

Research Application Summary

Liberalization of higher education in Sub-Saharan Africa

Masanja, V. G. & Lwakabamba, S.
University of Kibungo, P.O. Box 6, Eastern Province, Republic of Rwanda
Corresponding author: lwakabamba@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper discusses the liberalisation of higher education as under the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS) signed by member countries of the World Trade Organisation. The impact of commercialisation of higher education sector on the quality of education in sub-Saharan Africa is presented. The liberalization resulted in drastic expansion of higher education with significant decrease in public expenditure on education while private providers were interested more in money making than education quality. The liberalisation has resulted in a policy vacuum for the management of liberalisation of higher education. Individual households account for the major contribution for higher education funding which as a result is accessible to youths from privileged families. The proportion of university going-age youths in universities in sub-Saharan Africa is only 6% while the global average is 29%. Many graduates from these universities unfortunately cannot compete in the local as well as global labour market. For Africa to provide cost effective equitable quality education and produce skilled youths for the global and local labour markets, in desired quantity, the best option is to adopt technology led open learning and distance education in addition to the conventional delivery mode.

Key words: GATS, Higher Education, open learning, public expenditure, sub-Saharan Africa

Résumé

Ce document traite de la libéralisation de l'enseignement supérieur dans le contexte de l'Accord Général sur le Commerce des Services (AGCS) signé par les pays membres de l'Organisation Mondiale du Commerce. L'impact de la commercialisation du secteur d'enseignement supérieur sur la qualité de l'éducation en Afrique subsaharienne est présenté. La libéralisation a entraîné l'expansion radicale de l'enseignement supérieur avec une diminution significative des dépenses publiques d'éducation tandis que les fournisseurs privés sont intéressés plus à gagner de l'argent que la qualité de l'éducation. La libéralisation a entraîné un vide des politiques pour la gestion de la libéralisation de l'enseignement supérieur. Les ménages individuels représentent la contribution majeure dans le financement de l'enseignement supérieur qui est plus accessible aux jeunes issus de familles mieux privilégiées. La proportion de jeunes universitaires en âge de commencer l'enseignement universitaire en Afrique sub-saharienne est à seulement 6%, alors que la moyenne mondiale est de 29% et les diplômés de ces systèmes ne sont pas aptes à la concurrence dans les locaux ainsi que le marché mondial du travail. Pour que l'Afrique fournisse une éducation de qualité rentable et équitable, et produise

des jeunes qualifiés pour les marchés mondiaux et locaux du travail, en quantité souhaitée, la meilleure option est d'adopter l'enseignement ouvert et l'enseignement à distance basé sur la technologie en plus du mode classique d'enseignement.

Mots clés: L'Afrique subsaharienne, l'enseignement supérieur, l'apprentissage ouvert, les dépenses publiques

For many decades international trade involved goods while trade in services was secondary. To promote trade in services, 149 member countries of the World Trade Organisation (WTO) signed the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS)³ which became effective in January 1995 (WTO, 2007) . Education is among the 12 GATS major service sectors.

While primary and secondary education is considered to be primarily a service to be purchased for governmental purposes rather than commercialization, higher education and adult education are services considered for commercialization. Under GATS, education is being liberalized and transformed into a multi-billion dollar industry which includes recruitment of international students, establishment of university campuses abroad, franchised provision and online learning (Li, 2010) . Liberalization of higher education as a commerce, is among the top priorities of most governments especially developed and fast growing economies such as the USA, European Union member countries, Japan, Australia, New Zealand, China, and South Korea.

It is generally hypothesised that investment in higher education by African governments can pay-off. The presumption is that higher education yields significant benefits for African young people and the entire society since it is expected to provide better employment opportunities and job prospects, improved quality of life, and greater economic growth (AAI, 2016) . World Bank simulation models and UNESCO (ibid) report that returns to investments in higher education in Africa are 21% which is the highest in the world.

