Balancing Crises and Opportunities in Higher Education in Africa: A Historical Perspective

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The story of higher education development in Africa is one of a continuous struggle to balance crises and opportunities. As African countries emerged from colonialism, the period of the 1960s marked an era of promise and opportunities. Africans could at last access higher education opportunities previously denied by their colonial administrations. As African economies lacked capacity independently to supply the necessary infrastructure for higher education, development could only be realized if they partnered with development agencies. The World Bank and Western European bilateral agencies were to come to their aid in this effort.

The initial promise of development was not without a hiccup. Even though the public higher education infrastructure was lacking, the development agencies prioritized support towards vocational and technical higher education. Coupled with the Manpower Forecasting methodological approach that informed the education sector support policy of the World Bank and the bilateral agencies at the time, no significant expansion in infrastructure was realized even in the area of vocational and technical education. The humanities, arts and general sciences were not acknowledged as an area of development concern, leaving governments to design their requests for education development aid in conformity with the dictates of the aid agencies. As a result, public higher education infrastructure remained largely constricted, and access to higher education access remained limited until the 1990s.

As at independence, access to higher education was a given for those whose academic qualification merited their admission. All students were guaranteed a free education and one's socioeconomic background was not a limitation to an opportunity for access to higher education. The global economic crises of the 1970s led to the introduction of the student loans facility that was meant to help cushion government, by reducing public expenditure strain on government, and shifting part of the education cost to the consumer. The new policy was in line with the World Bank and bilateral development agencies conditionality informed by the Rate-of-Return methodological approach that sought to justify and rationalize allocation of resources under conditions of fiscal austerity. Student loans intervention allowed for those from a poor background to be able to access education, but the blanket intervention nature of the program also meant that there was no significant change in the burden of financing higher education from the perspective of public expenditure. The policy remained in effect throughout the 1970s and into the mid-1980s. It is the significant lack of governmental ability to expand the education sector infrastructure that characterized the crisis of this period as public higher education opportunities remained limited by the lack of infrastructure capacity.

As neoliberal economics ideology took hold in the Western nation states, the policies of limited-government, privatization, and free-market economics filtered to the developing regions of the World through the economic growth planning initiatives of the World Bank. Weighted by heavy debt burden, African economies were mandated to adopt economic Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) in the public sector. From the mid-1980s, the inevitable outcome was the slow elimination of non-tuition subsidies in public higher education that included meals and housing stipends. This marked the beginning of the end of the promise of guaranteed access to higher education to qualified students irrespective of their socio-economic background. It would be more challenging for poor rural students

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with no access to support services away from their rural residences.

From 1990 the disintegration of the Soviet Union offered an opportunity for the global spread of democracy; it also presented a doubled edged sword that comes with the full-fledged spread of neoliberalism as the global dominant economic ideology. Historically, higher education campuses provided the political space of engagement in national oppositional politics that helped put checks and balances on repressive regimes on the continent. The early 1990s ushered in an era when many of the active former student leaders became involved in the growing wind of multiparty politics on the continent.

The wind of expanded privatization in higher education sector also meant that more higher education opportunities became available for those seeking to access the tier of schooling. Many countries saw a growth in private higher education sector capacity that now competed with the public higher education sector. From the early 1990s, tuition subsidies were eliminated from public higher education and enrollment was also expanded. Public higher education institutions also developed a parallel model of a private-public education in which a privately funded cohort was admitted alongside a cohort of students admitted through the traditional mechanism that continued to allow for an element of government subsidy towards their education (Module I and Module II). There were also curricula and programmatic reforms that promoted accessibility and a shift from the traditional day-campus model that had been in place throughout the history of higher education in many of the counties.

While the 1990s represented an era of democratization of higher education with respect to expanded capacity in the private sector, the early experience in enrollment expansion at the public higher education institutions had to initially deal with the problem of declining quality as a result of congestion in an aging and deteriorating infrastructure. Toward the end of the 1990s, revenue stream from the privately funded students did help with revitalization of the infrastructure at many public higher education campuses participating in the provision of private-public higher education.

The shift toward the total elimination of government subsidy toward tuition cost at the public higher education institutions also meant the poor had to confront the reality of possibility of being locked out of higher education on the basis of their vulnerable socio-economic status. Until 2000, governmental response to the problem of equity in access to higher education had been to reform the student loan system to guarantee access for the poor- the criterion being a means-tested qualification. There remain challenges related to the efficiency in the delivery and recovery of the student loans. Many poor students continue to miss out on the loans as undeserving students end up receiving financial support. Further, the size of the student loan kitty remains inadequate given the high poverty rates and the significant population of needy students across much of Africa. Many schemes have a poor record in the recovery of the same. After 2000, the period of a resurgence of a rights-based development agenda has refocused the workings of the government in support of equalization and equity in the higher education sector.

A number of countries have recently made a commitment to expand higher education student loans to privately funded students in both the public and private higher education institutions. There is also a shift toward making accessible such financial aid to students in both the university and the non-university higher education institutions. This development represents gains for the economically vulnerable populations who often also ended up being locked out of accessing their desired programs at the public universities and with no option of being able to access private higher education. It also represents a challenge as to how a system that has been unable to cope with a small population of applicants for financial aid is going to be able to deal with multi-dimensional complexities of diversity in institution types and levels of need from the diverse population of students across each country.