

Widening access to University Education in Anglophone Africa: Problems and prospects*

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Abstract

Widening access to university level education in Anglophone Africa has been moving away gradually from rhetorical optimism and terminal naivety to the realm of political actualization of collective intentions of community modernization and growth. This is so because university education is being deconstructed to embrace the welfare, self-actualization, socio-economic and even political reconstruction of Africans, especially the poor, such that they do not remain the objects but effective subjects of change at the local and global platforms. This brief paper examines some of the ways in which Anglophone African nations have been widening access to university education in the midst of the challenges posed by poverty and massive sudden deaths arising from the HIV/AIDS pandemic plaguing the continent.

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Introduction

Placed within historical contexts, the changing landscapes in widening access to university education in Anglophone African countries can be said to be over half a century old. For the first universities modeled after Western traditions to be established came around in the late forties to early fifties. From the onset, the intention was to provide university education to all who demanded it for whatever reasons. However, there was the realization that not everybody could, in real terms, get access because of limited infrastructures and personnel at that time. Then special selection criteria were put in place in addition to the imposition of school fees which though were minimal at that time were high enough to deny access to children of the poor who may be qualified for university education. Then, the exigencies of the desire to provide political leadership encouraged politicians to begin to include the drive for access in their political manifestoes. However, the inclusion of access in the manifestoes did not automatically guarantee the actual implementation of the goal of access. What then appeared to be the most vivid articulation of access was the desire and design of politicians to import the discourse of access into political rhetorics and terminal naivety as actions in different Anglophone African countries did not match words. The immense and livid challenges imposed by socio-economic and political forces of modernization and, more scathingly by the “nauseating” globalization of the factors of production and social integration meant that political leaders had to engage in a re-think that ended up in the actualization of collective intentions of community modernization and growth through the widening of access to university education in Anglophone Africa. This brief paper examines some of the ways in which Anglophone African nations have been widening access to university education in the midst of the challenges posed by poverty and massive sudden deaths arising from the HIV/AIDS pandemic plaguing the continent. This discussion is placed in context of existing commonalities and issues surrounding the pursuit of equity, diversity and access, mature age entry, open and distance learning, E-learning and e-communities, accreditation of prior learning, community and private involvement in university education with specific reference to Botswana, Nigeria and South Africa. The paper proceeds with a discussion of the challenges posed by poverty and HIV/AIDS and

concludes with a highlight of how our limiting circumstances might, indeed, negate the global efforts to accelerate the widening of access to university education.

Anglophone Africa in Context

Anglophone Africa consists of English-Speaking African countries that are a part of the larger African continent. Africa itself covers an area of about 30 million km², and it is the third largest continent in the world. It has 53 independent states, 46 of which are situated on the continent itself, six are islands and archipelagos constituting states and (Equatorial Guinea) includes a continental territory and islands (Les editions J.A. 2002:24-55). In 2001, Africa was populated by 820 million people and with a year 2000 estimation of Gross National Revenue per inhabitant standing at 671 US Dollars on the average. That figure is perhaps 47 times lower than that of the United States (\$34,100) and almost 8 times lower than the global average (\$5,170). In 2000, Africa accounted for 11% of global trade in ores and minerals, 1% of world industrial output and just 1.8% of world trade (Les editions J.A. 2002:26). What this means is that the economy is still largely agrarian, and relies on foreign loans with commensurate high interest rates. This also means that after Africa's pleas for rescheduling of foreign debts are heeded, the continent remains compelled to adopt the Northern countries dictated stabilization policies and structural adjustment programmes that continue to pose immense challenges for accelerating the widening access to university education.

Africa has remained engrossed in conflicts, poverty, pandemic diseases, environmental degradation and adult illiteracy and political instabilities of immense dimensions (Oduaran, 2003:11-25). These problems remain high on the agenda of the development of Africa that has been colonised by the Arabs, Portuguese, British, Italians, French and Spanish at different times and in different locations. Africa remains a unique continent that is diverse in humankind, natural resources, ethnicity, culture, language and religion to which African University education has been urged to respond. Our emphasis is on Anglophone Africa that consists of Ghana, Liberia, Nigeria, Sierra-Leone and The Gambia in the West Coast, Kenya, Seychelles, Uganda, and Tanzania in the East Coast,

and Botswana, Lesotho, Malawi, Mauritius, Namibia, Swaziland, South Africa, Zambia and Zimbabwe in Southern Africa. The geographical spread is enormous, and so what we will be doing here is to illustrate some major points by drawing examples from some countries for illustration. That implies that we do not intend to generalize our discussion for the most part.

