

Research Application Summary

Higher education policy management and governance in Malawi

Kalizang'oma, R.

Directorate of Higher Education, Ministry of Education Science and Technology, P/Bag 328,
Capital Hill, Lilongwe, Malawi

Corresponding Author: kalizangomarosed@yahoo.com

Abstract

Policy, management and governance of higher education and higher education Institutions is an integral part in planning, implementation and provision of education services in the sub-sector in Africa. Historically, the roles and functions in the sub-sector have been fragmented and uncoordinated. This has been a result of evolution in diversified stakeholders as well as the multi-disciplinary nature of service providers in Higher Education in Africa and greater engagement of a wider variety of actors. A functional review undertaken in Malawi led to the creation of the Directorate of Higher Education as an independent directorate in the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology in 2009, with the sole function of managing policies in the higher education sub-sector. Since the inception of the Directorate for Higher Education, it has overseen the establishment of three public universities, in addition to the University of Malawi, the only public university since Malawi's independence in 1964. The Directorate also created the National Council for Higher Education which to some extent, has helped to improve performance. In addition, efforts towards greater cost sharing resulted in creation of the Higher Education Students Loans and Grants Board as an arm of the Directorate of Higher Education. The Higher Education Students Loans and Grants Board has enhanced loan recovery which was at zero percent before the establishment of the Board, and most debtors have now initiated paying back.

Key words: Higher education bill, higher education students loans and grants act, Malawi, national qualification framework, standards and accreditation

Résumé

La politique, la gestion, et la gouvernance d'enseignement supérieur et des établissements d'enseignement supérieur font partie intégrante de la planification, de la mise en œuvre et de la fourniture de services éducatifs dans le sous-secteur en Afrique. Historiquement, les rôles et fonctions du sous-secteur ont été fragmentés et non coordonnés. Cela a été le résultat de l'évolution des acteurs diversifiés ainsi que de la nature multidisciplinaire des prestataires de services dans l'enseignement supérieur en Afrique et d'une plus grande participation d'un plus large éventail d'acteurs. Un examen fonctionnel entrepris au Malawi a conduit à la création en 2009 de la Direction de l'Enseignement Supérieur en tant que direction indépendante du Ministère de l'Éducation, des Sciences et de la Technologie, dont la seule fonction est de gérer des politiques dans le sous-secteur de l'enseignement supérieur. Depuis la création de la Direction de l'enseignement supérieur,

elle a supervisé la création de trois universités publiques, en plus de l'Université du Malawi, la seule université publique depuis l'indépendance du Malawi en 1964. La Direction a également créé le Conseil national de l'enseignement supérieur qui, dans une certaine mesure, a permis d'améliorer les performances. En outre, les efforts visant à accroître le partage des coûts ont abouti à la création du Conseil des prêts et des subventions aux étudiants de l'enseignement supérieur en tant que filiale de la Direction de l'enseignement supérieur. Le Conseil des prêts et subventions aux étudiants de l'enseignement supérieur a amélioré le recouvrement des prêts qui était de zéro pour cent avant la création du conseil, et la plupart des débiteurs ont maintenant commencé à rembourser.

Mots clés: Projet de loi sur l'enseignement supérieur, prêts et subventions aux étudiants de l'enseignement supérieur, Malawi, cadre national de qualification, normes et accréditation

Background

The Education sector in Malawi is guided by the policy prescriptions in the ten-year National Education Sector Plan (NESP, 2008), and the five year Education Sector Implementation Plan (ESIP, 2013), with three policy goals of enhancing 1) access and equity, 2) quality and relevance, and 3) governance and management. These draw from the Malawi Growth and Development Strategy (MGDS II) which is the medium term framework strategy for achieving the country's poverty reduction goals through enhanced economic growth and infrastructure development. The Strategy is aimed at addressing the current macro-economic challenges facing the country. The ESIP II has prioritized reforms such as: improving governance systems, improving decision making, improving financial management; and improving management of information systems, among others. Implementation is on-going and it is expected that implementation of these policy reform agendas will address key challenges that the higher education sub-sector in Malawi is facing.

The Directorate of Higher Education is mandated to oversee Higher Education in Malawi and to deliver on key strategic thrusts and functions. Mandate of the Directorate are: (a) provision of policy direction to higher education institutions (HEIs) through university councils; (b) enforcing quality and accreditation matters in HEIs through the National Council of Higher Education; (c) advising Higher Education institutions regarding government policies and how they affect them, for example, selection, student loans, allowances, tuition fees, among others; (d) providing a platform for deliberations and negotiations between Higher Education institutions, the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, Treasury, regional bodies, bilateral and multilateral organizations; (e) facilitating legislation of relevant governing tools for Higher Education; (f) coordinating project and programme development and implementation; (g) facilitating the Technical Working Group for Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and Technical Colleges; (h) facilitating establishment of new universities, including the development of curriculum for such; and (i) budget and Lobby for resources on behalf of HEIs through marketing

proposals to development partners with support from the Government of Malawi.

Reforms in Higher Education in Malawi

The Directorate of Higher Education has brought various reforms to the sub-sector that have improved higher education quality through improved management and governance from sound policies. The ESIP II is built on the fundamental principles of enhancing access and equity, quality and relevance, and governance and management of higher education to respond to current and emerging challenges in the sub-sector.

