, Republic of Korea and Thailand. Its development is strongly supported by a strong private sector. Countries in this region have taken important initiatives to create private sector as a means of easing growing pressures for students' access and the inability of governments to meet funding demands of public higher education.

Similarly private higher education in Uganda has assumed increasingly important role in meeting the growing demand for student access and specialized courses in particular fields such as ICT, management, business and education. The development of higher education has raised important policy issues for the government. The most important of these issues are about the role of the state in the provision of higher education, the relationship between private higher education institutions and government, and the quality of provision. Generally private higher education has required government increased responsibility, especially in providing legislative and policy frameworks for the establishment and operation of private higher education institutions and in effective quality assurance, monitoring and accreditation arrangements. Government has to recognize the need to assist in attracting private investment into higher education and in recognizing the need for private sectors to generate financial returns on investments. This can be done through a number of ways, such as government providing incentives, subsidies and tax benefits as inducements to private investment.

However private investment in higher education will not materialize in the scale and duration required without some guarantee of operational autonomy to respond to market demands and fair return to compensate for opportunity cost and market risks (UNESCO 2003).

Cost of Private Higher Education

We are all aware that running an institution of higher learning requires enormous resources in terms of costs. Paying salaries for staff, supporting the teaching learning process, administrative costs, research costs and infrastructure construction and maintenance are all financial obligations of private universities. These obligations sometimes have gone beyond the capacities of these institutions. Many of them are operating under difficulties as they struggle to meet both national and international demands. It has become a tradition that the sole source of funds is the students' tuition fees, thus leading to hiking of fees beyond the capacity of would be students. This has affected the rate of access.

Students' tuition fees should be considered in the light of the prevailing socio-economic status of the country. However one can argue that in country with a low social economic status where the GDP is low with consequent low wages and salaries, it would be unrealistic to charge economic rates, since this would tend to deprive the majority of the people from the benefit of higher education. Yet in this country, the virtues of a free market economy are preached and practiced. Private Higher Education is a business and a very expensive business. There is no cheap way of training a modern teacher, doctor or economist. There is no cheap way to recruit and retain quality staff so necessary for sustaining higher education, there is no cheap way to equip laboratories and lecture rooms with modern and reliable equipments. It would therefore be logical to expect that those who benefit directly from higher education should be expected to meet a reasonable proportion of the cost of their training. However, given the poverty levels of our people, there is a need to consider various schemes to meet the cost of running a private higher education institution.

Ernest N. Wright (1998) identified some of these schemes:

- a. Competitive full government scholarship.
- b. Partial grants-in-aid for students.
- c. Loan schemes for students involving a revolving fund.

Private Higher Education institutions in Uganda need to make substantive initiatives aiming at diversifying funding sources through a range of means including corporate style universities being operated by companies, universities owning corporations, charging tuition fees, income generating activities such as external research grants, commercial activities, revenues from investments and endowments and donations. They should try to be both suppliers of education services nationally and internationally as well as providers of higher education services. Adopting GATs initiative would be ideal. A part from increased income, these initiatives can be strong impetus to internationalization of curriculum and increased sensitivity of academic staff to labour market needs. Loan funds from agencies such as World Bank, E. A. Development Bank and other commercial

Banks can be another source of funding to private universities. The following model demonstrates possible funding of a private university through multiple sources.

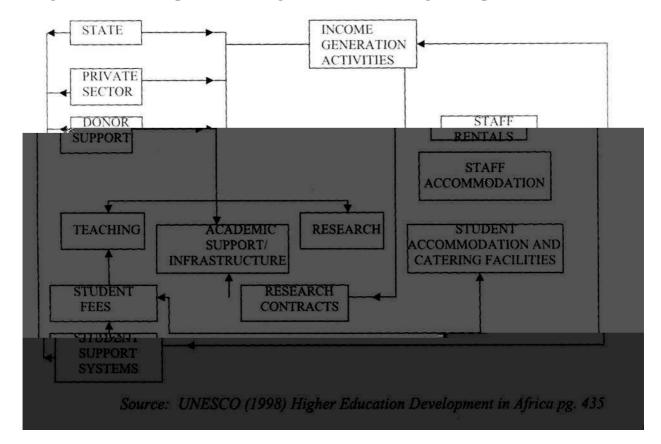


Fig. I Model of the possible funding of universities through multiple sources

Conclusion

The basic conclusion of this paper is that Uganda's private higher education institutions need to acquire complaint survival instincts by reducing their dependence on a sole source of funding by diversifying their funding mechanisms, turning themselves into suppliers and providers of quality relevant education, positioning themselves in strategic demographic areas, and diversifying mechanisms of access.