Universities as closed communities of scholars?

Anglophone African universities had hardly taken any firm root when the elites and illiterate Africans began criticising them for being conceived in colonial legacies. Their philosophies, objectives and characteristics were deemed to be incapable of preparing the people for effective competition in modern development. They were criticised for cultivating “new” closed communities of scholars who allow into their exclusive and cultural midst only those who possess the intellectual capacity and capability to be admitted into them (Yesufu, 1973:73; Ajayi and others, 1996:1 and Oduaran and Moremong, 2002:3). The culprits here were the University Colleges that had been established in Ghana, Sierra Leone, Nigeria, Kenya and Uganda.

People tended to forget or remained unappreciative of the fact that the universities had met the needs of the colonial enterprise for which it produced personnel who served in different capacities. They forgot that in spite of all the inadequacies, the universities had also virtually cultivated a new class of Africans who saw themselves as the champions of the movement for independent Africa, the first results of which began coming in 1957 when Ghana became independent just as Ethiopia had stemmed back the Italian occupation in much earlier times in the popular mass protest tagged as “Lay your hands off Abyssinia!”

Colonial Anglophone Africa did not experience any ICT revolution. It, however, experienced the importation of andragogy that was applied to different categories of learners. For the Departments of Extra Mural Studies that were established at Ibadan, Achimota, Nairobi and Kampala had begun to meet the needs of illiterate adults and

learners who wanted to continue learning in order to remedy their inadequate performances in overseas qualifying examinations right from the beginning. In fact, these pursuits were carried over to the postcolonial era.

The quest for equity, diversity and access

Beginning from the 1960s, most Anglophone African countries became independent. With independence, Africans had their destinies in their own hands, and most people agreed that nobody could be blamed for whatever went wrong with the socio-economic and political system. Colonial policies were revisited just as the political leaders sought to move the people in the “right” direction so that they could fulfill their dreams. The universities were no more expected to be 'carbon copies' of the European universities to which they were originally affiliated.

Between 1960 and 1970, post-colonial Anglophone Africa was characterised by an obvious search for the fastest means of personal and community development in the context of high optimism, and hope that what the people needed was rewarding socio-economic transformation. University education was expected then to be relevant in terms of contributing more positively to the process of providing competences to Africans whose skills were obsolete in the light of new challenges.

The new challenges to which university education was expected to respond included among others, how best the newly independent states could be assisted to consolidate their political sovereignty and initiate economic development paradigms and programmes that are capable of diversifying the factors of production whilst moving away from mono-cultural economies. The universities were required to embrace the challenges of widening access with an eye on quality, relevance, equality, equity and social justice.

Post-colonial universities were urged to confront head-on the issue of curricula review. The curricula pursued at the Yaba Higher College, Achimota College Fourah Bay and then the University College of Ibadan, the Khartoum University College (Sudan), the

Makerere University College, The Royal Technical College, Nairobi, as well as the College of Arts, Social Studies and Law, Dar-es-Salaam were deemed as rather too anachronistic and narrow to meet adequately the new challenges. People were disenchanted with manifest penchant for Latin, classics, religious studies, philosophies and arts. And they began to clamour for agricultural science, veterinary science, forestry, science, technology, architecture, commerce and medicine. The problems of inadequate access and pre-entry qualifications also meant that university education had to fill the gaps of providing for the not-so-hopeful to hopeful Africans in terms of equipping them for entry into universities.

The French speaking African countries were not left out in the transformations. For in addition to the Befelatanana School of Medicine that had been established in 1896, the University of Tananarive, the Aix-Marseille Faculty of Law and the Institutes of Higher Studies, Dakar and Tananarive had been pressured into Africanising their curricular in order to be relevant and decolonised (Ade-Ajayi and others, 1996:59).

Similarly, the Lovanium University Centre, Kinshasa (established in 1954), the Free University Campus, Kisangani and the State University of Lubumbashi (Elizabethville), all of which were mainly Belgian initiatives, were equally required to respond to the new challenges of relevance and modernisation. That was the same expectation required to the Pius XII College of Lesotho, Roma, the Liberia University, Haile Selassie 1 University (Ethiopia) and the University College of Rhodesia and Nyasaland. They were not only asked to provide relevant curricular but broaden access to higher education, reach out to sixth form studies and counter racism. The battle against racism in university education had become very strong just as the Fort Hare College was pursuing an agenda that favoured apartheid.

