

**Confronting the Challenges of Graduate Education
in Sub-Saharan Africa and Prospects for the Future**

By

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The current state of graduate education in sub-Saharan Africa overall can rightly be described as in crisis, a consequence of the impact of past and present challenges that have faced higher education in the region since the 1970s. The region counts about 1,500 public and private universities at present, with only a minority having graduate programs.

Graduate education in Sub-Saharan Africa was, for the most part, left out of the development of African higher education when the earliest universities were established and thriving, including Fourah Bay College (1827), University of Cape Town (1829), Makerere University (1922), University of Ghana (1948) and Ibadan University (1948). In those years, graduate education was not part of the curriculum of most institutions; the assumption was that those who needed advanced training would obtain it abroad. By the time graduate programs began regionally, most institutions had to contend with economies in crisis, universities starved for funding, burgeoning enrollments, shortages of faculty members with advanced degrees, and drastic reductions in donor funding.

Sub-Saharan university enrolments grew from fewer than 200,000 in 1970 to an estimated 10 million today. In the last few years, the demand for admission to graduate programs has surged, and such programs have proliferated in the region. Figures on graduate enrollment between 1997 and 2007 from nineteen higher education institutions,

for which we have data, show a total of 169,275 graduate students studying for master's and PhDs. In 1997, they constituted 6.9% of the total enrollment. Today there are 294,339 such students, or 9.3% of enrollments, an increase of 73.9%.

In the South African Development Community (SADC) region alone, doctoral enrolments constitute just 1% of total university enrolments; and when South Africa is excluded, the proportion drops to a paltry 0.17% for the region. In 2007, 10,578 students were enrolled in doctoral programs; of this number, only 530 were enrolled in regional universities outside South Africa.

Overall, the crisis in graduate education in Sub-Saharan Africa is multi-pronged. At the national level, with a few exceptions, political commitment to academic research is, in general, feeble, particularly so with graduate education. Most universities are underfunded, resulting in the consequent deterioration of infrastructure, the underdevelopment of such essential services as the library, Internet and management information systems, and a critical shortage of academic staff. Staff-to-student ratios are generally intolerable. Most institutions lack policies, strategies, and leadership where research and graduate education are concerned. Universities are generally poorly managed, in part due to persistent political interference and its accompanying lack of institutional autonomy. Internal accountability is lacking, as is collegial cohesion within the academy. These and other features have fostered a culture and environment that are inimical to successful and effective graduate education.

The shortages of faculty members in many African universities have been compounded by the fact that the average age of faculty members is relatively high at many universities, due to hiring freezes, budget cuts, low salaries, poor working

conditions, and a limited pool of new PhDs. Staff shortages have been exacerbated by the brain drain—the loss of qualified faculty members to more attractive job opportunities in the United States, Canada, Europe, the Gulf, and other African countries with higher salaries and better conditions of service, such as South Africa.

As this review demonstrates, postgraduate education in Sub-Saharan Africa, with a few exceptions such as South Africa, is not strong. Still, a number of bright spots stand out. They include experiments with different types of graduate programs, variations of the American model of classes and thesis, regional cooperative graduate programs, sandwich master's and PhD programs, and several other innovative efforts.

A number of suggestions seem to us to follow from our review of graduate education in Africa south of the Sahara. First, most universities should assign a high priority to expanded faculty PhD training—locally, regionally, and internationally. Very few African universities have enough PhD faculty members in critical areas to launch or expand major graduate programs.

Second, institutions of higher education must give strong priority to reestablishing a culture of high-quality research, accompanied by high standards and expectations for the products of that research. There is no shortage of problems that need to be tackled by scholars, whether it is policy research in economics, education, science, or other areas. But this task will not be simple, given the long neglect of research, the limited number of faculty members conversant with the latest research methods, or the ability to write good research questions and proposals.

Third, we see the need for a major concerted effort—nationally, regionally, and internationally—to expand and ensure adequate financial support for graduate education

in Sub-Saharan Africa. This stands out as one of the biggest challenges facing higher education in the region. Despite some international support for such efforts, including the new World Bank *Centers of Excellence* Program, such initiatives are few. It seems clear that graduate programs will have to be financed primarily by African governments with help from local donors, businesses, and the students themselves.

A fourth major focus must be to increase the quality of graduate programs at every level: in the quality of new faculty members, in increased PhD training opportunities for current faculty members, in an upgraded graduate curriculum that meets international standards, in providing high-quality facilities for teaching and research, and in higher expectations of excellence from both students and faculty members.

Has African graduate education improved over the last five years? Individual successes can be counted, especially in South Africa, Ghana, Kenya and a few other countries; but overall, graduate programs have not improved markedly over this period. What we have seen as the promise of regional graduate education in this half-decade has been limited primarily to Southern Africa and funded by South Africa without cooperative government support from outside. We do, however, see an important future role for regional graduate education and hope that the Pan-African University turns out to be part of that success. The experience in South Africa is encouraging, and we anticipate its replication in other regional centers such as Senegal, Kenya, Ghana, Nigeria, and by the Pan-Africa University.

The key goal for the future of higher education in Sub-Saharan Africa should be to focus on maintaining and expanding high-quality postgraduate education nationally. Those African states which are currently benefiting from economic growth should

channel some of these new financial gains into improved higher education and, where possible, in expanding or establishing high-quality graduate programs in key areas.

Critical to success will be the revival and expansion of the high quality research that has been carried out in the distant past, focusing on today's critical issues. That will help these graduate programs attract the brightest minds in Africa to support first-rate postgraduate education.

Such successes will not come easily and will require major investments in higher education by those governments that recognise the need and potential benefits of high-quality graduate programs for national development. Such recognition, however, requires governments to dedicate funding to support such programs, faculty members who are dedicated to high-quality research and teaching, committed students, and contributions from foreign governments, donors, and international organisations like the World Bank. They will need to listen carefully to the voices of Africa and harmonise their goals with those of educators dedicated to transformation. Such commitments will help create the conditions for the changes essential to establishing and expanding outstanding postgraduate programs in Africa—programs that will build on existing examples of excellence to produce first-class research, outstanding teaching, and high quality graduate programs.

This article draws on a study which will appear in full in the maiden issue of International Journal of African Higher Education.

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