

Opinion



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Higher education in sub-Saharan Africa: Why the neglect?

I am an economist, not an ICT specialist.

So, I am focusing on the context in which African eLearning is evolving. Why is eLearning “exploding” in Africa faster than anywhere else?

Africa has the fastest growing population in the world and its size is expected at least to double between now and 2050. Some 40% of

Africans are under the age of 15 (compared to a world average of 26%) but government spending is severely limited. No wonder that the supply of quality higher education is being outstripped by the growth of demand for university education.

I tried to find recent Africa-wide data, but they don't seem to exist. Neither UNESCO, nor the World Bank, nor the

African Development Bank, nor even individual African countries seem to be keeping recent statistics about higher education as basic as enrolment. The most recent enrolment data I found are for 2008. The lack of statistics is symptomatic of neglect of higher education by the “development community”.

Why this neglect? The crafters of the 2000 United Nations' Millennium Devel-

opment Goals, which governed much of the development agenda until this year, bear a heavy responsibility for exacerbating today's crisis of higher education in most of Africa. Only primary education is part of the MDGs. Not even secondary education is included, let alone higher education. This makes no sense to me, if only because teacher training is needed in order for primary schools to function. Because they were excluded from the MDGs, African universities have been starved of funding these past 15 years - and their finances were already precarious before the MDGs kicked in.

The fragmentary data that are available paint a dramatic picture. According to UNESCO, whilst fewer than 200,000 tertiary students enrolled in the region in 1970, this number soared to over 4.5 million in 2008, faster than in any other region in the world. So, for example, enrolment has grown hugely at the "Legacy Universities" established by colonial powers, which used to be (and may still be) the best in their sub-regions. Today's numbers are staggering: University of Dakar (over 60,000 students); University of Ghana (40,000); Uganda's Makerere (over 40,000); University of Nairobi (more than 60,000). From an intake of 131 students in 1962, enrolment in the University of Lagos has grown to over 40,000, while Kenyatta University teaches over 70,000 students. In most countries, politicians are still mandating public universities to enrol even more students. In spite of this extraordinary growth, Africa's gross enrolment ratio still lags way behind that in the rest of the developing world.

Because funding has not kept pace with enrolment growth, it is not surprising that quality is a huge challenge. A recent survey lists the following top challenges to quality:

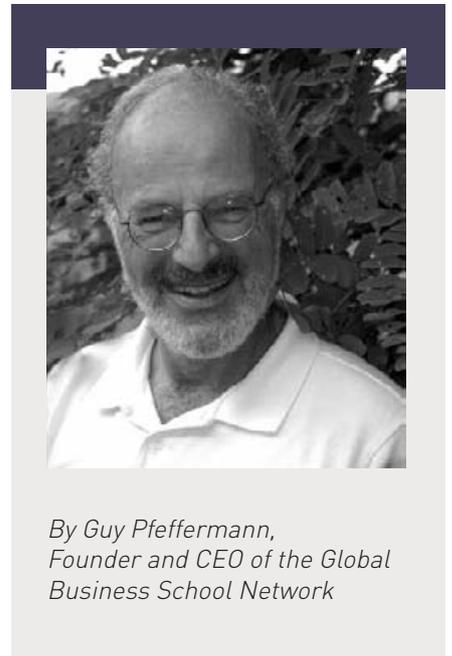
1. Depreciating quality of higher education teachers
2. Research capacity deficit
3. Infrastructure/facilities inadequacies

Other fundamental challenges include a mismatch between skills acquired and the demands of employers, gender imbalances, rigid admission criteria and limited opportunities for credit transfer.

Pressure of demand for university education against severe funding constraints led governments, starting in the 1990s, to make space for greater private participation in higher education. Today, in many countries, private higher education institutions range in proportion of the total from 15% in Ghana and Ethiopia, through to 20% in Kenya, to one-third in Nigeria and Senegal. In the area of business education, with the exception of South Africa, most of the highest-quality schools are private, including a number of excellent faith-based universities.

After decades of neglect, higher education is finally back on the development agenda. A number of African initiatives are striving to strengthen existing universities and to establish new "centres of excellence".

I fear that such improvements will not be enough to meet aspirations for education and jobs. Reform of public universities is, perhaps by necessity, very



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What is necessary in order to meet the need for skills and employment is radical, not gradual, change. eLearning is therefore the only way I can see of scaling up the reach of good and relevant higher education. Some African universities have introduced ICT into their modus operandi but, until now, more for registration and other administrative functions than for teaching. Ideally, mobile phones should become prime instruments of learning, just as across Africa they have become tools for bank-

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slow and starts from a low baseline. Some extraordinary private universities and schools, such as Ghana's Ashesi University, Lagos's Pan-Atlantic University, Nairobi's Strathmore University and United States International University show what can be achieved but their reach is limited.

ing. The dual challenge is to reach students with useful content and to develop business plans, which make mobile education sustainable.