Countering apartheid in higher education in South Africa had a bridgehead in 1916 when the University Acts enacted by the Union Government paved way for the inauguration of the University of South Africa and the Universities of Cape Town and Stellenbosch.

Here, it was the pursuit of the goals of redressing imbalance in university education and continuing education, in particular, this time in favour of black Africans.

The University of South Africa (UNISA) provides a good case study of what post-colonial universities were expected to do in response to the demands for rapid expansion of access to university education. Access had been limited not just by financial means but also by accommodation. It was in this situation that the University of South Africa (UNISA) undertook the initiation of external degree studies in 1945. Unfortunately, so to say, the greater proportion of university age students availing themselves of the opportunity offered by the correspondence format was whites. For example, out of about 5,000 students in Cape Town in 1959, 461 of them were multi-racial, 133 Asian and just 39 of them were Africans (Ade-Ajayi and others, 1996:71).

The demand for relevance and widening access was followed by that of the need to break down ivory towerism. The universities were required to adapt themselves to the people's circumstances, meet needs and reflect the hopes of those for whom they were established in the first place. So, responsive and social adult education and extension classes in agriculture, public administration, African studies and education were vital in terms of meeting new goals that had been unmet under colonial provisions.

The post-colonial initiatives in widening access have been spectacular in several Anglophone African countries, but space limitations will not allow much room for any detail mention, suffice it to say that universities experimented with several policies that possibly motivated a sharp increase in the demand for university education.

Selected Policies and Practices in Widening Access from the 1990s

Anglophone Africa, probably in recognition of and response to international emphasis on the modernization of access, has endeavoured to engage in the formulation, adoption and implementation of policies aimed at broadening access. The 1994 Revised National Policy on Education in Botswana, for example, adopted the principle of widening access to all levels of education, including to its only university, the University of Botswana, as

a worthy national course of action. Towards achieving that policy objective, the Republic of Botswana increased its commitment to providing more lecture, staff and students accommodation spaces such that more of its citizens can have access to university education. There was also a deliberate attempt to employ more qualified local and international staff in a major move to reduce the previously wide gaps in staff-student ratios. Beyond that pursuit, the University of Botswana adopted a policy that sought to ensure that facilities are provided with a view to easing the problems of physically challenged persons who might want to avail themselves of the new opportunity provided for university education insofar they are able to benefit from so doing. In attempting to meet the needs for university education by physically challenged persons, the University of Botswana has recent times been upgrading its physical structures so that they can be much more user friendly. For example, many of the big physical structures have sidewalks that allow for the easy mobility of physically challenged persons.

Botswana has now adopted and is promoting a policy of gender mainstreaming in all facets of national life. Gender mainstreaming has been extended to widening access to university education and, indeed, to specific courses or programmes that had been allegedly dominated by male candidates, especially the sciences and engineering.

Both Nigeria and South Africa provide no less excellent examples deliberate attempts to modify the landscapes of widening access. In both countries, there are national consensus and policy aimed at promoting and implementing the widening of access to university education.

Nigeria's National Policy on Education (Revised 1981, p.7) in Section 1, paragraph 1 clearly enunciated government's plans to ensure that everyone was afforded an opportunity within and outside the formal school system to acquire as much education as s/he can at the primary, secondary and tertiary levels so that each person is able to contribute meaningfully to national development. In Section 5 of the National Policy on Education (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1981, pp.22-27) clearly articulated how it intends to widen access to higher education, especially in the universities, such that everyone that demands university education would have a fair chance of being selected. It is probably with this intent that the government has initiated some programmes and

actions that have changed the landscape of widening access to university education. A brief highlight of some of these innovations may be useful here.

Nigeria has urged its universities to ensure that everyone who is afforded the opportunity of university education equitably develops his or her intellectual capacities to be able to understand and appreciate their environments whether it is internal or external. In anticipation of the global changes that may impact on universities in Nigeria, Section 5, paragraph 34 (1) has stipulated that there is need to diversify university programmes for the development of high level manpower within the context of the needs of the economy, without any prejudice to intellectual training in the basic sciences and the liberal arts (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1981, p.22). Since 1981, Nigeria has increased its number of universities to 41 with a total of 389, 846 students as at 2002 (Omolewa, 2002, pp. 115-118). In order to ensure quality university education and to guarantee that university programmes and courses reflect national needs, Nigeria has put in place what it calls the National Universities Commission (NUC) and another government agency called Joint Admissions and Matriculation Board (JAMB) in order to ensure that educationally disadvantaged states within the country are not left behind. Although an agency such as JAMB tries to ensure equitable representation of all states in the university education in terms of enrolment, it is in a way a contradiction of the principles of justice and equity in terms of widening access.

