



United Nations
Educational, Scientific and
Cultural Organization



Conference Budapest

6 June 2103



Tertiary Education in Africa by and post- 2015

Mrs. Lalla Aïcha BEN BARKA,
Assistant Director-General for UNESCO's Africa Department

Outline

1. Greetings
2. Introduction
3. Prevailing Issues in Higher Education
 - Enrolment and “Massification”
 - Quality of training and Research
 - Private Higher Education
 - Financing of Higher Education
4. Going Beyond the Challenges
 - Credibility and Transformative Role of Higher Education in Africa
 - Responding to the needs of the middle class
 - Intra-Africa Collaboration of Higher Education Institutions and Mobility of Students & Staff
 - Productive Partnerships with Universities of other Continents
 - Innovative Financing Instruments

Introduction

As an introduction to this paper I will borrow from Mr Sibry Tapsoba of the African Development Bank, based in Cairo, excellent paper, when he paid tribute to Philip Altbach for his so important work on higher education.

Mr Tapsoba stated that education in general, and higher education in particular, was shaped by the colonial powers namely Belgian, British and French colonial to manage their colonies and promote economic interests and socio-cultural changes. The only endogenous universities are the Al-Azar University in Cairo, Egypt and the University of Timbuktu in Mali. However, although they are the oldest universities on the continent and not of European descent, they were established with the support of the Arab world, and the teaching was in the Arabic language. Timbuktu has ceased to operate as a university, but Al-Azar continues to be a major center of excellence for the Islamic studies in the world.

During the colonial period, education in general and higher education specifically was conducted in the languages of the colonial powers. At the advent of independence the situation was as follow: 1) the majority of African countries did not have an adequate number of qualified human resource base to address the challenges of nation building and 2) all African countries adopted the education system inherited from their former colonial power. Hence, Africa remains the only continent in the world where people do not learn/study in their native languages, do not practice their native religion, and do not identify with their native cultures. The youngest generation of Africans grows up without a solid African roots and values.

In the early 1960s, it became imperative that the newly independent nations must invest in higher education in order to stimulate economic growth. Up to the early 1980s governments and the international community supported the development of higher education. Unfortunately, this policy drastically changed. From early 1980s to mid-1990s higher education was viewed as a *luxury* that African countries cannot afford and structural adjustment policies led to the severe reduction of government spending on higher education with significant negative effects on the sub-sector. Public spending per student plummeted over 25 years from an average of US\$6,800 to just US\$981 in 2005 for 35 countries.

“From 1985 to 1989, 17% of the World Bank spending on education was on higher education and from 1995 to 1999 the Bank allocated only 7% of its investment in education to higher education”.¹ The World Bank argued that this change of policy was justified by economic crisis facing African countries and the limited economic and social rate of return of higher education. The social rate of return in basic education was believed to be higher. This justified more focus on basic education post Jomtien (1990) and Dakar (2000) and in the MDGs.

However, the landscape of development thinking has significantly changed over the past three decades and there is empirical evidence to attest that today the returns of higher education to society are greater than the returns of basic education. The scientific and knowledge economy of the globalized world in which we live has confirmed the critical transformative role of higher education, through the improvement of efficiencies in the daily lives of human kind. African governments are increasingly considering higher education as key to alleviating poverty as indicated by the analysis of national poverty alleviation policy documents. Poverty alleviation will require a robust higher education system capable of greater contribution in knowledge, science and technology. However, higher education has to overcome multiple challenges: challenges of “massification”, financing of higher education, quality of research and private higher education.

Prevailing issues in Higher Education

Enrolment and “Massification”²: With an estimated population to be 1.04 billion in 2011³, Africa scores the lowest higher education participation rate in the world. The average gross rate of tertiary education enrollment (GER) was 8% in 2011 (5% female rate and 8% male rate⁴). This range differs from country to country and generally Anglophone countries have higher GER than Francophone countries. The tertiary gross enrollment rate for Anglophone countries averaged 6.7%, in comparison to the 2.9% that characterized Francophone countries⁵.

¹ David Bloom, David Canning and Kevin Chan (2005:6). Higher Education and Economic Development in Africa. Paper commissioned by the World Bank (AFTHD).

² Sibry Tapsoba (2013). The Changing Landscape in Higher Education in Africa. Paper presented at the Boston College – Center for International Education in Africa.

³ See AfDB Data Portal.

⁴ World Bank database

⁵ Data from G. Azcona, R. Chute, F. Dib, L. Dookhony, H. Klein, D. Loyacano-Peri Daniel, D. Randazzo Dominic, V. Reilly Vanessa, *harvesting the future: The case of tertiary Education in Sub-Saharan Africa*, The Maxwell School of Syracuse University, 2006

At the same time Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) reaches the highest annual growth rate: enrollment in tertiary education grew faster in SSA than in any other region over the last four decades. In the 1970 there were less than 200,000 tertiary students enrolled in the region. This number soared to over 4.5 million in 2008 - a more than 20-fold increase. In effect, the gross enrollment ratio (GER) for tertiary education grew at an average of 8.6% for each year between 1970 and 2008 – compared to a global average of 4.6%⁶ over the same period.

According to projections, Sub-Saharan Africa will experience a unique demographic transition, with an estimated 258 million Africans expected to reach prime working age (15 – 25 years) by 2025⁷. African universities must be prepared to take on this challenge.

