

## **Higher Education for Development in Rwanda**

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Perhaps more than any other African government, the government of Rwanda has focused on higher education, as a core component of its national development strategy. In the face of donor pressure to prioritize primary education, Rwanda has championed the importance of higher education as a catalyst for development. In many ways, Rwanda is a unique case, given its small size, land-locked location, and recent tragic history. However, the Rwandan experience offers valuable insights into the enormous potential—and the significant challenges—that face countries intending to build higher education capacity, to stimulate economic development.

In 2000, the Rwandan government issued its blueprint development strategy for the country, known as *Vision 2020*. Chief among the priorities in the plan was the need to develop Rwanda's human capacity to transform the

country into a knowledge-based economy, capable of competing on the international economic stage. The strategy elaborated the need for a skilled workforce—trained in disciplines such as information technology, engineering, and management. Since the late 1990s, Rwanda has spent a higher proportion of its education budget on higher education than almost any other country in sub-Saharan Africa. This unprecedented financial support for higher education has led to a dramatic expansion in the sector, both in terms of student enrollment and the number of institutions. With an annual growth rate of approximately 13 percent, higher education is one of the most rapidly expanding sectors in the country.

This dynamic context presents a unique opportunity for Rwanda's higher education sector, to demonstrate the critical role that universities can play in national development efforts. However, the government's vision can only be achieved if Rwanda's universities are able to provide an educational experience of sufficient quality to their students. This article will outline some of the recent successes of Rwanda's higher education sector and highlight some significant challenges for quality, which continue to hinder Rwanda's public universities. Although a significant private higher education market occurs in Rwanda, public universities receive the vast majority of government funding.

#### **A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF RWANDAN HIGHER EDUCATION**

Rwanda's higher education system currently consists of 29 institutions (17 public and 12 private). An independent government agency, the Higher Education Council, was established in 2007 and is housed within the Ministry of Education. Since the formation of the Higher Education Council, the sector has changed

dramatically, as new institutions have been established and new government policies have altered university admissions policies, the structure of the academic calendar, and student funding programs.

### **SIGNIFICANT SUCCESSES**

In the past 10 years, higher education in Rwanda has achieved a number of impressive successes. Chief among these is the rapid growth of the sector. In 2011, 73,674 students were enrolled at Rwanda's universities. Although still only 2 percent of the eligible population, enrollment has risen exponentially in recent years. On average, student enrollments have risen by 20 to 25 percent a year since 1995.

At the same time, Rwanda's universities have made a number of improvements to their curricular offerings and infrastructure. The Higher Education Council has also formalized the mechanisms for protecting Rwandan students from potentially bogus institutions, by establishing national accreditation and audit policies.

### **SIGNIFICANT CHALLENGES**

Despite the impressive achievements of the sector, Rwanda's universities continue to face serious obstacles, many with a significant impact on the quality of university education in Rwanda.

Although public universities receive considerable governmental funding, in comparison with other countries in the region, adequate funding remains an issue for universities, particularly following a 2010 decision to reduce state funding to university budgets, by 25 percent, to redirect funding to vocational

training. As a result of the cuts, universities are now expected to generate income—to support their activities. Most have opted to do so through increased tuition fees, admission of larger numbers of private students (who pay higher fees), or the establishment of consultancy arrangements.

Institutions also face a critical shortage of committed faculty. The growing number of private universities has increased demand for faculty positions. As the supply of academic staff has not increased at the same rate, this expansion has resulted in a growing trend for academic staff to hold part-time jobs at multiple institutions. In addition to part-time teaching, some staff members also conduct consultancies with international organizations—to supplement their largely inadequate salaries. Such faculty's overcommitment inevitably affects the quality of education at the public universities, while also diminishing any potential of increasing research output or graduate programs.

Compounding these challenges, universities have needed to react to a dramatic change in Rwanda's national language of instruction. As a result of its colonial legacy, Rwanda's education institutions used French from the time of independence until the mid-1990s. In 1996, a bilingual education system was introduced, under which universities were required to offer instruction in both French and English. In 2008, the Rwandan government announced that, effective in 2010, English would be the sole language of instruction in Rwanda, at all education levels. University students now study entirely in English. Although the change in language of instruction is supported by many, due to the potential benefits of employment prospects for graduates, the decision resulted in enormous consequences for students currently enrolled in university. As the majority of current university students used French throughout primary and

secondary school, many struggle to follow lectures and read notes in English, raising concerns about their comprehension and retention of information.

Furthermore, despite 15 years of support for higher education in Rwanda, students appear to be graduating without many of the skills required by the labor market. A recent *National Skills Survey* published by the Higher Education Council suggests that graduates lack critical competencies—including communications, technical, and problem-solving skills. Although increasing student access is a positive development, university education could be argued as of questionable value, unless it results in the development of skills that graduates need to use once they enter the workforce.

#### **MOVING FORWARD**

The government is working to address a number of the infrastructural and financial challenges facing universities, by improving efficiency and investing in research facilities and information and communications technology. However, many of these changes cannot improve the *academic* quality of Rwanda's public universities. Rather, increased attention must be paid to what is or is not working in terms of *student learning*—particularly related to the unique cultural, social, and economic situation of Rwanda—to truly revitalize the sector.

Much has been invested in, and much is rightly expected out of Rwanda's universities. The urgent and critical need of the day is for Rwanda's universities to seek ways to significantly improve the quality of the academic experience for their students, in order to secure a globally competitive, innovative, and creative workforce for the country's future development.