

Emerging Contours of African Private Higher Education

by

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(retrieved January 14, 2018 from <https://www.insidehighered.com/blogs/world-view/emerging-contours-african-private-higher-education>), a November 26, 2017 blog from the Center for International Higher Education

Since the 1970s, developing regions have exhibited massive growth in tertiary higher education in general and private higher education (PHE) in particular. Yet, HE still remains small especially in Sub-Saharan Africa where GER hovers at 8 percent. This is mainly because African higher education has remained essentially a public enterprise—a symbol of post-independence self-reliance which has left little room for PHEIs until the 1990s.

PHE has become one of the fastest growing segments of the higher education sector with a number of these institutions continuously on the rise. Favorable privatization policies, massive demands and other global developments account for the continued surge in private provision. Ethiopia alone currently boasts more than 120 private institutions. Ghana, South Africa and Uganda have significant number of PHEIs—in virtually all cases more in numbers than public ones. In 2009, there was an estimated 468 private and 200 public universities in Africa, though this may have been a huge underestimation.

Africa has reached a level where access to higher education in its various guises would not be possible without the active involvement of private institutions. This is mainly due to the increasingly significant roles these institutions are playing in the continental provision of higher education. This article examines the developmental features of African PHE by drawing from experiences in the continent.

Veiled Advances

Notwithstanding the differences in specific goals and objectives between private and public HEIs, PHEIs in Africa have created opportunities for access and become alternatives to the public sector. It is inconceivable to imagine higher education in many countries in Africa today without the involvement of PHEIs that currently claim 20 percent of the enrollment.

PHEIs are vital to the continent's economies and the effort of nation building by providing critical educational and training opportunities. They provide employment-oriented courses and entrepreneurial skills relevant to the job market. They also help conserve Africa's scarce foreign exchange by creating alternative opportunities to study at home.

PHEIs infuse competitiveness due to their dynamic and entrepreneurial features. In 1990, South Africa had only five MBA programs offered by public providers serving around 1,000 students, but due to competition from private institutions, the number of providers grew to 40 and MBA enrollment to 15,000 within a decade.

Ethiopian public institutions introduced distance education much later than their private counterparts and ultimately emulated the most successful private providers in their catch-up strategies. In Mozambique, the emergence of PHEIs has led to the opening of self-financing and fee-paying programs that have resulted in curricular innovation and organizational changes that make institutions more responsive to market demands.

Successful PHEIs also provide administrative features that may not be available in the public sector. While public institutions are often criticized as rigid and bureaucratic, successful PHEIs are credited for their dynamism, efficiency and flexibility in addressing student needs. For instance, most Kenyan PHEIs have been credited for creating conducive environments for dialogue with students and staff unlike their public counterparts. PHEIs have increasingly become the choice of parents for their stability compared to infamous and incessant strikes common to public institutions. The existence of the private sector promotes inter-sectoral competition as well as cooperation instrumental in creating dynamism and efficiency in the whole system.

Conventional wisdom has it that public institutions usually cater to the disadvantaged and under-represented. In fact, PHEIs benefit the disadvantaged. In Ethiopia more than 50 percent of PHE students are female while this figure stands at only around 35 percent in the public institutions. PHEIs in Uganda enroll an equal percentage of female students as the public universities at around 40 percent.

PHEIs in Tanzania are contributing significantly to address the equity imbalance that the public sector has not been able to rectify. In Ethiopia, private institutions provide annual scholarships to thousands of students who are unable to pay tuition while public universities have no such provisions.

Tanzanian PHEIs have expanded opportunities by opening branches in areas where access to higher education has been particularly low. Ethiopian PHEIs also claim more extensive distance education centers than their public counterparts.

Emerging Features

Although Africa is dominated by demand-absorbing PHEIs, it now hosts institutions that are achieving a status that might be considered “semi-elite”. These are institutions with quality programs, research endeavors, and innovative delivery—defying the generally unfavorable characterization of PHEIs on the continent.

The commercial/religious and/or market-friendly orientation of private institutions are slowly changing as many PHEIs are diversifying their programs. For instance, the disproportionate focus on religious studies of Kenyan PHEIs has changed since 2000 through deliberate effort. The Agha Khan and Kiriri Women’s Universities in Kenya have distinguished themselves by developing programs with international flavor.

In some countries the reputation of some “semi-elite” PHEIs is such that admission is increasingly difficult to achieve. Admission to some, such as Kenya’s United States International University, are so rigorous that it takes months before results are announced. In Nigeria, some PHEIs have earned parental respect so that the option is preferred over public institutions.

In some PHEIs, foreign partnerships are pursued to enhance quality and attract students widely. The well-equipped Institute International de Management in Benin maintains strong affiliations with established institutions in Europe and the United States. The American University of Cairo is well regarded in Egypt as an elite national institution.

In Ethiopia, St. Mary’s University has managed to align its efforts with the Association of African Universities (AAU) and run an annual international conference dedicated to PHEIs in close cooperation with the African Union Commission, AAU, and Unesco, among others. Its 15th Annual conference held this year on a theme *Ensuring Quality through Public-Private Partnership/Regional Integration* further testifies to the expanding role of PHEIs in the continent.

Conclusion

As the issue of quality continues to challenge public universities, private institutions are slowly gaining higher status in the African higher education ecosystem and increasingly fulfilling a role that was once fully ascribed to public institutions.

PHEIs are providing the critical support African governments seek in responding to the demands of the time characterized by mounting needs for high level training and education. Emerging trends indicate the growth of PHEIs that are comparable, and even at times better than public ones—both in their orientations and delivery of higher education.

Unfavorable quality arguments against PHEIs, often resulting from the opportunistic behavior of some profit-seeking providers, are no longer the authentic narrative. Thus, the role of African PHEIs should be seen as critical and vital as their counterparts in the public sector.



Epa, an Adinkra symbol of law and justice, enslavement and captivity via the Republic of Côte d'Ivoire and the Republic of Ghana.