

Government and Governance Reforms in Higher Education in Africa

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Higher education was considered a “public good” worthy of public support in Africa, during the first decades of independence, and most countries adopted a state-funded and heavily subsidized model for university expansion. With the fiscal crisis of the 1980s, public funding declined and universities fell into a state of disrepair, leading to a deterioration of physical facilities—a decline in student enrollment and teaching standards and a depletion of research capacities. Reforms to revive the sector became necessary and unavoidable.

Most reforms redefined the role of the state in higher education development and in the governance and management of institutions. The institutional governance moved from a “state-control” to a “state-supervision” model, leading to increased institutional autonomy, on the one hand, and

reliance on market tools of incentives and accountability mechanisms to steer institutions toward policy goals on the other. Some of these reforms helped expand the system, revitalize the sector, and improve institutional governance.

STATE AND GOVERNANCE IN AFRICA

Higher education in Africa, like in the West, was centered on institutions funded and managed by the state. Hence, state control was the most-common pattern of university governance that evolved in Africa. Heads of state, serving as chancellors of universities, became common in some countries. Realizing the limitations of relying on state funding, countries in Africa introduced several reforms to develop financing alternatives to expand the system and reforms to govern and manage institutions more efficiently and effectively.

These reforms in higher education reduced state control on institutions, made them autonomous, and moved them closer to markets. The widespread privatization of public institutions and proliferation of private institutions over the past two decades are a reflection of this trend. Resultantly, a good share of additional enrollment in Africa has taken place in the nonstate-funded segment of public institutions (private students) or in private institutions.

Many countries created buffer bodies to support and implement policy, allocate resources, monitor performance, and ensure accountability. National Councils of Higher Education or their equivalents were established in most Anglophone African countries. The more-common practice among Francophone countries has been to create separate ministries of higher education. This trend is changing and higher education councils are being established in some of the Francophone countries. However, it seems that they mostly play an advisory role and, perhaps, a less-substantive role in policy formulation and its implementation than their counterparts in the anglophone countries.

INSTITUTIONAL AUTONOMY AND NEW GOVERNANCE

Institutional autonomy is seen as a mediating position between state control and market operations. Autonomy has helped universities to maintain the image of public institutions, while enforcing market principles in the operations. Autonomy expects institutions to set priorities, evolve strategies, develop study programs and courses, select institutional leaders, recruit staff, diversify funding sources, decide on internal resource allocation criteria, and allocate resources accordingly.

The granting of autonomy was accompanied by new structures of governance and accountability measures at the institutional level. Governing

boards were constituted to oversee the overall functioning of an institution. They take policy decisions including those related to staff recruitment, appointment of heads of institutions, and finances. The governing boards in Francophone countries are very often composed mostly of internal members, while those of Anglophone countries have larger numbers of external members, at times including international experts. In countries, such as Kenya, there are separate management boards at the institutional and school levels.

The new sets of accountability measures included strategic plans, result-based management, performance contracts, performance indicators, monitoring and evaluation reports, institutional audits, and external and internal, quality-assurance mechanisms. National accreditation agencies have become common in many countries and internal, quality-assurance units are being established in several institutions.

GOVERNANCE REFORMS AND THEIR EFFECTS

The reforms, no doubt, helped universities to design their own survival strategies, when they were in a state disrepair. Privatization measures—cost recovery and income-generating activities—helped many universities in Africa survive in the 1990s and prosper in the 2000s. For example, the reforms initially helped Makerere University to move “back from the brink” and later helped

working and living conditions, increase enrollment, improve staff salaries, arrest staff depletion, improve the market relevance of courses, and reduce reliance on state funds.

Studies conducted by the International Institute for Educational Planning show that higher education governance reforms in Africa helped institutions to reduce their reliance on the government and to focus on serving market and local requirements. The reforms also helped to diversify the resource base and decentralize internal resource allocations. In countries such as Ethiopia, the line-item, budget-based resource transfer has been replaced by block grants; public universities in Ghana are expected to generate 30 percent of their budgetary requirements; and Nigeria has introduced competitive research funding. Performance monitoring increased research outputs in South Africa and improved operational efficiency in Ghana, while performance contracts improved accountability in Kenya.

The reforms made public institutions more market oriented in their approach and result driven in their operations. It seems the reforms contributed to a widening of inequalities in access to higher education and subsequently to the employment market. The market processes favor those who have the capacity to pay and seem less friendly to equity concerns. Since institutional pressures to expand stem more from financial rather than educational

considerations, the market orientation seems to have promoted entrepreneurialism in universities and academic capitalism in higher education.

Many of the reforms are supported by the development partners. It seems that the same reforms that helped reduce reliance on national governments have increased reliance on external agencies. The implications of the changing relationships between the government, institutions, and external agencies need closer examination, especially in the context of globalization.

CONCLUSION

The reforms introduced in the 1990s helped higher education institutions in Africa survive, systems expand, and the region experienced the highest, global-growth rates in higher education in the 2000s. The market orientation of the reforms has, no doubt, destabilized the traditional ways of organizing university activities and governing institutions. After an initial inertia, institutions in Africa showed resilience and became part of the change process.

The reforms centered on autonomy and market orientation have raised issues related to leadership. The leadership at the institutional level is challenged to find an appropriate balance between expansion and quality improvement, between academic priorities and financial considerations, between efficiency and equity concerns, and between local relevance, global standards and rankings,

among others. The transfer of power and authority to institutions is not always necessarily accompanied by measures to reinforce leadership capacities—to make governance efficient and institutions more effective.

The fast expansion of the system, the proliferation of providers, and a diversification of study programs pose challenges to govern and manage the system. The entry of foreign providers and the flow of teachers, students, and study programs within and outside the region necessitate focused attention on harmonization, investment in quality, and the establishment of global standards. These challenges may not be effectively addressed by the market forces, since they require policies based more on long-term perspectives than on short-term financial considerations. Therefore, the need is not to move away from the state but to engage the state more actively to develop a futuristic perspective, a framework for operation, and for regulating the system than for funding, controlling, and managing the institutions.