African Ivy
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[redacted]

Dear, Mr Epstein,

As a supporter and philanthropist of higher education in the United States I thought I would reach out to see if your foundation could be of any assistance to an initiative to improve higher education in Africa.

I recently penned an article (attached) stating why I thought Africa needed an elite 'Ivy League' higher education institution to reverse rock bottom standards and assure its future. I received good feedback and subsequently decided to set up an initiative to explore turning this into reality.

For a novice this is obviously daunting but immensely exciting thinking of the potential end result. I am thus in the process of reaching out to organisations or philanthropists who may consider supporting this initiative. Not necessarily financial at this stage but contacts who may be interested in a new project or simply advice from organisations/foundations who have been involved in funding and higher education about potential courses of actions

I do hope you get a chance to read the article and let me know your thoughts.

Sincerely,

Sharif Labo.

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Why Africa Needs Its Own Ivy League Institution

Africa is suffering from high graduate unemployment and many of its best students and researchers are flocking overseas. Could an African elite university turn this around?

ARTICLE | 20 APRIL 2013 - 4:10PM | BY SHARIF LABO

Students hang out outside a lecture room of the University of El Geneina, West Darfur. Photograph by Albert Gonzalez Farran/UNAMID

Casual readers of optimistic headlines about Africa's high growth rates and record levels of foreign investment might be forgiven for thinking all is well on the continent – or at least that, with 'Africa Rising', all will be well before too long. But many of the perspectives and figures underlying these simplistic narratives obscure the complex reality of rising inequality, success in only certain specific sectors, and – crucially – jobless growth.

Indeed, on the continent itself, there is a rising sense that Africa's growth isn't creating enough jobs for the millions entering the labour market each year. By some estimates, 50% of young people in South Africa, and 40% in Kenya and the DRC, are unemployed. In Nigeria, approximately 30 million youths are jobless. And the International Labour Organisation estimates that in 2012, 247 million workers in sub-Saharan Africa were in vulnerable employment. Also worrying is the fact that having an education does not seem to help. In response to an advert for 100 drivers in Nigeria last year, the Dangote Group received 13,000 applicants including 8,460 with bachelor degrees, 704 with masters and 6 with PhDs. With Africa's youth population expected to double by 2045, this could prove to be a ticking time bomb; one only needs to look at the likes of Tunisia and Egypt for a forewarning of what a growing numbers of highly-educated unemployed young people can lead to.

Broadly-speaking, there are two ways of looking at the problem: 1) the economy's *demand* for labour isn't sufficiently strong to generate enough jobs because growth isn't fast enough and/or the sectors which are growing are not labour intensive enough; or 2) the *supply* of potential workers isn't appropriately educated and skilled for the jobs that could be available.

In reality, both are true. However, the latter can influence the former, and it is the latter to which we will now turn.

Seeking studies overseas

As high levels of unemployment amongst graduates suggests, African universities are churning out armies of job seekers rather than job creators. Higher education does not even appear to be correlated with higher employment in a number of places. In Uganda, for example, 19% of Ugandan graduates are unemployed, compared to 7% of secondary school leavers. And in Nigeria, graduates are 5% less likely to be employed than those with just a basic education.

On top of this, many of Africa's best students are choosing to study abroad. According to figures from 2006, one out of every sixteen students in sub-Saharan Africa is enrolled outside the continent, and some countries even have more students abroad than at home. Nigerian students are estimated to spend $500 million annually in Western universities, a staggering 70% of the national university budget.

But it's not just students who have fled. Half the continent's researchers, according to estimates, are in Europe, driven abroad by poor facilities and salaries up to 20 times lower. Unsurprisingly then, Africa's output of research is amongst the lowest globally.

So what's gone wrong? To start with, investment has not kept up with the growth in student numbers. Between 1991 and 2006, the number of students in higher education exploded from 2.7 million to 9.3 million, a growth of 16% annually, but expenditure only grew by 6%; investment has remained at 20% of educational budgets.

Meanwhile, funding from international donors has increasingly concentrated on basic education, believing this is the best way to alleviate poverty. In the late-1980s, 17% of the World Bank's global educational spending used to be focused on higher education, but this had declined to 7% by the late-1990s.

