

# The European Commission perspective on higher education in Sub-Saharan Africa

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## 1. Introduction

First of all, I would like to offer my compliments to the organizers of this conference. I think they have taken the initiative at a well-chosen moment. We are now living in a time of great opportunities to address the problems of education - in particular higher education - in developing countries. I see a 'window of opportunity' for the higher education sector to promote its function as an engine of development. I will explain why in a short while.

Three years ago the situation was quite different. When a prestigious MBA school approached the European Commission with a request to do something special for African managers, we decided against this initiative. There was a lot of prejudice against higher education and its potential to promote development. I feel that at this moment there is a commitment to reverse this situation. There is an opportunity for countries and donors to show more clearly than ever the development potential of higher education. I also feel that international institutions like the World Bank and the European Union are going through a period of transition where their doctrine with respect to the development role of higher education is concerned. There is a need to build up a consistent perspective on the role of higher education in society. If this is not done, others will perhaps seize the opportunity and give priority to the basic education sector at the expense of higher education.

## 2. Higher education and development

Two questions are essential in this respect. The first is, what can be done to increase the quality of the higher education system and attune it to the needs of both developing and developed countries? What are the obstacles for increasing the quality and accessibility of the higher education system? I would argue that we need a holistic approach. I

mean by this an integrated strategy in the sense that higher education, and education in general, should be placed within the wider context of development. Looking at theoretical approaches, one can say that in the 1960s the main problem for development was a lack of physical capital. After that we became aware that physical capital was not a sufficient condition to generate development. It was necessary to have skilled people for working with the equipment and machines. We began to speak of *human capital*. And after becoming aware of that, we realized that development is also a matter of *institutions*, i.e. rules of conduct, norms and attitudes, or culture if you like. In short, we need money for machinery and trained people, but we also need ideas and the capacity to interpret information from the outside world and propose something new or different. That is why the European Union is putting men and women at the centre of the development process. This means people who are willing to take risks and test new ideas and ways of doing things. In short, people who are capable of doing innovative things.

Education is more than training people. It is preparing them to take advantage of information from outside, signals or knowledge on which they can act and on the basis of which they can produce new products or new services. It is interesting to see that the adaptation of outside information has led to successful outcomes in the Asian continent. In Africa, it has been less successful. People are less prepared to accomplish these tasks. The economist Romer made a comparative study of Zimbabwe and Taiwan at the beginning of the industrialization process in the textile industry. He came to the conclusion that in Taiwan, foreign investment was the source of new production and economic growth. In Zimbabwe, foreign investment created companies but these companies were unable to create spin-offs. There were no possibilities to duplicate the production processes, because there were no people able to understand the business. This means that if there is no system or culture to train skilled people, there is no possibility for people to become autonomous in terms of controlling and creating their own development and well-being. Therefore, schooling is the key to development.

There are two risks involved in this. First, schooling may produce individuals that are not in tune with reality in their country. The education system must be in contact with reality, otherwise it will

generate individuals that are frustrated or graduates who in due time will leave their country (the *brain drain* problem). Again, in combating this, the holistic approach is the best option. We need to look at how we approach the needs of the country when we invest in the education system. We need to look at what is necessary in terms of putting the country on track towards generating ideas and individuals with the means to contribute to production in the long term. Therefore, educational institutions are necessary, not just to train able people, but also to prepare the policies that are necessary for development. Universities should not only be centres of excellence, but also centres which reflect on the needs of the country. If universities are not able to do this, nobody will be.

The second problem relates to the risk of inconsistency between different levels of the education system. The different parts of the system, from primary schools to higher education institutions, are dependent on each other and should be interrelated. It is necessary to create an awareness of this interdependency, as an answer to non-governmental organizations (such as Oxfam) which are mainly concerned with basic education (and perhaps rightly so). The different parts of the education system should not conflict, but converge. For instance, educators in secondary schools will have to be able to train people to go on to university if they want to.

Another side of the inconsistency problem may arise from donors who try to transpose their policies and beliefs on recipient countries without much concern for how consistent they are with the countries' own needs. We should abandon this approach in favour of one based on local priorities. We should also avoid different donors making different choices on the basis of different paradigms, which runs the risk of them proposing inconsistent models or even conflicting ones. We should realize that the public administration in recipient countries is frequently weak and unable to resolve conflicting interests or guarantee compatible models. Hopefully, this is now something of the past.

