

2.6. AFRICAN STUDENT PERSPECTIVES ON ACCESS AND RETENTION: THE AASU PERSPECTIVE ON ACCESS, DIVERSITY AND RETENTION CHALLENGES IN AFRICA

By Oludare Ogunlana, Secretary General, All-African Students' Union

AASU is a continental representative organisation of democratic student unions founded in 1972 with 51 member unions from francophone and anglophone Africa. Affiliated to the International Union of Students (IUS). AASU has a Consultative Status with UNESCO; ECOSOC accredited with UNCCD and enjoys a cordial working relationship with the UN system. The activities of AASU are carried out within the framework of its constitution. These are, among others: To develop working relation/co-operation with other sub-regional, regional and international youth and student organisations, governmental, inter and non-governmental organisations on issues of common concern and interest; i.e. Access to Education, Democracy, project on HIV/AIDS, ICT in Higher Education in Africa, Gender issues and Academic freedom.

Introduction

The right to education is guaranteed in the United Nations Declaration on Human Rights (Article 26). However, access to higher education is not without barriers in Africa. People from a disadvantaged social background, cultural minorities, the physically disabled, women and refugees are all facing various obstacles, leading to lower representation in higher education across the continent. One argument has been that the processes of globalisation and convergence of the educational system from a national welfare service to an international economy-driven market has become a major barrier hindering the principle of equity in access to higher education. The situation is almost the same all over Africa except for few countries like Libya, Egypt and, to some extent, South Africa. Many students feel that the ambition of most African governments is to commercialise higher education entirely. This perception is drawn from the fact that in most parts of West Africa, for example, private higher education institutions have been encouraged by governments as substitutes to public institutions. Students at the private institutions often pay no less than 5000 USD per session, though most families live below poverty lines, as suggested in UNDP statistics. The introduction of disproportionate tuition and other fees in the institutions of higher learning are a major threat to access and success, and students are weary of this both in the public and private sectors. Resource restrictions that have influenced fees have also caused closure of departments, and the introduction of market rates for students' accommodation, medical and recreational facilities among others.

The problems are many and varied: classrooms are inadequate, hostels are overcrowded with no facilities of comfort, with students (the future leadership of the continent) sometimes sleeping in classrooms, kitchens and any other available space as if destitute. Libraries lack books, laboratories and workshops are ill-equipped, academic and non-academic staff are in short supply and poorly remunerated with the burden of regular strikes and closures while qualified manpower is drained overseas.

The conclusions of this article draw from a list of questions that was put together by the consortium of the Erasmus Mundus project 'Access to Success: Fostering Trust and Exchange between European and Africa', and circulated to national student unions in Africa. These questions were similar to the questions posed by the European Students' Union in Europe, a partner on the project with which the AASU has collaborated. The questionnaires were distributed to 54 member unions of our organisation, who were asked to conduct a survey among their member institutions of higher learning in their countries. A few countries, like Nigeria, Senegal, Togo, Benin, Chad, Ivory Coast, Ghana, South Africa, Tanzania, Rwanda, Zimbabwe and Kenya, sent

their reports. The analysis of the questions and case studies of some selected countries indicated that the problems of Access and Success of students in higher education are similar⁴⁰.

We noticed that the major problems students are facing are lack of resources. For instance, all students that completed the questionnaire agreed by filling “Yes” to lack of resources as the number one barrier to access to higher education in their respective countries. Most students are concerned about retention of students as number one priority to them as a result of poor government policies and the negative effect of global economic meltdown that may lead to mass drop-out in the next academic session.

Analysis as drawn from the questionnaires and country examples

According to the data collected from some institutions of higher learning in Nigeria, Ghana, Kenya, Cameroon, Togo, Benin, Liberia, Serra Leone, Zimbabwe, Senegal and The Gambia over a wide range of issues such as access to higher education, statistics revealed that the problems are almost the same. There is no equity in terms of access to higher education as a result of social inequalities. People from a disadvantaged social background, cultural minorities, the physically disabled, women and refugees are facing various obstacles, leading to lower representation in higher education. However, we noticed that there have been a lot of positive developments in terms of cultural and religious barriers as opposed to some two decades ago.

