

Abstract

The need to respond to past unaddressed educational issues and new realities such as equity, quality and relevance, employability, and digitalization is becoming a component of national development strategies and policy reforms of the tertiary education sector across Africa. This article explores the need to learn from past weaknesses and understand the nature of evolving demands, which is key to readying the African higher education system for a challenging and complex future.

Responding to the evolving tertiary education needs of the youth will take a Herculean effort from governments, institutions, and other stakeholders.

Rethinking Tertiary Education in Africa: Policy Reform and Implementation

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Africa has exhibited remarkable economic growth over the past decade and half, with half of the fastest growing economies located in the continent. However, this growth has not translated into enough employment for the soaring youth population. Creating jobs for the 10–12 million youth leaving the various levels of the education system has become a strenuous task for many African countries.

A Need to Focus on Skills and Job Creation

Unlike in the past, it takes years for young graduates to get employed. Skills mismatch and a low percentage of graduates in science and engineering is common. The ensuing frustration has led to low self-esteem, desperation, permanent migration abroad in search of better prospects, and increased rates of crime, posing a serious threat to social cohesion and national stability.

As a consequence, the acquisition of relevant skills and job creation are unavoidably becoming a component of national development strategies and policy reforms of the tertiary education sector. This is largely reflected in the skills development strategies that individual governments are developing and in regional initiatives such as the Continental TVET Strategy and the Continental Education Strategy for Africa 2016–2025, developed by the African Union (TVET stands for technical and vocational education and training). African governments are expected to address the need for an appropriate tertiary system that is relevant to the demands of the labor market and can stem the rising unemployment across the continent.

The African population is expected to grow from the current 1.4 billion to 2.5 billion in 2050 and 4.3 billion by 2100. The estimated 364 million between 15 and 35 offer immense opportunity and challenges for investing in the tertiary sector, which is key to socioeconomic development through developing human capital and knowledge creation and dissemination. Currently, 9.4 percent of the relevant age cohort in sub-Saharan Africa access tertiary education, compared with the global average of about 38 percent. The region spends 21 percent of government education expenditure on tertiary education, 27 percent on secondary education, and 43 percent on primary education.

Responding to the evolving tertiary education needs of the youth will take a Herculean effort from governments, institutions, and other stakeholders. The policy reform history of this subsector is, however, replete with ups and downs, misconceptions, and

unhealthy influences that affect the many assumptions and directions set by national governments. Learning from past weaknesses and understanding the nature of evolving demands is key to readying the African higher education system for a challenging and complex future.

Past Influences and Lessons

Africa's colonial history is known for its several damages, including the alienation of the youth from its historical, cultural, religious, and linguistic roots. The impact of colonialism is still evident in the isomorphic tendencies and dependencies of African higher education institutions (HEIs) toward institutions of their former colonizers.

During the postindependence period of the 1960s and 1970s, African HEIs assumed the grand responsibilities of nation building, enhancing economic growth and Africanizing the system, but their success was limited. During the 1980s through the 1990s, additional demographic, sociopolitical, and economic challenges reduced government income, resulting in inefficient governance and management systems, poor infrastructure, dwindling quality, and meager research output. These challenges were exacerbated by policy prescriptions from influential donors like the World Bank, which, among other measures, deemphasized higher education in favor of primary education, promoted privatization and marketization within a mostly public system, and diversified funding strategies, which included cost-sharing schemes. Most of these prescriptions were not aligned with African needs and realities, leading to a variety of repercussions.

The reemphasis on African higher education since the mid-1990s is pushing African tertiary institutions to reposition themselves as engines of economic development and growth. In addition to discrete governmental actions, Africa has embarked on various regional and global commitments and initiatives that enhance the recovery and revitalization of its tertiary education system. Current needs for policy reforms continue to be driven by old and emerging themes including employability, digitalization, quality and relevance, and equity and inequality.

Digitalization

Africa needs to benefit from the use of digital technologies, often described as the most rapid paradigm shift ever seen in education. There is an urgent need to invest and modernize the digital infrastructure, which is inhibiting access to reliable internet. Exorbitant costs, a lack of skills and awareness, and cultural acceptance are also key barriers that need to be addressed.

Institutions need to embed digital transformation in their strategic planning, organizational structures, and operational processes. Without a change in policy, practice, and perspective, it will not be possible to address the impending challenges of digitalization.

Equity and Inequality

Despite significant gains at the primary level, tertiary enrollments in Africa lag far behind the rest of the world. The continent's tertiary education system is characterized not only by the lowest rate of participation, but also by its considerable failure in addressing the question of equitable access for students from low-income groups, women, and disabled and refugee students.

While countries should improve their policies toward inclusive growth, African tertiary education institutions must equally make issues of equity and inequality their top priorities in order to promote social cohesion and mutual growth.

Quality and Relevance

Tertiary education in Africa faces severe constraints in its overall quality and performance. The increasing rise in student population has been a major factor contributing to the deterioration in quality of higher education. The relevance of programs remains problematic, as evident in failures to link TVET and higher education with socioeconomic development, and persistent mismatches between tertiary education and the demands of the job market.

The average percentage of academics with a PhD in public higher education institutions in Africa is estimated to be less than 20 percent. Senior professors are rare and

fast retiring. Low salaries of faculty, lack of research funding and equipment, as well as limited institutional autonomy trigger many scholars to leave their country for greener pastures.

Enhancing the quality of graduates entails creating favorable learning and working environments, strengthening available infrastructures, and developing formal quality assurance systems to enhance new initiatives in the area.

Conclusion

The tertiary education system in Africa provides opportunities to translate the continent's population growth into a demographic dividend. The sector is often regarded as key to poverty eradication, technological development, and social and political cohesion. The Declaration and Action Plan of the First African Higher Education Summit held in Dakar, Senegal, in March 2015, envisages the African higher education landscape for 2050 as an improved system on par with the rest of the world. This is assumed to be achieved through increasing access; creating a financially sustainable, efficient, and globally competitive system; a comprehensive system characterized by diversification, differentiation, harmonization, relevance, flexibility, and resilience; and capable of producing highly skilled, innovative, employable, ethical, and civic-minded graduates.

In view of these aspirations, the process of policy making must provide for sufficient rethinking on the responsiveness of the tertiary sector to current challenges and emerging realities. African tertiary education institutions should particularly justify their relevance to the economy and the demands of society and local communities. Particular attention should be given to factors inhibiting the transition from policy to desired outcomes, since this is a serious bottleneck across the continent, and critical to addressing the immense challenges and evolving realities within the tertiary education sector. ▲

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