The changing landscape of widening access to university education in Nigeria has brought in the adoption of the new methodologies by the National Open University (NOU) that had been scrapped by the military in the early 1981 but that is now re-introduced by the civilian administration of Chief Olusegun Obasanjo, President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. The National Open University itself is a kind of welcome development in a situation where incessant staff work stoppages are almost paralyzing the very intent of having universities to meet the learning needs of people.

Other than having the innovation with new technologies provided by ICTs, Nigeria has allowed the flourishing of privately owned universities most of which are owned by Christian Missionaries in recent times. Apart from expanding access to university education, these private universities seem poised to set standards for the government owned and run universities of adequate funding, equipment and staff stability. One other

good challenge such universities bring to bear on the scene is their stable offer of services and providing programmes and courses in selected areas of interest. Although it might be too early to say if these universities will be able to face up to the challenges of more global competition that lay ahead of them, they provide a much needed alternative to often epileptic services that are provided by government-owned and run universities.

As a way of broadening out the possibility of gaining admission into the universities, many of the universities have mature entry schemes that allow applicants who are 35 years old and over to be admitted if they there are proofs that they can cope and benefit from university education. Most universities in Nigeria also have continuing education programmes for professionals and youths who do meet the entry requirements.

Even though Nigeria has allowed room for so many innovative practices and policies in recent times, it has kept an eye on quality education as could be seen in its decision two years ago to scrap almost all academic outreaches that the State universities were experimenting with in the guise of widening access. Although it has not been possible to establish through research why it did so, it was alleged that many of the academic outreaches were operating without regards to the laid down minimum standards. The National Open University and academic sandwich programmes are already filling the gaps in supply of university education. Much of the progress that has been made in terms of widening access to university education has been reduced in importance by the poor state of basic infrastructures in Nigeria.

South Africa provides another excellent example of the changing landscape of widening access. South Africa has extended its affirmative action programme to the frontiers of widening access. By affirmative action, South Africa seeks to correct the injustices of the past which had meant the exclusion of certain persons from benefiting from the socio-economic and political programmes and actions of government. At the moment, there is no discrimination against any South African on account of colour, creed and socio-economic standing in terms of gaining access to university education. If anything at all, the government of the Republic of South Africa is openly encouraging its universities to Absorb as many of its citizens as are qualified for admission.

Towards broadening the qualification base for admission into its universities, South Africa has established a qualifications framework that recognizes prior learning and

accrediting courses from a wide range of professional training outside the walls of its universities. The recognition of prior learning together with the adoption of the mature entry scheme has meant that more and more South Africans can avail themselves of university education. Moreover, South Africa has endorsed and is applying the virtual approach to learning in terms of encouraging the adoption of ICTs as a means of further widening access. The University of South Africa, popularly known as UNISA, has impressive sub-continental university extension programme that guarantees wider access to university education not just for her citizens but citizens of the neighbouring countries such as Botswana, Lesotho, Namibia, Swaziland and so on. By virtue of this innovative approach of adopting the distance learning mode, South Africa has contributed significantly to encouraging the nearby nations to equally follow suit. For example, the nations of Botswana, Lesotho, Namibia and Swaziland have all established either evening university programmes or distance learning programmes. In Botswana, for example, there is the Distance Education Unit at the Centre for Continuing Education, University of Botswana that has programmes leading towards the award of the Diploma in Adult Education, Diploma in Primary Education, Bachelor of Business Studies degree in marketing, business and accounting, Masters of Education Degree in Educational Administration whilst its Extra-Mural Studies Unit provides evening academic programmes that geared towards the award of the Certificate and Diploma in accounting and business.

Common Themes

Perhaps one indication of an almost uniform approach to addressing the need to widen access to university education is the emergence of some common themes within prevailing policies and practices in Anglophone Africa. For many countries in the bloc, it is possible to identify the near commonality in the pursuit of policies that have the core objectives of equality, diversity and access as is the case with Botswana, Nigeria and South Africa. Moreover, there is a seemingly vigorous pursuit of mature age entry schemes, open and distance learning, e-learning and e-communities, accreditation of prior learning. It is common to find in the three countries highlighted a constant call on

community and private sector involvement in university education. In Botswana, for example, the University of Botswana has come up with an endowment fund to which the community and the industrial sectors are contributing funds for the upgrading of facilities and award of scholarship to indigent students and/or intelligent students. In Nigeria, private sector involvement in widening access to university education has ensured the emergence of at least three privately owned universities, namely the Igbinedion University at Okada in Edo State, the Madonna University in the former Eastern Region and the Benson Idahosa University also in Edo State of Nigeria. Each of the identified common themes can be explored much further elsewhere.