The major barrier is lack of infrastructures in the existing universities to accommodate the ever-increasing number of applicants every year. A large percentage of prospective students attempt to enrol in universities but approximately 60% of this group are turned down due to inadequate or decayed infrastructure in the various institutions of higher learning. The growth rate in most of the African countries is very high though there are no expansion plans in places at universities to absorb the growth rate.

This is primarily true in West Africa, Central Africa and East Africa. South Africa and some countries in North Africa like Libya, Egypt, Morocco and Algeria are exceptions.

All over the world the funding for higher education is decreasing, affecting both the accessibility and the quality of higher education. The increasing costs of higher education give cause for concern as living standards have severely declined in Africa. This tendency leads towards an elitist higher education, only available to a small, privileged group in society. We believe that there is a direct correlation between access and funding. Therefore, we, the students, ask for a social security system that takes into account students’ needs for housing, food, medical care, study material and transportation. In this way, financial barriers can be reduced. We also believe that the state has the main responsibility to ensure financial resources for education. Africa is one region which does not have a fair policy on student financial assistance. We also suggest better curricula reform in order to allow students to work and study at the same time.

Access in Nigeria: a case study

Nigeria, with a population of about 140 million, has 96 institutions of higher learning ranging from Universities to Polytechnics, Colleges of Education and other degree-awarding institutions. The spectrum of institutions of higher learning ranges from federal government-owned universities, state government-owned universities to numerous other privately owned universities. However, the federal universities

⁴⁰ We used Nigeria as a case study because the situations are similar except for South Africa and North Africa. We recently organised a conference in Ghana (17-21 September 2009) where all these issues were discussed. We had 6 countries in attendance representing the sub-regional blocks of Africa i.e West Africa, Southern Africa, East Africa, North Africa and Central Africa. The situations are all the same. We are able to elaborate more on Nigeria and Ghana because our office staff is able to travel from one university to another in Nigeria and Ghana to get information from primary source by talking directly to students and staff. We sent questionnaires to all our 54 member unions but only a few of them returned the questionnaire. We have thus had to rely on follow-up phone calls to get information before compiling this report.

outnumber the state-owned and private universities. In addition, federal, state and privately owned Polytechnics as well as Colleges of Education train middle level manpower with specialised skills which are useful in most organisations.

The concept of access to higher education has been described briefly in the questionnaires distributed. In the surveys conducted in the University of Ibadan, Polytechnics of Ibadan, University of Lagos, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, University of Ilorin, Ladoké Akintola University of Technology Ogbomosho, University of Agriculture Abeokuta, Olabisi Onabanjo University, Ago-Iwoye, Lagos State University, Federal University of Technology Akure, Federal Polytechnics Ede, Federal Polytechnics, Ilaro, Federal Polytechnics Offa, all within the south-west region of Nigeria, we noted the sharp downturn of student enrolment year on year. As far as the research is concerned, the outcome revealed that policies have not been crafted to address the needs of the underprivileged and other minorities in society, hence, this unfortunate trend.

About 75% of the respondents in the surveys conducted admitted that the inequitable access to higher education poses a great threat to the educational system in Nigeria. One specific trend observed during the research is the sex ratio. The statistics of male students in higher institutions in Nigeria overwhelmed that of the female counterparts. Virtually all the institutions involved in the survey have enrolment rates which are highly skewed in favour of males. Schools we visited have a larger number of male students than female students. Similarly, the population of male staff is more than the female staff both in academic and non-academic categories.

Though the three tiers of government in Nigeria, i.e. the federal, the state and the local, have been pushing institutions for equitable representation of gender in the education sector and other sectors, this has yet to be successful as there have not been any proactive policies and measures by the government to realise this lofty agenda.

Increasing Participation in Nigeria

Nigeria attempted to institute various programmes aimed at increasing participation. However, the concept of increasing participation varies from institution to institution across the country. Some universities have distance learning programmes incorporated into their system, some have other internally organised courses where diploma and certificates are awarded to students having completed prescribed examinations after a stipulated period of time and others have part-time courses embedded in their programmes. These include the establishment of a National Open Universities system across the country. There are various distant learning programmes where academic programmes are being run in different fields of study. The programmes have been successful in many cases. However, they are not without their shortcomings, as the costs of running any course in these institutions are exorbitant and there is a bottleneck in the process of securing admission into these institutions. Though intended to widen access, these programmes still seem exclusive to the rich people in the society. These programmes, as lofty as they were, have thus far failed to address the issue of increasing participation, or rather, widening participation, sufficiently in Nigeria.

