

Higher education and development: evidence summary

(4-page summary)

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1. Trends in higher education prioritisation and financing

Research in the pre-independence period generally focused on how governments could use higher education to train people in the skills necessary for economic growth. Training mainly took place in donor countries. In the post-independence period, there was significant domestic and external investment in higher education. However, by the 1990s, influenced by brain drain, a lack of expected results, rates of return analysis, and the Jomtien conference on Education for All, support for higher education waned.

This drop in financial support created a crisis of quality. African universities faced challenges including dwindling funding for academic resources, research and scholarships; a rise in student enrolment leading to heavy teaching loads for staff who receive low wages; brain drain; low productivity; low engagement in global academic discourses; poor leadership; increased dependence on external funding and a growing inability to set their own research agendas.

In recent years, higher education has regained prominence and is now regarded as important for social, economic and sustainable development; for conflict resolution and human rights; for innovation and entrepreneurship; and for the global knowledge economy. Donors are now investing in both primary and higher education.

2. Rates of return analysis and how this has influenced higher education funding

One of the main factors influencing the decline in higher education funding in the 1990s was research by a leading World Bank staff member, on rates of return to education. This stated that the economic rates of return to primary education were greater than those for higher education; therefore investment in primary education was seen as being more socially equitable. From the late 1980s to the late 1990s, the World Bank's average annual budget for higher education dropped from 17% to 7%. In Sub-Saharan Africa, the shift was more extreme from 51% in 1992 to 7% in 2000. The main bilateral education donors followed this trend.

The main contention of education rates of return analysis is that the focus is purely economic and does not include the considerable non-economic benefits of higher education which are often more difficult to quantify. Other concerns include the use of inappropriate sample surveys and views that conventional rates of return patterns are unlikely to prevail in Sub-Saharan Africa given different labour market conditions. Despite these concerns, rates of return were used during the 1990s as a means for formulating public policy on education investment. This is now beginning to change.

3. Evidence on the role of universities in development

3.1 University partnerships

Partnerships (North-South, public-private, formal and informal) can improve the quality and relevance of higher education; they can exist on many levels and donors can be instrumental in establishing, facilitating and financing them. Partnerships have two main functions: (i) to facilitate the dissemination of information, research, knowledge

and solutions; and (ii) to deliver collaboration between experts and institutions on specific projects in education, research and development.

Some of the challenges of implementing successful partnerships include imbalances in resources; start-up funding but no on-going funding to sustain the partnership; poor monitoring and evaluation; cultural differences; and concerns about weak research capacity for innovation. However, there is evidence on how partnerships have produced measurable outcomes, but it does not always reflect the complex processes that underpin effective partnerships. More research is needed to explore why teaching and learning partnerships are slow to develop.

External agencies are increasingly trying to improve the functioning of higher education institutes. Nearly two-thirds of studies related to external interventions discuss interventions which rely on the participation of at least one foreign tertiary education institute. Many southern universities face stiff competition from established universities with proven research capacities. Opening up branch campuses overseas and developing partnerships are a way of expanding research capacity. More research is needed to establish the extent to which inter-university partnerships impact on research outputs. As a geographic region, Africa ranked very low compared to other regions as a partner for higher education cooperation.

With the growing need to demonstrate better transition from education into the labour market, university-industry partnerships are increasingly regarded as crucial for development in Africa. However, research is scarce and partnerships limited. There is also potential for partnership between Africa's diaspora and African universities.

3.2 The role of universities for development

Universities provide measurable benefits to graduates, relating to health, gender equality and democracy. They contribute to the strengthening of institutions, and the forming of professionals who are vital for sectors such as education and health. Driven by the desire of governments wanting more graduates to allow them to remain competitive in the expanding world economy, university enrolment has increased (massification) including dramatic growth in the private sector. Research from **Uganda** demonstrates how Makerere University has shifted from a development-oriented to a market-driven university with a focus on humanities, a shift from research to teaching, increased commercialisation and the enrolment of fee-paying students. Knowledge production is now regarded as an external process though there is still a strong need for capacity building in research.