Under GATS, are the interests of African countries adequately taken into consideration? Liberalisation of higher education poses an opportunity to have foreign suppliers provide increased access to higher education programs or to invest in the infrastructure for education provision. The key questions are: liberalization for whose benefit? And at what cost? The GATS is encouraging mobility of students, lecturers, researchers and temporary movement of labour force. The major concern to all countries (those importing and those exporting education services) is about quality standards and accreditation issues, such as frameworks for licensing, accreditation, and qualification recognition and quality assurance. African countries lack capacity to have such frameworks in place and thus be able to participate equitably in trade liberalization and increased cross border delivery of education like developed and emerging economies. Although increased mobility of lecturers and researchers is relevant to African countries, however, they lack capacity to participate effectively and a few well-qualified professionals and graduates are

attracted to employment positions in developed and emerging countries resulting in brain drain (AAI, 2016).

Have Higher Education Liberalisation Policies in SSA met the expected objectives?

For Africa, the policies to liberalise higher education under GATS were introduced as part of economic liberalisation. Most African governments introduced these policies in the early 2000's and are implementing them since then. Among the goals for liberalization of the higher education sector in Africa was to bring the private sector into this business. The private sector's perceived role was to contribute to the acceleration of the attainment of targets for the educational Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) under the implementation of the Millennium Development Goals and the Medium term Poverty Reduction Strategy Programmes. It was presumed that existence of a significant private higher education sector will be a catalyst for improved quality education and that public national education industry would be subjected to competition. External liberalization would bring in the aspects of globalization and this was perceived to bring about transformation of the higher education systems so as to train a highly skilled workforce and contribute to the research base and innovation capacity.

A number studies have been conducted to interrogate whether the quality of education has improved as a result of the liberalization policies in Africa, if African universities have the necessary resources to provide quality education, and generally, what are the implications of the management of the liberalisation of higher education provision and its quality (e.g. Nagatete, 2007; Boit *et al.*, 2012; Ssegawa, 2012; Amandeep, 2016). Findings revealed that liberalization has lowered the quality of higher education. Studies show that as a result of higher education liberalization policies, many sub-Saharan African governments are systematically reducing their role to provide higher education as a social service to their people. Governments have left market access principles to infiltrate and influence the provision of higher education. Studies (e.g., Nagatete, 2007) and UNESCO statistics (UNESCO, 2011) reveal that it has been difficult for governments as well as the private sector to adequately finance higher education, even when their efforts are combined. Despite the increased demand, higher education remains in very sad state in SSA. Education support materials like text books, computers, laboratory facilities, and infrastructure are inadequate. The quality of education is further questioned due to the prevailing state of lecturers; findings reveal that they are not well-motivated and not facilitated to grow professionally (Boit *et al.*, 2012).

Equity issues

The quality of education in the SSA is clearly far behind the rest of the world. Another big challenge has been how to expand educational opportunities, improve quality and increase equity with limited and inadequate financial resources. Based on national statistics and anecdotes, it is established that liberalization has resulted in some population groups receiving more public financial resources than others to get access to higher education based on geographical reasons, gender reasons, and socio-economic reasons, among others. The inequality gap has widened and continues to enlarge.

In SSA countries, government financing of education is often complemented by inputs from external partners, students and households, and private entities. In countries suited by UNESCO (AAI, 2016) the contribution of households is 25% of all education expenditure and is the largest private financier. By implications, children from poor families are likely to miss out and preference for a boy under resource constraints implies that a girl is more likely to miss out. Many SSA countries have abolished fees at primary and some even secondary level while enrolment in private schools has increased. Private schools are unfortunately located in urban areas. Children of the urban middle class are enrolled in these private schools which are better equipped and offer better education. As a result students from these schools are most likely to get a place in the best Universities and scholarships to study abroad.

A significant number of students are sent abroad for their higher education studies on government scholarships causing a large outflow of monetary and human capital. For example in 2008, nearly 223,000 students from sub-Saharan Africa were enrolled in tertiary education outside of their home countries, representing 7.5 percent of the total global number of students who study outside of their home country (AAI, 2016). In most cases, the selection of such students is not transparent.

Rapid Higher Education Expansion in SSA. Implementation of liberalization of higher education policies has resulted in rapid expansion of student enrolment without corresponding resources allocations. Although the public expenditure on higher education has increased tremendously, expenditure per student has decreased significantly. This has negatively affected the expansion of facilities to match the surging student enrolment.

