



The Office Of The Principal and Vice - Chancellor

THE REVITALISATION OF HIGHER EDUCATION: Access, Equity and Quality

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Introduction

If the next century is going to be characterised as a truly African Century, for social and economic progress of the African people, the century of durable peace and sustained development in Africa, then the success... is dependent on the success of our education systems. For nowhere in the world has development been attained without a well-functioning system of education... without equality of educational opportunities.²

Former President Thabo Mbeki captured the mood of the African renaissance that for a while swept through Africa, promising much hope for a value-laden development, people-centred, and in step with the advancing technological world and information society. By this reckoning education was no longer an optional matter or merely a toy of ideological players to be kicked about in a contest of no consequence. African nations recognised how critical a common understanding and action was to advance the objectives of a resurgent Continent. The New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) represents that common endeavour of African nations, positioning Africa to contribute admirably to the evolving global issues like World Declaration on Education for All and the Dakar

¹ Principal and Vice Chancellor, University of South Africa; www.unisa.ac.za. Plenary Address at UNESCO World Conference on Higher Education, Paris, 5-8 July 2009.

² Address at Conference on Education for African Renaissance in the 21st Century

Framework for Action adopted in Senegal in April 2000, the declaration of the Millennium Development Goals, the very significant report of the Commission for Africa and its report, *OUR COMMON INTEREST* which bears the stamp of African participation - all these attest to the quality of outcomes once Africans themselves are participants rather than mere observers or recipients of charity. Africa itself recognised that a reciprocal commitment was needed to benefit from these developments, hence in January 2005 in Khartoum, the AU Summit of Heads of State and Government adopted the Second Decade of Education in Africa.

The problem, however, has been that so much of the promised Spring has turned into a false dawn. By and large the undertakings of these international platforms have not been realised. 9/11 radically altered global priorities and plunged much of the developed world into a new agenda of 'War on Terror,' such that the promised 'common interest' was no longer shared. Africa itself has had to battle the pandemic of HIV/AIDS for a sustained period, once again diverting much needed resources towards a war that threatened much of the promised future. And now, we find that the global financial crisis is once again diverting attention and resources into forms of protectionism with regulatory fortresses that threaten to undermine much of the gains of recent history.

And yet it is precisely at times like these that the global community ought to hold its nerve, hold hands and act in common. The generator of development is not economic wars or military conflict, but education for technology and development. That is what President Mbeki sought to capture.

Equity, Access and Quality

It is with good reason that *equity*, *access* and *quality* are referred to as the exclusionary triangle of higher education. Traditionally, higher education has been the prerogative of the privileged few, a preserve of the cultured classes everywhere. In addition, notions of quality have been introduced that use as a yardstick, cultural norms and educational policies and practices that fall outside the lived experience of the majority of those who seek education. Judgment on standards of excellence is without doubt culture and history determined, and yet evolving and mutating at different levels in particular contexts.

All three, however, not only raise questions of context and perspective, but also they are about opportunity, potential and fairness. It suggests that for any education to become meaningful, the circle of opportunity must be expanded, potential extended to those who might otherwise not be considered worthy enough, and that everyone should be treated fairly. Modernity has vastly increased expectations, and even entitlement, on the part of whole populations that might previously not have had appetite for education, many of whom are set in the iron cage of culture and backwardness.

Access to higher education

There is no denying that world-wide, we are seeing ongoing increased access to higher education. There has been an average global growth of student enrolment in higher education of 5.1%, per annum over the last two decades. In Africa, this percentage is 8.7%.³ However, a skewed global enrolment distribution, which sees 69 out of every 100 adults of tertiary age emanating from North America and Western Europe but only 5 from Sub-Saharan Africa,⁴ speaks to the continued yawning gap of world development. In addition, public funding for tertiary education has declined in real terms, especially in low-income African countries (who have ironically experienced the higher enrolment rates). Tertiary public financing, which averaged US\$6 800 per student annually in 1980, dropped to US\$981 in 2005 for 33 low-income countries.⁵ This is supported by the acknowledgement in the 2008 the Millennium Development Goals Report that:

- Developed countries' foreign aid expenditures declined for the second consecutive year in 2007 and risk falling short of the commitments made in 2005;

³ The World Bank. *Accelerating Catch-up: Tertiary Education for Growth in Sub-Saharan Africa*. Synopsis. Development Economics Research Group Africa Region Human Development Department, World Bank. October 2008

⁴ Global Education Digest 2006 Comparing Education Statistics Around the World. Pg 21. Unesco Institute for Statistics, 2006, Montreal. Pg 20

⁵ *Accelerating Catch-Up: Tertiary Education for Growth in Sub-Saharan Africa*. Synopsis. Development Economics research group. Africa Region Human Development Department. World Bank October 2008. Pg 11

- International trade negotiations are years behind schedule and any outcome seems likely to fall far short of the initial high hopes for a development-oriented outcome.⁶

When it comes to Africa, increased access to higher educational has not necessarily meant that this is taking place at home. Sub Saharan Africa, for example, has the highest outbound student mobility ratio (5.9%) which is almost three time greater that the global average. One out of 16 students from the region studies abroad. Every second student from the region (51%) goes to Western Europe, followed by South Africa (9 out of 10 of the 21%) and North America (21%). In fact, we know that Developed Countries are increasingly competing for students in international education markets. (OECD, 2005a)⁷. What we hear less of is the reverse migration of students from the developed world accessing education in Africa to the same extent. It is evident that education has become an economic commodity that must be purveyed like marketable goods and services *a la* WTO. But for many of us education must remain a common good of shared value.