All the Anglophone African countries are apparently contending with a number of challenges in spite of the achievements already highlighted. It does mean that the aspect of common challenges is a partly a theme that can be briefly explored.

The Challenges

Whist it may not be possible to quickly identify some of the major reasons that possibly prompt governments in Anglophone Africa into enacting policies and actions aimed at widening access to university education, it may not be out of place to suggest that the demand for university education by their citizens has grown over the years. In spite of the efforts that have been made to widen access to university education, there are several countries where the demand for university education is far exceeding the supply of the same. One can say that about Nigeria and Botswana where the available spaces cannot actually accommodate those who are actually qualified for university education. Limited financial outlays could be one possible explanation for that phenomenon. One way of the dilemma in the case of Nigeria is to introduce fees in the universities even when the sponsors of learners do not have visible income that can keep their wards in the universities. Again, downsizing the public service workforce to further complicate the high rate of unemployment in Nigeria has meant that innovative practices in widening access could only benefit the “lucky” few who can afford university education.

Whatever achievements that Botswana has made in terms of widening access have been diminished by the apparent limited admission spaces at the University of Botswana. In recent times, the University of Botswana can hardly admit one-third of candidates who are qualified for admission. Botswana is now proposing the inauguration of a second university as a part solution to its inability to make university education available to all who need it. Part of the Botswana response to its inability to meet the demand for university education within its shores is to send to South Africa, Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States some of its brilliant youths who cannot be admitted in its only university.

One common challenge that has been unaddressed as far as far as widening access is concerned is the failure to redress the uneven distribution of students by discipline in many Anglophone African countries. Consequently, the labour needs of the countries are not adequately being met in the context of globalization over which we have no control, whether ordinarily or absolutely.

Conclusion: Hope in Despair

The peculiar and direct challenges presented above are by no means the only ones that can be identified in Anglophone Africa. There are many competing needs in Africa with the result that government investment in university education is rapidly declining. As Ogot and Weidman (1993, pp1-24) put it, government budgets in Africa have been inadequate to fund the actual needs of institutions of higher learning. That is situation that universities are grappling with at the moment. On the one hand they are being requested to widen access, and on another they are being told to do so even with shrinking budgets. In essence, the universities have been cornered into buying into the commodification of university education, and university administrators are standing thereby in a hapless manner. The universities are being asked to diversify their resource base through cost-recovery measures and charge fees for students and for services to non-university constituencies and more vigorous pursuit of contracts and consultancies even if these meant allowing the strict academic functions to diminish in frequency and quality. Therein lies the dilemma of the Anglophone African universities that are left with no

choice but to go to parliamentarians and other “do gooders” with caps in hands begging for scarce resources.

As if the limited resource base that have excluded the listing of our universities among the 500 top ranking universities in the world is not sufficient, the sub-continent is groaning under the pressure of massive poverty. Apart from Botswana, Ghana, South Africa, Lesotho, Namibia and Swaziland, the 2003 UNDP Human Development Report listed all the Anglophone Africa countries under the low human development index (UNDP, 2003, pp. 239). It is not strange therefore that the universities are being asked to charge all sorts of fees in contradiction of policies that seek to widen access to university education.

By far the greatest despair with which the countries are grappling with is the prevalence of HIV/AIDS. In fact, this paper will make little meaning without the mention of the impact of HIV/AIDS on the widening of access to university education. In another presentation, I drew attention to the fact that Sub-Saharan Africa which harbours all the Anglophone African countries recorded between 25 and 28.2 million people living with HIV in 2003, and that by that same year between 2.2 and 2.4 million people had died from AIDS (Oduaran, 2004, pp.1-24). That is instructive for those of us who are interested in widening access. The point is that you may be seeking to widen access to those whose life expectancy falls below 35 with the consequence that while developing intellectual capital on the one hand, on the other you run the risk of losing all your investments to the graves that are constantly being dug to bury those in whose hands our future rests.. Our hope is hanging on the danger of a problem that has defiled every investment that we are making. That is our dilemma.

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