

PART 2C: OUTCOMES REPORT: WORKSHOP ON 'ACCESS AND RETENTION: COMPARING BEST PRACTICE BETWEEN EUROPE AND AFRICA' 17-20 NOV. 2009, ADDIS ABABA, ETHIOPIA

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The purpose of the workshop was to look at higher education development in Europe and Africa and in particular at the areas of access and retention and to identify common challenges and possible solutions.

This summary will start by giving a snapshot of higher education development in Europe and in Africa; then it will highlight the challenges each country is facing, and go on to list the solutions that have been proposed. It will finish with the concluding remarks of Mee Foong Lee, based on her observation of the discussions that took place, including that of the Rectors' Dialogue.

Higher Education Development

In Europe

The last ten years saw two major movements in Europe aimed at strengthening universities to achieve their three missions: research, teaching and service to society. These movements lead to the Bologna Reform process (1999) and the Lisbon Agenda (2000), which respond to the massification of higher education, low efficiency of higher education systems, an ageing population, the economic downturn, and global competitiveness, e.g. in the face of emerging economies such as China, India and Brazil. The latest Leuven Communiqué of the Bologna Process reaffirmed the social dimension in higher education, with its emphasis on equitable access and completion. The aim of lifelong learning under the Lisbon Agenda is to develop a knowledge-based society. When we talk about lifelong learning it does not mean that one remains as a student in an institution for life. Lifelong learning is rather to provide a 'second chance' to those who missed out. For example, if a student, for whatever reason, leaves secondary school, works for 10 years in a dead-end job and then decides to come back to education, he/she should be given the opportunity to do so; and lifelong learning would help facilitate that.

In Africa

Higher education in Africa generally speaking – although there are country and regional differences, e.g. East Africa, West Africa, South Africa and North Africa – has gone through three phases: in the 60s there were a small number of elitist universities; in the 70s and 80s there was expansion and consolidation as student numbers at primary and secondary schools grew; in the 90s the focus tilted to the provision of basic education as opposed to higher education, resulting in a neglect of structural development programmes. But things are changing and African higher education is now in a renewal and revitalisation phase. At the same time, it is also at a crossroads and facing tremendous challenges regarding resources, quality and relevance in the face of local and global development demands.

So, what are the challenges for Europe and Africa?

Challenges

The following are the challenges that have been identified during the course of the two-day discussion. They are listed here with no particular order of importance.

For Europe

- How to expand access while promoting excellence and how to value diversity as an asset and not a liability?
- How to provide education to more people and develop/maintain the ability to face global challenges?
- How to improve retention and completion rates?
- How to convince research universities to widen access and not see diversity as a threat?
- How to instil good governance and promote institutional autonomy?

For Africa

- How to cope with the rapid expansion in higher education?
- How to widen access when places are limited?
- How to balance access and excellence; teaching and research?
- How to relate study programmes to societal needs – here we are talking about the relevance of the curriculum
- How to increase retention and completion rates of students?
- How to introduce good governance into the institution?
- How to secure adequate funding? In Africa cost-sharing has been advocated.
- How to retain not just students but also university staff?
- How to introduce measures to achieve excellence as massification stretches resources and affects quality?
- How to achieve gender balance?

Solutions

The following solutions have been suggested and it is apparent that many of them are relevant to Europe as well as Africa.

Access

- It is important to reach down to the grassroots and out to the communities
- Universities should act as a catalyst to improve and connect with their communities
- Universities should help improve school attainment through early outreach activities
- Affirmative actions should be used to redress imbalance, be it gender or socio-economic
- Adopt flexible admissions policy to increase access, e.g. recognition of prior learning
- Provide flexible study programmes and alternative pathways
- Use open and distance learning methods
- Use ICT to reach a wider segment of society – but this might not work in Africa due to constant power cuts and slow connections
- Investment in higher education is the key to future success

Retention

It should be noted that for African universities the problem with retention is not just of students but also of their staff. The brain drain question has not been resolved.