Equitable access is a fundamental principle in the provision of education for all, irrespective of race, origin, gender, socio-economic status. An important reform to address this pillar was the Legislated Loans Act 2014, which led to the establishment of Higher Education Students Loans and Grants Board to provide access to loans and grants to students from low socio-economic background that cannot afford to meet the costs of education at HEIs, public or private. The Loan Fund was designed as a revolving fund that requires that students pay back their loans so that the next cohort of disadvantaged yet deserving students can benefit from the scheme.

Expansion of higher education services by both public and private providers has led to quality challenges in the higher education sector. In response, the Directorate of Higher Education facilitated the establishment of the National Council for Higher Education (NCHE) Act (No 15 Of 2011). The NCHE Act promotes institutional quality, standards and accreditation of new institutions and programmes. An associated board was established to oversee these quality assurance and accreditation matters. Currently, the National Qualification Framework (NQF) is being established as a framework for quality assurance across all sectors and the NQF will further link various sub-sectors with industry through curricular reform.

There are four public universities in Malawi, which are governed by separate Acts: University of Malawi Act 1965, Mzuzu University Act 1997, Lilongwe University of Agriculture and Natural Resources Act 2011, and Malawi University of Science and Technology, Act 2013. A lack of uniformity in governance and management of these universities as well their functioning systems were observed. Thus, the need for the universities to be guided by an up-to-date Act of Parliament that can facilitate their efficiency and effectiveness as well as accountability, is emphasized in public discourse. Accordingly, the proposed Higher Education Bill that is currently being drafted will ensure that all the present and future new public universities are governed by the similar regulations and conditions of service in terms of appointments, dismissals, and principles for benefits and salaries. Such a law as proposed will facilitate University Councils to manage the university system more effectively in the context of fiscal austerity so that resources are efficiently utilised to meet the expectations of Government and the universities themselves.

The proposed Higher Education Bill is expected to: (i) come up with a legal framework

that is in tune with current global reality and enhances good governance and management; (ii) provide a legal framework for implementing decentralization and other reforms in the public universities of Malawi; (iii) ensure diversity in the organizational and institutional landscape of the higher education system through mission and programme differentiation, thus enabling the addressing of regional and national needs in social and economic development; (iv) offer an Act that can promote efficiency and effectiveness in the governance and operations of the university; (v) provide legislation which is compatible with the Republican Constitution of Malawi and is a reflection of the wishes of the people of Malawi; and, (vi) increase the participation rate in higher education to meet the demand for high-level skills through a balanced production of graduates in different fields of study taking into account labour market trends.

Implementing reforms and emerging lessons

The establishment of Higher Education Students Loans and Grants Board has improved access to Higher education for students from low socio economic background as well as their completion rates. For example, at Lilongwe University of Agriculture and Natural Resource, in 2014 alone about 251 students dropped out of school due to financial constraints and in 2015 about 200 were about to withdraw. The Secretariat of the Loans Board has commenced Loan recoveries campaign with multifaceted strategies put in place whilst at the same time is also completing the Loans disbursement processes for public universities. Due to the fact that in Malawi there was no legal framework in relation to students' loans despite disbursing loans, beneficiaries were not paying back since 1985 when the facility was introduced in Malawi with assistance from World Bank. With the establishment of the board, the Secretariat has managed to source all lists of former beneficiaries (1986-2005) and has created a robust database. The Library has been stocked with supporting documents including with filed forms for the former beneficiaries (2000-2015).

Loan Recoveries

The Board has opened accounts at the National Bank of Malawi and Malawi Savings Bank. These are specifically for the collection of loan repayments from the former beneficiaries. Press releases with information on recovery have been advertised through the main national newspapers in Malawi (Daily Times and the Nation newspapers) on the obligations for the students' loans recovery from former beneficiaries. Bill Boards to further cascade the message on loans recovery have been mounted in key locations of major towns. Jingles with details for the recovery of old loans are being aired on Radio.

Nevertheless there are still leakages in the loan system as evidenced in the 2015 disbursement process where some of the beneficiaries from the loan facility did not fit within criteria as envisaged by the Act. This was partially because university registrars and Dean of students were not involved in the process. To eradicate this, policies have been put in place such as, Loan eligibility policy which provides details on the eligibility and non-eligibility of applicants. It was noted that sometimes officers from the Loans

Board were not referring to the Act when screening eligible students. To address this issue policies are being developed such as Loans Screening and Approval Policy, Loans Disbursement Policy and Loans Appeal policy.

In Malawi, before the establishment of National Council for Higher Education, each public university had its own academic calendar and processes so that selection of students could be done by each university separately. This had a disadvantage that students could be selected to all the four public universities, and potentially denying access to others. To improve on this, a harmonized selection process has been introduced where all public universities do the selection together. However, it has also been noted that some students with good grades are being left out because of being missed during the data entry and this is being addressed.

The monitoring of quality in institutions of Higher learning has strengthened university efficiency. The National Council has embarked on accrediting process for all universities in Malawi, which will enhance quality at national level.

Conclusion

The core function of the Directorate of Higher Education in Malawi is to provide policy direction to HEIs through relevant bodies such as University Councils, National Council for Higher Education, that are partly responsible for enforcing quality and accreditation matters in HEIs. Further, they play an important role in advising Higher Education institutions regarding government policies and how they relate to them and may affect their operations as well as according a platform for deliberations and negotiations between Higher Education institutions, the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, Treasury, regional bodies, bilateral and multilateral organizations. The Directorate has played an important role in enhancing the higher education subsector in Malawi and implementing Malawi's education strategies towards national economic development in Malawi.

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