Are Universities able to offer quality education?

Higher education has expanded rapidly in SSA from 2.3 million to 5.2 million between 2000 and 2010, as revealed by UNESCO and World Bank statistics (ibid.). Despite this surge, only 6% of university going-age youths are enrolled in higher education in SSA which is far below the global average of 29%. Private higher education is one of the fastest growing education sectors in Africa. The private higher education sector is growing at a much faster pace than the public sector. For example in 2009, Africa as a whole had around 200 public universities and 468 private ones. USA had 1,700 public universities and nearly 2,500 private universities.

Public universities are neither able to expand their facilities to support the growing number of students nor maintain existing ones, as a result, most public universities in SSA are characterised by decaying infrastructure and buildings. They are typified of overcrowded classrooms. UNESCO statistics show that on average there are 50% more students per professor at SSA universities compared to the global average; inadequate teaching and accommodation space; inadequate laboratory facilities, scientific equipment, and library resources; shortage of academic staff; and shortage of funds. These are characteristics of falling indicators of academic quality standards.

Anecdotal evidence shows that majority of the Private education providers (both local and external) are capitalising on the liberalisation policies to convert education into business where they collect large fees and provide poor quality education. They (private providers) are providing education without well trained staff, their staff-student ratios are appalling, and the teaching and learning environment in general is not fit-for-purpose. Their investment in higher education seem to be more guided by making profit and market than fulfilling any social agenda for the welfare of the countries and the learners. They treat education just like any other commodity. Private investment in higher education in most SSA targets programmes which are lucrative for their business prospects rather than those which are priority to the socio-economic development of the countries. Besides not investing in quality education, most private providers do not invest in research. Both quality education and research are important for creating and developing human resource.

Is the management of the liberalisation of higher education able to deliver Quality higher education?

Liberalisation of higher education policies were expected to impinge on the education policy matters such as equitable access and inclusive education, accreditation, quality, funding, and social economic learning outcomes enshrined in the role and purpose of higher education. However, national statistics, national household surveys and anecdotes indicate that there is an urgent need of accelerated improvement of both the quality and quantity of higher education in SSA.

Although regulatory and accreditation systems for higher education provision have been put in place in most SSA countries, and they are even overseen by continental and regional bodies such as the Association of Africa Universities (AAU) and the Inter-University Council for East Africa (IUCEA), to date, higher education in SSA continues to be largely a market that is not regulated. Investigations have been carried out to establish the relationship between the quality of education and the management of the liberalisation of higher education. The studies have established that neither policies, nor government funding for higher education, and nor the quality assurance bodies guarantee that liberalisation will maintain and even improve the anticipated standards for the quality of higher education. For example, in his Master's Thesis, Ssegawa (2012), investigated the relationship between the management of the liberalisation of university proprietorship, students' access to university education and university academic study programmes as provided for in the higher education policy, the university funding policy and the National Accreditation body, on one hand and the quality of university education as measured by proxies of (i) university funding, (ii) infrastructure and equipment, (iii) staff, students, (iv) research and relevance, and (v) graduate versatility and labour market adaptability. Ssegawa (2012) says: "The study finds that the liberalisation of higher education in a policy vacuum enabled the entry into university education of proprietors that are incapable of university level quality assurance let alone introduction of modes of access to university education in which quality assurance is not satisfactory". As a consequence of liberalisation, most universities in SSA countries are overcrowded with inadequate teaching space,

inadequate or no laboratory facilities, inadequate library resources, accommodation space and scientific equipment.

How prepared is the SSA higher education sector to produce a skilled workforce?

According to UNESCO reports (UIS, 2011; AAI, 2016), Africa is yet to provide the right education and training for jobs in today's workforce. There is a great mismatch between the skills of workers who are graduates of universities in SSA and the skills that employers need for today's global workforce. Besides, even within Africa itself, many employers are not satisfied with graduates from its universities for their lack of basic, technical and transferable skills of graduates. Although Africa youths make up 40% of the working-age population, only 60% of them are employed.