A case study from the University of Ibadan indicated a high institutional priority on increasing participation, and the university is keenly embarking on that project. This is well understood through their distance learning programmes and some other affiliated courses. It is also instructive to note that postgraduate studies in the university have been widened with a higher number of enrolments in postgraduate studies than even in undergraduate studies. Statistics showed the percentage of the postgraduate students and undergraduate students as 70% and 30% respectively. In the past few years, the policy on admissions in the university has taken on a different dimension. Undergraduate admission has been reduced drastically by almost 50% in favour of postgraduate programmes. Thus this institution realises the importance of developing postgraduate education, which is lacking in many African countries. Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, provides yet a different approach. The trend of admissions at the Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, seems to encourage increasing participation of more undergraduate students than

postgraduate. The difference between these two schools is in the number of the postgraduate students' admission, with one focusing on postgraduate expansion and one on undergraduate. Many institutions have their particular policies as regards increasing participation, thus it is important to look at the sector holistically, identifying good practice as well as bad practice in assessing how institutions address the access and increase in participation agenda differently. It is also important see whether, collectively, these diverse approaches are catering to societies' needs.

Widening Participation in Nigeria

As mentioned, broadening the participation of underrepresented or disadvantaged groups in Nigerian institutions is not at all entrenched in the policies of many institutions. Nonetheless, the survey conducted at the University of Ibadan revealed the existence of a special admissions policy for people from Educationally Less Developed States (ELDS) in Nigeria.

Under this arrangement, these categories of students from educationally less developed states in Nigeria will be given special consideration in their admission processes even if they failed to secure standard and acceptable requisite cut-off marks for their courses of choice. This provides opportunities for at least five such students to be admitted to each department in the institutions, to encourage them. As to how to identify the less educationally developed states, the school has developed criteria for this and has a special category of such states in their admissions lists. However, not every institution in Nigeria has this arrangement.

But beyond the Less-Developed State approach, there is no general consideration for those coming from low socio-economic backgrounds in terms of securing admission into higher education. Lack of financial support for this group from government and inadequate policies continues to be a problem. Consequent upon this, the university records an increase in drop-out rates on a yearly basis.

On a positive note, the research further revealed that the University of Ibadan and some other institutions such as Federal Colleges of Education (Special) have provisional policies for students with learning disabilities. The university has a department of Special Education, in the Faculty of Education, where physically challenged students and students with learning difficulties are given preference in term of admission security. Similar to the ELDS case, they are also given special consideration to encourage them to have access to education. However, inadequate or total lack of facilities for students with disabilities is a great limitation for the attainment of this policy. Suffice it to say that there is a lack of enough higher educational institutions to meet the demand of this group. Insufficient infrastructures for the group also play a significant role in the low participation.

Existing structures in most African universities does not augur well for students with physical disabilities. Lecture Halls and Halls of Residence were built without considering the physically challenged in the society. In 2007/2008, a student of the University of Ghana had to carry his colleague on his cycle to the lecture hall and back. African campuses are not organised in such a way that would allow students with physical disabilities to go to lecture rooms and back without going through a lot of stress. This in itself is discriminatory to students with physical disabilities.

Retention

We have come to realise that not only access, but the success of education is important in higher education. The ability of many students enrolled in higher education to undergo all necessary training successfully without interruption and barriers in terms of finance and other problem is key to our national development.

Every year in Africa about 30% of students who apply for admission into institutions of higher learning have access to it and about 5% or more of the students drop out, depending on the country in Africa. In fact, based on our research and information from the survey sample, the retention rate in Southern Africa is higher than central Africa, East Africa and West Africa.

A country like Chad with only one university has a low retention rate as a result of financial barriers and the political situation. Presently, there is a 10% greater retention rate in North Africa than in sub-Saharan Africa.