This might suggest that the solution to Africa's higher education problems is simply more funding. This is undoubtedly important, but alone will not be sufficient. Giving campuses a fresh lick of paint and new computers isn't suddenly going to attract leading scholars and students ahead of the global competition.

Africa's Ivy League

Instead, a more radical shift is needed to give Africa's tertiary education a boost. One possibility is building an African 'Ivy League' institution.

The US is what it is today in large part because it advances the most revolutionary science and is home to ground-breaking firms. Institutions like Stanford University and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) have been instrumental in this process by attracting the brightest from across the globe to solve the hardest problems.

If Africa had such an elite institution, it could potentially attract leading scholars, train students with the skills society needs, and help reverse the brain drain and capital flight. Perhaps most importantly, it could also act as a beacon of excellence for others colleges on the continent.

Many will no doubt question the wisdom of concentrating funds on one university when it could be disbursed amongst many, but the current system clearly does not seem to be working, and the benefit of elite institutions elsewhere – economically, socially and in raising the standard for education more broadly – is plain to see. Stanford University's alumni, for example, have founded companies that generate more than $2.7 trillion in annual revenue – equivalent to the 10th largest economy in the world – while MIT's alumni have sales of $2 trillion. Crucially, these benefits are spread nationally and globally.

Furthermore, there are strong pragmatic reasons an African elite university should be appealing. At the moment, the most prestigious African journals are published in Oxford and Yale but surely it would be more practical to do research on Africa in Africa. Studies into tropical diseases, agriculture and public policy would surely be best conducted on the continent so academics can work with professionals at the coalface.

A worthy challenge

The battleground of the future will be fought on ideas and technology. Many countries are preparing for this by investing in institutions modelled on the world's best. Qatar invited and funded Georgetown and Cornell Universities to set up satellite campuses in Doha. The King Abdullah University of Science and Technology in Saudi Arabia opened in 2009 with a $10 billion endowment and has recruited its leaders from institutions such as the California Institute of Technology (currently the top-ranked university globally). China is investing $250 billion a year in building a world-class education system, and the rise of Asia has notably been accompanied by a corresponding rise to prominence of Asian universities. Meanwhile, in Africa, only one university – the University of Cape Town – is ranked in the world's top 200.

Creating an African elite university able to compete with the world's best will undoubtedly be immensely challenging. Many millions would need to be raised, and the funnelling of resources into one institution could necessarily mean less funding for other initiatives. In fact, politically and financially, a regional institution may make more sense than a national or pan-continental one. Furthermore, given intense global competition, it is hardly a foregone conclusion that the best students and researchers would immediately rush to enrol. Building a gleaming campus is one thing, but building a reputation for excellence is necessarily a long-term project.

However, despite the challenges, this would be a project worth striving for. In a global marketplace where human capital is increasingly the differentiator, Africa needs its own incubator of ideas to compete and kick-start the reform of higher education. An elite university that Africans can be proud of could make a real sustainable difference to the continent and provide a lasting legacy for the future of Africa.

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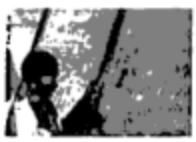
For further reading around the subject see:

Africa's Jobless Growth?

Africa's 'Demographic Dividend': The Youth Will Decide



Africa's Two-Speed Education and Classrooms without Walls

About the Author »

Sharif Labo

Sharif is a MSc student at the LSE with a BSc in Economics from the University of Surrey. He can be contacted at [redacted]

ADD NEW COMMENT

Comments

by Desne Masie on 23 April 2013 - 9:49pm

What about South Africa's Business Schools - GIBS, UCT GSB, Stellenbosch GSB and WITS Business School are all world-class and extremely highly regarded internationally. GIBS normally does particularly well in the FT rankings...

by Sharif Labo on 25 April 2013 - 8:33pm

Desne; The article does mention UCT is in the top 200 Times Global University ranking but generally South Africa does tend to be the exception rather than the rule in Sub-Saharan Africa on a range of issues including education.

by Lori on 24 April 2013 - 8:51pm

Thanks for your article, Sharif. The African Regional Initiative in Science and Education (RISE) works towards the same goals of reversing brain drain and supporting a culture of research excellence on the continent. RISE uses the network model and leverages the strengths of science departments at multiple universities and institutes to train students. If you're interested, you can read more about it at http://sig.ias.edu/rise.