

With tertiary participation now more than 50 percent in countries with above average per capita incomes, a tipping point has been reached. Higher education has become an essential passport to full-time work and effective social status. It has become increasingly difficult for middle-class families (and in some countries, for any families) to stay outside the higher education system. There is often strong resistance to tuition increases, yet in their hearts people know they have to enroll their student-age children, even if they have to pay much of the cost themselves. The round of funding reductions in the recession of 2008 did not trigger a decline in participation as many feared: in fact the worldwide growth of participation has never been stronger. While there are some continuing instances of demand elasticity, overall, many governments are learning that they can cut back their subsidies for higher education and force tuition rises, without paying a political price, and without reducing participation in the long run. This can only mean “we ain’t seen nothing yet” and state funding will fall much further. What then happens to the public character of higher education? The public mission has always rested on the funding role of the state. Without a strong state presence is it realistic to expect institutions alone to sustain quality and social mobility?

In high participation systems the question shifts from *access?* to *access to what?* All else equal, a major shift to private costs is associated with growing stratification of quality of provision, and greater inequality of opportunity, with the upper middle class concentrated in leading institutions. Some would say we are there already, but the more important point is that as the state withdraws, the quality of mass public education collapses and it can no longer function as a springboard for mobility. Private for-profits have low completion rates and their credentials lack zing in the labor markets. In two thirds of countries, economic inequalities are increasing. If higher education worsens social stratification and blocks social empowerment, it has lost its moral foundation in the common good. It becomes an obstacle to be removed. Is this where we are heading? ■

The Challenge Facing Chinese Higher Education in the Next Two Decades

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One of the most striking aspects of higher education in the past 20 years is the rapid expansion of enrollment. In 1995, the world total enrollment was 79 million with 5.2 million in China. In 2012, it was 196 million and 32.6 million respectively, 2.5 times of 1995 for the world, 6.2 times for China. China is the home to the world’s fastest-growing higher education.

However, the state appropriation and quality inputs could not keep up with the quantitative expansion, which resulted in large class size, crowded classrooms and labs, decreased teaching equipment and library books per student, and lowered quality of teaching. Since many universities enlarged enrollment in low-cost programs—such as literature and history, instead of engineering technologies and sciences—it made the structure of graduates by expertise mismatch the labor market needs. Many graduates had difficulties to find jobs. The Chinese Ministry of Education came to realize the problems of overspeeded expansion of higher education and issued a document in 2012, trying to stabilize the size of enrollment. However, with ever-increasing private and social demands for higher education, the expansion momentum was still forceful. In 2013, the total enrollment increased to 34.5 million. It is estimated that the total enrollment will exceed 40 million by 2020. Chinese higher education is currently characterized as “big but not strong.”

Thus, the challenge for the coming 20 years of Chinese higher education is to balance the quantitative development and qualitative improvement and to make Chinese higher education “big and strong.” This will be a quite difficult task. On one hand, China has to keep a certain growing rate to meet the huge unmet demand; on the other hand, it has to adjust the higher education structure and improve the quality, to make graduates well fit in the human resource needs of the changing economic situation. Many policy measures will have to be taken. First, expansion of enrollment has to slow down to make the number of graduates be absorbed by the economy.

This issue was not seriously taken into account, before. For example, in the coming summer of 2015, China will have 7.5 million higher education graduates, while



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the economy is slowing down; thus, employment of these graduates will become more challenging. Second, high priority has to be attached to raising higher education quality. This needs more quality inputs including more state appropriation, strengthening faculty development, enhancing accreditation, and total quality management and evaluation programs. Third, the institutional isomorphism has to be changed through adjusting the structure of higher education, according to labor market demand by appropriately differentiating the institutions into different levels and different types, with each serving different human resources needs of the society. Fourth, for information technologies they should widely share the high-quality educational resources, such as making on-line courseware of the best teachers for nationwide use. Fifth, promote international exchanges and cooperation, and assimilate high-quality programs, such as Shanghai New York University. ■

The Challenge of Graduate Unemployment in Africa

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Sub-Saharan Africa is the region with the lowest higher education enrollment—barely 8 percent. Conscious of the importance of higher education for socioeconomic development and in response to the ever-increasing demand for higher education, African countries have made huge efforts—in spite of many constraints and challenges—in increasing access to higher education. Enrollment in most countries has increased by several folds. The outcome was as expected—the greater output of graduates. Perhaps not expected was the increasing unemployment of these graduates, and this is true for almost every African country. In some countries, the unemployment figure is alarming. The social and political consequences of large unemployment, especially among the educated youth, can be serious, as evidenced by the 2011 “Arab spring” in North Africa.

The causes of graduate unemployment are known. First, in concentrating on increasing access—but with inadequate financial, physical, and human resources—public universities have sacrificed quality for quantity. This has had a direct impact on the qualifications awarded. But more than good qualifications, employers look for attributes and competencies referred to as “soft skills”—these are quasi-

inexistent in the graduates. Also, the linkages between the university and the community—business and industry, public bodies, and the rural areas—are poor, and the university in many ways is cut off from the world of work.

But not all the causes can be laid at the doorstep of institutions. Other stakeholders have an equal share of responsibility. The private sector, which is fast becoming the main employer of graduates, must assist by providing short student internships, graduate training, soft-skills training and even funding as part of its social responsibility. The largest private companies in Africa are foreign owned and they must give priority to employing locally trained graduates.

Most countries also lack a differentiated higher education system that produces a diversified workforce in response to Africa’s development priorities. African governments have, often for political reasons, replicated existing institutions or upgraded polytechnics and postsecondary colleges to universities, basically creating “more of the same” institutions. Yet, the labor market demand is more for lower-level, practically trained diploma holders than for academically-qualified degree holders.

Africa is currently the fastest growing region in the world, both economically and demographically. It has the world’s youngest population, with huge expectations for education. The region needs highly skilled human capital for its sustained economic growth, so it must continue to expand its higher education sector. But development cannot be achieved by merely producing large numbers of graduates; it must be ensured that they are productively employed. Africa therefore needs to resolve its major challenge of graduate unemployment. What is needed in each African country is a concerted, well-defined strategy and action plan, at both national and institutional level. This strategy should also be motivated by reliable and up-to-date statistical data, which are severely lacking at present, to create a vibrant higher education sector can play its meaningful role in enabling Africa to overcome its development challenges and become a major pole of global growth. ■



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