

**Public Funding of Higher Education and Student Access:
A Comparative Study of Two Public Universities in Africa**

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Abstract

This study explores the question of how two public universities in Africa seek to improve student access, given the decline in public funding. Using resource dependence theory as a guide, qualitative approach via semi-structured interviews and documentary analysis are used to gather data to explore the study's objective. To examine the reduction in public funding and student access, this study first examines the changes in public funding and student access at the University of the Western Cape and the University of Ghana from 2007 to 2016. This is followed by an analysis of factors that influence the changes in public funding, and their implications for student access at the two universities. The last to be explored is the actual strategies that the University of the Western Cape and the University of Ghana have employed to improve student access in the face of cutback in public funding.

Keywords: public funding, higher education, comparative, strategies, Africa

Introduction

Historically, higher education institutions have been receiving financial support from national governments to provide access for students, which is seen as critical for sustained economic growth (Mitchell, Leachman, & Masterson, 2016). In developed countries such as the United Kingdom, it has been reported that, the expenditure on education out of total government expenditure is 13.88% of which, on higher education is 22.82% (Times Higher Education, 2019a). Furthermore, in South Africa, the

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government allocation to higher education as a percentage of GDP is 0.75% (University of the Witwatersrand, 2016).

This notwithstanding, public funding to higher education has been challenged by the rising cost of higher education (World Bank, 2017a). Consequently, funds allocated to higher education by governments, globally, have declined in real terms, which tends to slow down higher education access (Mitchell, Leachman, & Masterson, 2016). South Africa and Ghana are no exceptions. In light of the above, this study explores how the University of the Western Cape in South Africa and the University of Ghana in Ghana improve student access in the face of limited public funding.

Since the study focuses on the public funding and student access in two countries, cases from the two countries were selected. There are nine public universities in Ghana and twenty-six public universities in South Africa. Choosing all the universities is impossible because of the time limit. In this sense, I restricted the study to the two public universities, namely the University of the Western Cape (UWC) in South Africa and the University of Ghana (UG) in Ghana.

The choice of the chosen cases was guided by sound theoretical arguments. State subsidies for both universities fall short of their budget. For instance, the state subsidy contributes 43% to the University of Ghana's budget (University of Ghana, 2017b), while at the University of the Western Cape, the state subsidy represents 48% of the university's budget (University of the Western Cape, 2018). Both UWC and UG show similar patterns in terms of student enrolment growth. Student enrolment increased from 2007 to 2016 with an aggregate rate of 40% at UWC and 33% at UG (National Council for Tertiary Education, 2018; HEMIS database, 2006-2016).

Research Questions

Arising out of the main question already mentioned above are the following research questions:

1. What was the nature of the changes in public funding and student access at the University of the Western Cape and the University of Ghana from 2007 to 2016?

2. What factors influence the changes in public funding, and what are their implications for student access at the University of the Western Cape and the University of Ghana?
3. What are the strategic responses towards influencing changes in student access by the University of the Western Cape and the University of Ghana in the face of the limited public funding?

Literature Review

At the beginning of the 21st century, the importance of university education caught global attention due to its role in training workforce for national economies (Malechwanzi, Shen, & Mbeke, 2016). It is for the importance of university education that globally, higher education accessibility has risen. For example, higher education enrolment in the world was 32.6 million in 1970 to 198.6 million in 2013, for Africa, higher education enrolment grew from 0.74 million to 12.2 million, Asia 7.3 million to 108.2 million, and South America 1.2 million to 18.0 million, while for Europe it was from 13.3 million to 31.5 million and North America 9.8 million to 27.0 million (Zezeza, 2016).

However, higher education faces perpetual challenges, including the expansion of equitable access (World Bank Group, 2017). Even when governments acknowledge the challenges, most governments lack the financial strength to address them (World Bank Group, 2017).

Research Methodology

The study utilizes cross-national comparative study design to obtain an in-depth description of each case (Yin, 2018) of how two public universities in Africa improve student access in the face of limited public funding. The study employs interviews, and document review to obtain data. Twenty-two university leaders and government officials are earmarked to take part in this project. I have considered this number because of the objectives of the study, available time and resources (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). These participants were selected based on their knowledge about funding and student access. I will also use a document analysis. Documents that will be analyzed in this study include annual reports,

memoranda from meetings, financial statements, mission statements, admission brochure, graduation brochure and strategic plans to augment and corroborate interview data.

Contribution

The problem with the term “comparison” is that it is mainly used as a flag of convenience, intended to attract international interest and money and the result is a “soft comparison” lacking any solid methodological grounds (Wendt, 2020). This study contributes to comparative higher education by showing that while universities have things in common, there are also differences. This might suggest the need to do more in-depth comparative research.

The main takeaway of this research will be that higher education funding and student access are getting attention in Ghana and South Africa. This thesis will contribute to the formulation and implementation of new policies or improvement of the existing ones. It will serve as a resource to policymakers, higher education researchers, and practitioners when they want to know the opinions and perspectives of academics and government officials about higher education funding and student access.

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Author Note

Fredua Kwasi-Agyeman (author) is a Ph.D. student in Higher Education at the University of the Western Cape, South Africa. His primary research interest is Higher Education Funding. His research is being supported by a competitive grant from the Carnegie Corporation of New York. Born and raised in Ghana, Fredua Kwasi-Agyeman obtained a bachelor’s degree in Political Science from the University of Ghana, a Master of Philosophy in Higher Education from the University of Oslo in Norway.

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