

Innovations in African Higher Education: The ADEA Report

Note from William Saint of the World Bank: The principal reference document at the recent Association for the Development of Education in Africa's Biennial Conference in South Africa was a "Prospective, Stock-taking Review of Education in Africa," which synthesized the findings of some 30 different cases studies of successful educational innovation and change in Africa during the 1990s. I recommend this document as a useful guide to "interventions that work." The portion of this paper that addresses higher education is reproduced below. For further information concerning ADEA's higher education working group, please contact William Saint, Principal Education Specialist, Africa Region, The World Bank, 1818 H Street, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20433, USA Fax: (202) 473-8065.

Higher Education Reform

The ADEA Working Group on Higher Education reports on three successful efforts in higher education reform. The first focuses on institutional reforms within a single university in Mozambique. The second analyzes systemwide higher education reform as introduced by the government of Cameroon during the 1990s. The third describes an innovation in regional cooperation for graduate training and research.

The institutional reforms concern the strategic planning experiences of the Eduardo Mondlane University in Mozambique. Two intensive planning cycles are reported. The first one began in 1990 when it became clear that the university needed to adapt to the changing economic and political scenario associated with movements away from marxism and affiliated support from the former Eastern bloc. The need to solicit funds and support from external partners was evident. The second cycle began in 1996–97—when Mozambique and its major public university were adapting to the impacts of democracy, market competition, and globalization—whereas the first effort was that of a small number of senior notables, the second one was generated using a participatory methodology deemed to be more effective in involving the university in the process of change.

This case study is basically an assessment of the participatory process of the second planning cycle in comparison with the first. It comes to the following conclusions: Participatory planning processes, especially in a context where democracy is a relatively recent innovation (as in Mozambique), tend to be long and painstaking. Participatory planning must involve the commitment of as many members of the university as possible. It is important to listen to everyone, and to be seen as listening. An efficient information system is helpful. Indeed, one of senior management's roles should be to provide basic information and play a lead role in stimulating the debate. Different groups will need to participate in different ways. This must be taken into account when planning the process.

Planning cannot be evaluated on documentary evidence alone. One of its most important outcomes is its fostering of debate on major issues. Divergence and conflict are a normal component of strategic planning. It is not a simple technocratic exercise; one of its goals is to catalyze debate. Universities are built upon the premise of free discussion and debate of ideas. It is therefore incumbent for the planners to take this into account when preparing the planning process. Participatory planning has a positive impact.

Another contribution for the Working Group on Higher Education concerns the reform of higher education in Cameroon. This reform was initiated in 1993 as a response to severe overcrowding at the University of Yaounde, where enrollments increased from 9,000 in 1977 to 45,000 in 1991. Alongside this was the relative stagnation of the infrastructure and a teacher-student ratio of 1/54 in 1991. The state treasury was likewise depleted, which led to late and irregular payment of student stipends and staff salaries (in 1991 they consumed 89 percent of the university budget) and to a low execution rate for the university budget. Student welfare appeared to have surpassed teaching and research as the university's priority. Success rates were low (about 30 percent) and graduate unemployment was on the rise. As a result, the university community lost motivation and became demoralized.

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The goals of the 1993 reforms were the decongestion of the University of Yaounde and the professionalization of university studies. The first aim was addressed by the establishment of six full-fledged universities throughout Cameroon. Apart from solving the space problems in Yaounde, the expanded geographical distribution made higher education more accessible to students in underserved regions of the country. Professionalization was pursued through quality improvement measures and greater university autonomy. A two-semester course credit system was introduced. Universities were required to link their programs to local labor market needs. The bursary system was eliminated, thereby increasing the budget for research, infrastructure, and teaching, and student registration fees were increased significantly. The reforms produced results. Data for the 1995/96 academic year show improvements in success rates (up to 70 percent for one of the universities) and reduced teacher/student ratios.

The reforms, however, have also seen setbacks, such

as resistance to financial participation on the part of parents and students, and reduced funding by the state. Despite new revenue generated by the registration fees and the elimination of bursaries, universities still rely on declining government support for around 70 percent of their budget. The creation of new universities has also required additional personnel. This has led to a decrease in overall staff quality. Strategic planning and quality control are still almost nonexistent. The conclusion drawn from the higher education reform experience in Cameroon is that the success of such reforms depends on full political and societal support, the financial sustainability of universities, and a body of experienced and devoted managers.

The ADEA Working Group on Higher Education also reports on a research capacity building network for Eastern and Southern Africa aimed at achieving human resource development through sustainable capacity building in science, engineering, and the humanities. Staff development fellowships for research and for advanced degrees at the participating universities are the principal strategies used. The program is known as the University Science, Humanities and Engineering Partnership in Africa. It is a multipartnership experience, involving the University of Cape Town (UCT), which provided much of the management and content for this experience; the Association of African Universities, which provided the vision and the framework for cooperation and introduced UCT to its counterparts in Africa; participating universities in Uganda, Kenya, Tanzania, Zambia, Zimbabwe, and Botswana; and external financing partners. The approach used is a “sandwich model,” in which the fellowship holders alternate between the partner universities (their home university and, in most cases, UCT, where they pursue their studies). Fellowships allow for travel and subsistence for up to 20 months and make provision for supervisor travel, research expenses, and relevant equipment.

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Achievements to date are: 36 full-degree fellowships have been awarded, 10 of which have gone to women; two Ph.D.s and 2 master’s degrees have been completed. Over 40 supervisors have visited partner institutions. These visits are associated with lectures, external examinations, and research cooperation. This experience demonstrates the effectiveness of a network based on a common needs assessment, the enthusiasm of all participants, and an adequate

management capacity. This has helped to promote research collaboration among African researchers and has broken down some of the historical barriers between South Africa and the rest of the continent. The sharing of regional resources yielding economies of scale has taken place. A network of African researchers capable of addressing the developmental requirements of Sub-Saharan Africa has been established.

The following key success factors are identified in the case study: The importance of consultation . . . [and] the development of personal relationships at an early stage... played a role. These consultations led to general agreements on the objectives of the program, which in turn led to shared expectations. Each partner expressed specific needs and expectations. UCT, for example, stressed its untapped capacity to receive additional post-graduate students, and its belief in the importance of having students from other parts of Africa to serve as role models within the changing South African context. Other partner universities stressed their staff development and capacity building needs, as well as their desire to develop continental research relationships. Effective management of the process included early institutional buy-in at the highest level from all partners and flexibility (including budgetary) so that each fellowship could be tailor-made to the individuals concerned. Enthusiasm was important as a motivating factor. There was a conscious effort made to develop a network beyond the individual fellowship holders. Linkages were established between universities, departments, and supervisors. These have led to spin-offs, particularly involving supervisors, such as the appointment of external examiners and invitations to lecture or deliver seminars. Successful networking occurred simultaneously at three levels: the university senior management level; the departmental level; and the level of individual fellows. The focus on local research projects, the provision of suitable equipment, the emphasis on longer-term research cooperation, and the ability to raise funds independently for future research were all factors.

Problems encountered included the following: communication was difficult (whether by post, fax, e-mail, or telephone), and this affected communications between Cape Town and the partner universities, as well as between the fellows and their supervisors. One outcome of this was that program administration was much more costly than anticipated. There were difficulties related to the lack of clearly defined and delineated roles within the joint supervisor system. The duties of the supervisors and the nature of their relationships were never adequately addressed within the project. Imbalances generated by the project were somewhat problematic. For some, living in Cape Town on their home university’s salary was quite difficult. The equipment received by the fellows also created some conflict between them and their more senior colleagues. ■