To be able to explain this issue clearly, it is important to draw a sharp contrast between public institutions and private institutions. Public institutions in Africa admit more than 70% of students who have access to higher education. They were initially wholly financed by the government, but 'cost-sharing' has been introduced in many instances, often the result of alternative financing models promoted by the World Bank and the IMF. Now, higher education is often partly financed by the Government and partly financed by parents/students. However, there is a worry that the cost burden is being constantly shifted further onto parents. This phenomenon has been one of the major reasons why students drop out in most African public universities. Apart from the introduction of exorbitant fees that parents could not afford, there are no measures in place by university management to enable parents and students to pay this fee conveniently by introducing monthly payments or provision of loans, grants or financial aids to finance their education. Most parents in Africa live below the poverty line and survive with less than \$1 dollar per day and the salary of a professor in most African countries is less than \$1 000 dollars per month. Of course, while we may agree that education is expensive, many parents just do not earn enough to enable them to pay for the tuition of their children. These are real issues that negatively affect the issue of "Success" in higher education in Africa. Most students that enrol are unable to complete their studies and in most cases some of them drop out by the second academic year of their programmes.

In 2008, the University of Ghana stipulated that every student must pay the cost of tuition in its entirety before they can register for the academic semester and most students could not afford to do this and as a result most of them either deferred their programmes or dropped out completely. The situation is the same in Nigeria, Cameroon, Ivory Coast, The Gambia, Togo and Central Africa.

In an effort to get better education, most students opt for private universities which are very expensive. Our research shows that most students that enrolled in private universities could not complete their studies as a result of the high tuition and living costs. Some of them could find the money at the beginning of the programme but then to continue paying for a further three years becomes a problem, either because some of them lose their parents during the course of their programme, or their parents lose their jobs or business as a result of political instability, such as in Nigeria. The lack of job security in Nigeria was further compounded by the global economic meltdown that negatively impacted overseas remittances to receiving countries was a major force behind the sudden drop-out of many students from both private and public institutions of higher learning.

Political instability is another factor in the low retention rate in African institutions. Apart from the destruction and deterioration of infrastructures and lives these bring, conflicts are disruptive to studies, sometimes freezing whole generations of students and affecting academic calendars.

A typical example is the recent incident in Zimbabwe where the eruption of violence during the election saw the closure of institutions of higher learning and the dismantling of the students' organisation (ZINASU).

Further, the victimisation of student leaders who criticise their government has been of great concern. This phenomenon of political victimisation of radical student leaders and academic staff is rampant in Africa because of the lack of autonomy and academic freedom. For example, between 1998 and 2004 the Kenyan government banned more than 40 students from Kenyatta University on political charges. The

Cameroonian government has violated students' rights more than any country in the world. On many occasions, students are not only expelled from school but humiliated, imprisoned or assassinated. Zimbabwe recently disbarred the students' union followed by the arrest of the students' leader, who was kept in detention for more than a week. Most student union leaders are now in exile in Canada, United States and Europe.

Private education has also experienced retention issues. In some cases, private institutions have been established by Churches or by profit-making organisations. However, religion can be one of the major reasons why students in Africa drop out from such private institutions. Some religiously fanatical institutions capitalise on private ownership to propagate their philosophies to students. Some students who do not share in their beliefs are forced to leave school.

One other factor that leads to low retention in Africa is the exorbitant fees these private institutions are charging students. These fees range from \$3,000 to \$15,000 dollars per academic year and are being increased every year. This situation not only alienates a majority of African students but creates hardship on campuses. The fact of the matter is that private institutions of high learning in African are lucrative. Therefore, many private, rich individuals and business corporations have taken advantage of the situation to exploit students. Apart from the exorbitant tuition fees, students have to pay for board and lodging throughout the duration of the programme. All these have taken access and success of higher education away from ordinary people and society and have become the exclusive preserve of children of the few rich people in society.

Conclusion

In our opinion, there is a direct correlation between poverty and student retention all over Africa. The analysis of our research shows that many students drop out as a result of financial barriers. We have a higher number of students from lower economic backgrounds dropping out of higher education after gaining access. There is lack of equity in access and student retention in higher education based on the gap between the less disadvantaged and students with a good family background. The solution to these problems is in the hands of our education policy makers. They must create a conducive environment for students to have access to higher education and complete their programmes. Measures like the introduction of support schemes to enable students to pay for their tuition and education would be one solution. We still maintain our principal position that education must be free, but governments can adopt a similar system to the one in the United States where students have access to loans, financial aid and grants to finance their education.