Research and community engagement activities of universities can impact on local and national development through creating knowledge for development (especially if there is an aspect of indigenous knowledge rather than a reliance on Western models). This has influenced a capacity development focus both nationally and by donors. Some evidence also suggests that high levels of higher education are essential for the design and productive use of new technologies. However, research from **Vietnam** shows that

universities' contribution to the country's socio-economic development has been limited to the production of an educated labour force rather than innovation and research.

3.3 Linkages between higher education and development

A lack of access to higher education is a key constraint to the development of a country. A rigorous literature review commissioned by DFID presents evidence of potential outcomes of higher education on four areas of development: (i) increased productivity; (ii) technological transfer; (iii) improved capabilities; and (iv) improved institutions.

Higher education develops entrepreneurship, job creation and good economic and political governance. It strengthens democratic institutions and social cohesion. Further research is needed on non-market education externalities and how and when they impact on development. Through teaching and research, higher education can also transform societies by changing attitudes and can lead to development through the creation, absorption and dissemination of knowledge.

A summary of the empirical evidence suggests that higher education contributes to both social and private development, including improved health and quality of life; links to higher productivity and net tax revenue. Research from **Eritrea** shows how a highly centralised human resource development strategy is working to produce human capital for the development of the nation.

3.4 The geography and power of knowledge

Geography impacts on participation in higher education with most higher education institutes being located in urban areas, thus potentially creating a barrier for people living in rural areas. Admission to higher education institutes is generally meritocratic and determined by the quality of secondary schooling. This may further discriminate against students from rural areas, where education quality is often lower.

3.5 Gender and diversity in higher education and research

In low-income countries, there are fewer than seven women enrolled in university for every ten men. Research from **Ghana and Tanzania** found that when gender is intersected with socio-economic status, the participation of poor women is found to be extremely low. By contrast, widening participation in higher education can be a force for democratisation, reducing the impact of traditional beliefs that can reproduce privilege and exclusion. Evidence from **Eritrea and Pakistan** suggests that access to university empowered women by giving them greater economic independence and status within the family and society.

Female leaders are underrepresented amongst the top 100 universities (most of them in high-income countries). This is also true across a lot of Africa, where cultural and social barriers to women's education are reflected in both lower female enrolment rates and in the proportion of female academic staff in higher education institutes. The exceptions are

Botswana, Lesotho, Swaziland, Namibia, and South Africa where gender parity in higher education was achieved by 2000.

Disability is another dimension to equity and equality issues. Evidence from **South Africa** shows that disabled students in higher education find themselves in a contradictory conjuncture of rights, benevolence and the social model of disability. Evidence from **Tanzania** indicates that a desire to overcome perceptions of discrimination and the challenges caused by disability motivates students to pursue higher education. However, infrastructure and student support structures remain inadequate.

3.6 The role of higher education and research for the SDG agenda

SDG 4 is about inclusive and equitable quality education. Targets specific to higher education include 4.3 (equal access for women and men); and 4.b (expanding the number of scholarships available to developing countries). The literature on the role of higher education and research for the SDG agenda is limited and emerging.

Higher education has the potential to improve social justice. The challenge is how to release the developmental potential of higher education, while avoiding the elitist disconnection from society that has characterised higher education in the past. Females and students with disabilities are not fully represented in universities and the quality of education provided to refugees is generally poor. A key focus on these and other more marginalised groups is critical if SDG 4 is to be achieved.

Higher education has also been shown to have a positive impact on state-building, democracy and good governance, as well as on job creation, entrepreneurship and tax revenues which are vital for achieving SDG 8 (decent work and economic growth); SDG 9 (industry, innovation and infrastructure); and SDG 16 (peace, justice and strong institutions). In **Ghana**, research shows that quality secondary and higher education played an important role in the formation of developmental leadership.