In the developing nations governments are not only struggling to accommodate ever increasing demands for access to higher education in an environment largely bereft of appropriate infrastructure, resources and capacity, but they have to do so in a technological world that is being driven by forces over which they have minimal control or influence, and in a market-driven global environment that is actively pursuing, for a variety of reasons, the very human capital that is needed for its growth and development. Those nations that cannot keep up or adapt to these continually changing circumstances, will ultimately become educationally redundant, and given the acknowledged role of higher education in socio-economic development, they are like to remain mired in poverty and chronically under developed.

Equity in higher education

Equity in education includes equality of access and provision, equality of programme quality and content and equality of calibre in respect of graduates. Equity has a substantive

⁶ Millennium Development Goals Report 2008. United Nations, New York. 2008. Pg 5

⁷ Ibid pg 46. OECD (2005a) Education at a Glance, Paris: OECD

quality rather than being confined to mere numbers. Equity, therefore, suggests a fair access to educational resources of equal quality and value to enhance educational attainment. It also means access to a learning environment that is not alienating but fulfilling. It suggests that any learner must have a better than even chance of educational achievement given basic or minimal circumstances. This means that questions about educational resources, instruments, curricula must speak to the learner's real, experienced world, excite one's imagination and affirm one's history and cultures. Equally, a true education in all circumstances must also open up a whole new world of knowledge that had been taken for granted in precise, critical thinking.

One suspects that if Africa is ever to be successful in achieving its educational goals, in achieving equity, it will have to assert more forcefully its own identity; it will have to look inward and challenge the reasons for not inserting into international education fora in a much more consistent manner Africa's own education initiatives on the Continent; and it will have to reflect deeply on why it is that Africans are not pursuing more aggressively both individually and as a collective, the comprehensive range of African education achievements that Africans historically have provided from the manuscripts of Timbuktu to the secrets of primordial humanity in southern Africa, and early histories of trade with China.

There are initiatives underway in Africa to collaborate to capture and preserve the African heritage, collaborations on teacher education especially in science and mathematics education as in the TESSA programme, and the AU is developing projects to advance technology for education in Africa.

Quality in higher education provision

Quality is variously ascribed as

-efficiency in meeting set goals.....the pursuit of excellence and human bettermentand, a range of elements including the level of student achievement; the ability and qualification of staff; the standards of facilities and equipment; the effectiveness of teaching, planning and administrative

processes; and the relevance of programmes to the needs of students and the nation in an emerging global knowledge economy,⁸

- The inadequate mastery of education programmes, the application of rigid teaching practices, the lack of teaching materials and insufficient teaching time,⁹ and
- A process and a critical indicator of expected outcomes.¹⁰

In higher education, this is reflected in low throughput and retention rates, burgeoning and often uncontrolled and unlicensed numbers of private higher education providers, the proliferation of courseware that has not been subjected to any form of quality assessment and assurance, criticism of quality of graduates from our tertiary institutions, the misalignment of skills with market place needs, poor student-funding and student-staff ratios with resultant heavy teaching workloads, and declining research activity and outputs, amongst others. In addition, the proliferation of technologies that are evolving at an unprecedented rate is facilitating the generation of vast bodies of knowledge that require updating or that become quickly redundant. This implies that both workers and educators need to be retrained to keep up with the changes, reinforcing the notion of lifelong learning and adding to the traditional concept of “student.” In Africa, we need to ask ourselves how we will balance these dynamics in such a manner as to ensure steady and incremental progress towards our stated goals. “It is one thing to achieve 100% access but another to provide high-quality relevant education.”¹¹

The second of the six goals of the Education for All framework, commits signatory nations to the provision of primary education of a good quality, while the sixth goal implores all nations to make a commitment to improve all aspects of education so that everyone can achieve better learning outcomes.¹² There can be no doubt that the quality of education

⁸ Revitalizing Higher Education in Sub-Saharan Africa, A United Nations University Project Report 2009. Pg 10

⁹ Revitalizing Higher Education in Sub-Saharan Africa, A United Nations University Project Report 2009. Pg 2

¹⁰ Ibid pg 10

¹¹ Ibid pg 9

¹² Ibid pg 10

provision will determine the success of educational outcomes. Linked to the issue of quality is relevance. In Africa we are often confronted with the complaint from both industry and graduates, of a mismatch between qualifications and required skills. This is a matter that needs to be addressed with urgency both in terms of the possible fruitless expenditure and in terms of human capacity needs. It is imperative that we arrive at congruence between supply and demand in regard to relevance.

For most in Africa, equity, access and quality in higher education remain elusive; brought tantalisingly close by technology, yet always just out of reach. The challenge for Africans is to define these concepts in terms of their own reality, to assert their claim on African terms and to work collaboratively and incrementally towards their goals. The challenge for the so-called developed world is to pause and reflect honestly and critically, on their motivations, intentions and commitments towards Africa. The hope for genuine progress in the revitalisation of higher education, especially in Africa, I would assert, lies at the nexus.

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