- Move from teacher centred to student centred approach
- Provide flexible learning paths
- Flexibility of degree structure
- Innovative curriculum development – here we are talking about what we teach, and how we teach, as with the influence of new technology, the students of today are very different from those of 10, 20 years ago, and we can no longer teach them the same way
- Staff development to expose them to new methodologies in the student centred approach – this is often given low priority due to the lack of funds
- Improve the quality of the programme
- Provide a conducive learning environment
- Involve students in the whole education process – in Sweden this is entrenched in law but in Africa this might not be possible given its political context
- Provide a good student support system in guidance and counselling

Concluding remarks

1. In Europe, on policy issues, the national discourse does not seem to match institutional practice, and discussion on access is more on a country-national level rather than European level. It is therefore difficult to make comparisons, although there are similar problems.
2. In Africa, there appears to be a greater awareness and a sense of urgency in the need to widen access and participation. However, although efforts have been made, they are often hampered by the lack of funds, inadequate infrastructure and human resources.
3. There is a tension, or pull, between teaching and research, in Europe as well as in Africa. In Europe, widening participation often comes unstuck by the argument that if you concentrate on teaching, your research will suffer. This is not true. Excellent research needs to draw from a pool of high calibre undergraduates, so my argument is that improving the quality of teaching will provide high quality future research students/postgraduates.
4. In Europe, the issue is more on re-training and getting new groups into higher education due to the demographic change. In Africa, it is the high demand for higher education and access for disadvantaged groups, in particular, female, students from low socio-economic backgrounds or underdeveloped economic regions, and disabled students. This may explain why lifelong learning is not a top priority for Africa.
5. In Europe it has been shown that an open-for-all system with no selection, while increasing access, does not resolve the problem of retention. For instance, Austria has an open access policy for secondary school leavers but it also has a 40% drop-out rate. Evidence has shown that there is a strong 'selection and retention' connection. However, the debate on institutional autonomy has yet to be resolved if the selection issue is to be addressed. But autonomy could be a double-edged sword because institutions could exploit their autonomy and not widen access but rather sharpen their profile in a different direction.

6. We should stop playing the blame game and move away from the blame culture – the South blaming the North, the students blaming the institutions who then blame the government, the universities blaming the secondary schools, the secondary schools blaming the primary schools. For better or for worse, we are all in it together and we need to work in co-operation and in partnership to tackle the problems together. This can be achieved through academic capacity building between Europe and Africa; through raising school attainment, by partnership between university-secondary-primary schools using early intervention and outreach activities to identify young pupils with potential to succeed so they do not slip through the net. This can be done and has been done even by research intensive universities and the University of Glasgow is a good example.
7. We should adopt a holistic approach focusing on the student life cycle, from entry to retention to completion, and view education as a continuum, not truncated into primary, secondary and university with no links at all. Universities should be responsive to their students' needs, to widen access and to encourage diversity. It is not only right, fair, and just to do so, for economic reasons, it would be infinitely stupid not to, as students are our best investment, and if they fail, the money used will be a lost investment.

I would like to end this with a quote from G.K. Chesterton, who said, "Education is simply the soul of a society as it passes from one generation to another". As educators, we have a responsibility to ensure that this generational cycle is made possible for those who are disadvantaged who are currently underrepresented in higher education.

Post script

In circulating these conclusions for commentary amongst the participants of this event, the following additional points were deemed important for this summary:

1. When we talk about co-operation development between Europe and Africa, we should avoid using the word 'donor' - a better description of the relationship would be 'partnership'.
2. Rather than going into one or two-year short term projects, we should seek 'lifelong' partners (say, 10 years for an initial funding stage) to build sustainable development.
3. It is important that we ensure continuity and train the young ones to replace the old ones currently working in cooperation development in Africa, but the question is 'what incentives will make young students want to work in Africa?'
4. Students are important stakeholders in higher education dialogue. Bi-regionally, co-operation is equally important for student associations and representative bodies, e.g. between ESU and AASU, to gain broader political weight and share practice.
5. With regards to the student contribution at this workshop, students' unions generally see education as a public good that should be free for all at any cost. Universities are more pragmatic and would not rule out, in the case of African universities, a cost-sharing approach consisting of government grant, private funding, and student fees. Students identify the fees issue and financial support as critical to the access agenda in both continents. However, 'free' education does not inherently imply that access is more advanced.