### **3. The sectoral approach**

Right now, the World Bank is pushing for a *sectoral* policy or approach in its development policies. This means that it is promoting

the ideal of giving aid to countries that show the potential to formulate

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relationship between development and the education system at its different levels.

#### **4. The potential of ICT**

The final window of opportunity is provided by information and communications technology (ICT). ICT gives those lagging behind the chance to leapfrog by making it possible to learn more quickly; the best professors and knowledge can be mobilized for the people and universities in the less developed countries. However, again we have to be aware of the risks. There is a danger of preparing students for an imaginary world, a world unrelated to local reality. This may create pupils and students who are not useful for their own countries or are tempted to leave their countries after graduation. ICT is not a solution, it is an instrument. The solution is a policy that needs to be established and implemented at country level, on the basis of a strategic, coherent vision of what is needed by the country in terms of investment and support. The problem is to learn to master the instrument ICT to achieve this goal. The African Virtual University (see the contribution to this conference by Ruth Kagia), created by the World Bank, is an important step. The European Commission is associated with this initiative and hopes to expand its association. However, it will first have to overcome a certain amount of reluctance. There must be guarantees that this instrument is in tune with the needs of the country in question. If not, we will just be preparing new researchers in, for example, Mozambique who, once they have obtained a degree, will emigrate to Portugal, or to the United States to go to universities like MIT. ICT is having a strong impact on our society and its social fabric. The danger is that it may create expectations (e.g. with respect to consumption, well-being, careers) well beyond the possibilities and capabilities of countries or individuals. Therefore, again, ICT promotion is not a goal, it is an instrument which must be used in the right way.

#### **5. Final reflections**

My final reflection is on the theme of the conference: the funding of higher education. I would like to address the issues of tuition fees, access and demand-driven funding. First, the introduction of tuition

fees does not necessarily conflict with the interests of students. It may actually give them more power. If they pay a share of the cost of their education, students will be regarded as customers, who are entitled to question the content and quality of the programme they take. To counterbalance the negative effects of tuition fees on access, governments could provide support to students. However, in pursuing a policy of guaranteeing equal opportunities for all, governments have to beware that they do not subsidize students from rich families, even though the relationship between students and their families are not the same everywhere.

Funding higher education partly on the basis of (student) demand, may not be an optimal solution. It may lead to conflicts between a country's short and long-term interests, for example, through the overrepresentation of students in the social sciences and humanities. On the same note, where research or the training of researchers is concerned, governments and donors will have to prevent a situation in which universities produce research results or researchers that are not useful for their own country.

At the end of this presentation, I would like to say that the European Commission at the moment is discussing a new mandate. In its policy towards developing countries the Commission will place a strong emphasis on ownership and a holistic approach towards educational policies. Moreover, it seeks to engage the local actors - not just the state - in discussions about development policy. In conclusion, I would argue that there is currently a window of opportunity for shaping a new approach to supporting higher education in Sub-Saharan Africa and putting higher education at the top of the development agenda. This opportunity will not last forever and we have to seize it quickly. In arguing for a holistic approach, I stressed a broadening of the scope of higher education support. The financing of higher education will have to fit into a wider overall strategy. This means that there is a need for a sectoral (i.e. integrated) approach to policies for educational support.

Another conclusion - or rather recommendation - that may be put forward concerns the need for institutional diversification. The potential of the new information and communications technology is enormously important for Sub-Saharan Africa, provided it can be attuned adequately to the needs of the countries concerned. Another

aspect of diversification is the emergence of private institutions of higher education. Private institutions may perhaps be able to cater for part of the unmet demand for higher education. A last element of diversification concerns the resources of the sector; additional resources may be found in tuition fees.

Reviewing the possibilities for using the above-mentioned instruments and approaches for the funding of higher education in developing countries, and Sub-Saharan Africa in particular, I would argue that there is a great opportunity to give higher education the priority it deserves in contributing to the development of countries and their people.