Quality of Training and Research: The rapid enrollment expansion in the tertiary education in SSA has not been supported by an increase in the quality of higher education. Public funding as well as foreign aid was drastically cut. That led to overcrowded campuses with deteriorating physical facilities, outdated libraries, decaying research infrastructure, and brain drain as the highly qualified faculty flee to better working conditions.

In addition, “the rapid enrolment expansion channeled students disproportionately in the less expensive ‘soft’ disciplines and siphoned off research funding to cover the costs of more students. In 2004, just 28% of tertiary students were enrolled in science and technology fields. Likewise, research output faded as Africa devoted just 0.3% of GDP to research and development, and the number of professional researchers fell.

Graduate students comprise a shrinking portion of total enrolments, reducing the next generation of tertiary instructors and researchers at a time when their numbers should be increasing. These trends make it increasingly difficult to provide relevant knowledge and core skills needed for African nations to boost competitiveness and sustain growth”⁸

Insufficient attention to professional development coupled with inadequate funding for research has led to a crisis in academic staffing just when teachers are most needed to instruct

⁶ Datas From UNESCO, *Trends in Tertiary Education: Sub-Saharan Africa*, UIS Facts Sheet, No 10m 2010.

⁷ AAVV, *Harvesting the future*.

⁸ World Bank: *Accelerating Catch-up – Tertiary education for Growth in Sub-Saharan Africa*

the rising number of students. A combination of inadequate salaries, heavy teaching workloads resulting from declining staff-student ratios, deficient personnel management, and lack of research opportunities makes staff retention and recruitment very difficult.

Private Higher Education: In response to a decline in public higher education and to labor market demands, a private sector has rapidly developed in many countries. “While public university doubled from roughly 100 to 200 between 1990 and 2000, the number of private tertiary institutions exploded during the same period from two dozen to an estimated 468⁹.”

“However, insufficient regulatory frameworks for investments, accreditation and quality assurance, and lack of incentives through competitive funding for research and innovations, have hindered private institutions’ ability to compete on a level playing fields with public institutions and to broaden their role in promoting growth and competitiveness.”

Financing of Higher Education: Higher education in SSA is funded by different international public and private donors. The public donors can be identified as international organisations, development banks, and organizations for bilateral cooperation between countries. UNESCO, in the survey “Youth and skills: Putting education to work, Private Philanthropy and Social Investment in Support of Education for All”¹⁰, classified private donors in companies, foundations, billionaires and others additional entities.

Most of the time, international donors funding is channeled by local non-profit organizations and international NGOs with headquarters in the developing countries and quite often by multilateral institution. According to UNESCO even when the donors declare to directly fund governments, the funding is channeled through a third organization. Moreover, most donors are still basing their supporting system on short term funding cycle, that does not favor the ownership of the recipients,, and that limit the autonomous decisions of universities in term of management. This model defeats all prospects of building sustainable projects.

⁹ idem

¹⁰ UNESCO, *Youth and skills: Putting education to work, Private Philanthropy & Social Investment of Education for All*, UNESCO, 2012.

UNESCO, in the above mentioned paper, identifies different forms of support: *in kind contributions, direct service providing, policy engagement or funding.*

Analyzing the activities of some of the principal foundation and corporations in the paper mentioned above, UNESCO expresses concerns for certain emerging tendencies of international donors: (1) *lack of transparency and accountability*, (2) *lack of coordination and cohesiveness*, (3) *short term contribution for long term needs*, (4) *weak monitoring and evaluation procedures*, (5) *ambiguities in targets' choice*, (6) *definition of shared value.*

Going Beyond the challenges:

Credibility and Transformative Role of Higher Education in Africa –The recent events in North Africa called the “Arab Spring” for the hope provided by the uprisings have added pressures on higher education, especially on its capacity to provide jobs for graduates. This has resulted in a re-questioning of the transformative role of higher education; thus, affecting the credibility of a system that is trying to emerge from a crisis. Redesigning the current system by offering “community college” short-term technical training and paying more attention to science, technology and vocational education could offer sustainable solutions to job creation and economic growth.

Responding to the needs of the Middle Class – The investments in basic education have significantly enhanced enrollment level in primary and secondary education. In addition, Africa is the continent with the fastest growing middle-class. One aspiration of the middle-class is to have tertiary education for its youngsters.

Intra-Africa Collaboration of Higher Education Institutions and Mobility of Students & Staff – Addressing the constraints of higher education cannot be done solely within natural boundaries. Solutions must include regional perspectives and the establishment of centers of excellence. The collaboration between African higher education institutions will facilitate the mobility of professors, scientists/researchers and students.

Productive Partnerships with Universities of other continents – As the financial crisis continues to persist in Europe and North America, higher education institutions in the North face financial limitations in building partnerships, especially with African higher education institutions that

have very limited financial resources. The temptation is therefore to focus partnership programs with institutions in South East Asia, the Middle-East and Latin America. The proliferation of American, Canadian, French, German, etc. in Egypt and other countries is testimony to that effect.

Innovative Financing Instruments – Financing of Higher education in Africa comes traditionally from three sources: governments, parents and donor agencies. The bulk of government financing goes to salaries, infrastructures and social needs of students (dormitories, cafeterias, transportation, etc.) and scholarships, while parents pay –reluctantly!– tuitions and donors agencies support scholarships, research and knowledge generation. This model needs to be revisited to integrate innovative financing instruments, such as taxation and endowments.