African governments must invest in higher education to build a highly skilled and educated workforce in order to sustain progress, gain economic prosperity and human wellbeing. The global world will soon require skills from Africa because by 2040, the world's largest labour force will be in Africa with an estimated working age population of one billion. Africa will be able to export labour as cross-border trade only if its higher education system is able to produce a highly skilled and educated workforce in great quantity matching the global labour market.

Technology led online and distance learning is the way out. Africa can attain quality higher education to all in the very near future regardless of geographical reasons, gender reasons, relevance reasons, age reasons, occupational reasons, and socio-economic reasons, at affordable cost through the adoption of technology led Open Learning and Distance Education since it can be cost effective. The potential of this mode of delivering education has been emphasized in Government Policy Reports of many African countries.

In both developed and developing countries, Open Learning and Distance Education is increasingly becoming an important integral part of mainstream education. Open Learning and Distance Education is one sure way for developing countries to achieve their educational goals while maintaining quality, equity and relevance. In India, 20% (more than 2 Million) of students are on ODL mode; Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) alone has more than one million students. National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) has over 100,000 students. Open Universities are increasingly being introduced while more and more conventional Universities are becoming dual mode Universities by introducing the ODL mode alongside their conventional face-to-face modes.

Conclusion

Liberalisation of higher education as a service commodity has resulted in drastic expansion of higher education in SSA. While government funding of higher education has increased in real terms, it has decreased significantly per student leading to deterioration of quality. Private providers and cross border providers have focused on business, they provide poor quality education, they target programmes which are lucrative for their business prospects rather than those which are priority to the socio-economic development of the countries,

and they do not finance research and professional development of staff. Policies, regulatory systems and frameworks have failed to deliver quality education under the liberalisation of higher education policies. Proportionately fewer youths from less privileged backgrounds tend to get promoted into the higher education system at home or abroad and this has contributed to the widening gap of inequality with more access by children from the more privileged background and men. Graduates from such systems are not fit for competition in the local as well as global labour market.

To meet the higher educational goals, SSA governments' cannot rely on quantitative expansion of conventional public higher education systems alone. Adoption of Open and Distance learning offers the hope of making quality education available to all at low cost.

Acknowledgement

This paper is a contribution to the 2016 Fifth African Higher Education Week and RUFORUM Biennial Conference.

References

- African-American Institute (AAI). 2016. State of Education in Africa Report 2015: A report card on the progress, opportunities and challenges confronting the African education sector. <http://www.aaionline.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/AAI-SOE-report-2015-final.pdf>, accessed on 13th October 2016.
- Boit, J.M. and Kipkoech, L. C. 2012. Liberalization of Higher Education in Kenya: Challenges and Prospects. *International Journal of Academic Research in Progressive Education and Development* 1 (2): 33-41.
- Li, Xiaobin and Zhao, Linbin. 2010. General agreement on trade in services and higher education in China. *Canadian and International Education / Education canadienne et internationale* 39 (3), Article 4. Available at: <http://ir.lib.uwo.ca/cie-eci/vol39/iss3/4>, accessed on 13th October 2016.
- Karamveer, K. B. A. 2016. Impact of liberalization and globalization on higher education. *International Journal of Emerging Research in Management and Technology* 5 (1): 51 – 55.
- Nagatete, A. 2007. Quality higher education in the face of liberalization: a case of four universities in Uganda. Masters Thesis, University of Oslo Institutt of Pedagogikk.
- Ssegawa, D.E. 2012. The management of the liberalisation of higher education and its implications to the quality of university education in Uganda. Master of Arts in Educational Management Thesis, Makerere University, Uganda.
- UNESCO Institute of Statistics (UIS). 2011. Financing Education in sub-Saharan Africa—Meeting the Challenges of Expansion, Equity and Quality. <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0019/001921/192186e.pdf>
- World Trade Organisation (WTO).2007. Understanding WTO, Cambridge University Press, https://www.wto.org/english/thewto_e/whatis_e/tif_e/understanding_e.pdf, accessed on 13th October 2016