

The State of Higher Education in Africa

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Higher education in Africa has generally been neglected for several decades. Previously it was only accessible by a chosen few, in most cases individuals who were economically privileged and could therefore afford to attend good primary and secondary schools offering quality education hence were able to perform well in university or college entry examinations. On the contrary, the economically disadvantaged individuals could not access higher education given their poor educational background.

However, having recognized the role of higher education towards meeting national, social and economic development goals, recent years have seen renewed commitment to higher education by most African governments. This is because higher education institutions could act as knowledge creating entities as well as think tanks for enhancing future innovations in science and technology. Making higher education more accessible and equitable especially by expanding opportunities for marginalized groups remains a challenge in many African countries. Nevertheless some governments have attempted to put into place some affirmative measures to fulfill this need. For example in Uganda, in order to enable more female students gain admission into public universities and get more popular and highly competitive courses, female applicants are given an additional 1.5 points leverage and sometimes some of the admission requirements may be waived.

The future of higher education in Africa seems to be brighter given that students' enrollment is steadily rising and more individuals are opting to undertake higher education. Currently there are more than 4 million students attending higher education in Africa (World Bank 2008). Although, this figure appears to be

high, students attending higher education in Africa are relatively very few compared to other developing regions such as Asia and Latin America. Students' completion rates are also low due to the fact that many students drop out of college following their failure to pay all the required institutional costs and tuition fees.

Currently, many higher education institutions are moving towards offering the market driven/demand curricula and courses such as computer science and information technology (ICT), environmental studies, peace and conflict resolution, and entrepreneurship (Jacob, Nsubuga and Mugimu 2009). This is to attract more students and thus more revenue needed to meet their day-to-day operation costs.

Traditionally, African governments have wholly financed higher education, however due to over stretched budgets; this approach has become financially unviable. Following the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) recommendations, African governments were advised to reduce their national budgets on higher education and to constitute cost-sharing policies. This meant that governments would partly sponsor a few students and the rest become self-sponsored. Those who can particularly afford to pay the required costs are given the opportunity to access higher education.

In recent years, we have also seen rapid expansion of the private sector in higher education. There are more than 450 private universities and colleges in Africa today (World Bank 2008). Despite this progress in the sector, the majority of potential students who would wish to access higher education cannot do so; at least for many years to come, mainly because most of them find institutional costs and tuitions fees very high and prohibitive.

Despite the advancement in higher education in Africa, it still faces many challenges such as poor infra-

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structure, lack of funding, shortage of human resources which is compounded by brain drain and the HIV/AIDS epidemic, outdated curricula, poor ICT infrastructure, and poor library facilities among others.

Political instability in the region has undermined economic and social growth in most of the African countries. It is therefore not surprising that the majority of African nationals who are experts in highly specialized fields live outside Africa in more developed countries. Unfortunately, the current political environments and economic policies in most African countries do not favor or encourage African nationals and intellectuals/experts to return home from the diaspora.

The future of higher education in Africa will depend on, first, the ability of African governments, their partners and development agencies, establishing economic policies that could encourage distinguished African nationals and intellectuals living in the diaspora to return and make their contribution to Africa. The expertise and knowledge of those individuals returning home will boost the development of African higher education by opening networking opportunities, not only in research and publication but also consolidating Africa's ability to use ICT and advancing technology. Second, a renewed focus on ensuring the relevance of curricula to meet the current realities and needs of Africa is critical, otherwise we will continue to see many more graduates without employment. It is evident that many developing economies such as India, Malaysia, and China earn billions of US dollars because their nationals share expertise, knowledge, and skills through job outsourcing schemes with industrialized nations.

Without a strong foundation in higher education, Africa will lag behind the rest of world in all important aspects of life such as the economy, technology, quality of life, etcetera. Therefore, the reality is that Africa as a region cannot afford to neglect higher education any more (Bloom, Canning and Chan 2005). Damtew Teferra (2009) indicated that

A new era has dawned for higher education in Africa. The pledges made, the good will shared, and the commitment expected coming out of the WCHE are indicative of the new bright period for the subsec-

tor. . . . As the players and the issues on the African higher education landscape continue to diversify, it is vital that the regionally and internationally relevant bodies—such as the Association of African Universities (AAU), the Association for the Development of Education in Africa (ADEA), the African Union, UNESCO, the African Development Bank, and the World Bank, among others—play an active and visible role in shaping the new era of higher education in the region. It is an opportune time for these institutions to come together to collectively define the future and share the roadmap for achieving key objectives with all the stakeholders—the old and the new.

The recent World Conference on Higher Education held in August 2009 brings new hope for higher education in Africa. Indeed, all these stakeholders are challenged to meet their commitment toward supporting and promoting higher education in Africa, especially in ensuring that it becomes responsive to the African social, economic, and political realities and problems.

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