

What is the Commonwealth's role in higher education?

John Kirkland

Higher education has not always been well represented in Commonwealth discussions. Until fairly recently, the sages of the international development community lined up to tell us that it simply wasn't important enough.

Happily, times have changed. The last few years have seen grudging recognition that higher education is critical to social and economic development. The Commonwealth is playing its part in this new consensus. The 18th Conference of Commonwealth Education Ministers in 2012 (18CCEM) supported the growing calls for higher education to be recognised explicitly in successors to the Millennium Development Goals. The 2015 conference, 19CCEM, will be asked to reinforce this demand.

The agenda for this ministers' meeting also includes a special session on higher education for the first time. This is welcome – but will inevitably raise the question – what can the Commonwealth actually *do* in the field? Resources are always tight for the official Commonwealth. This is particularly so in the area of education. Despite this, there are several reasons why the Commonwealth can, and should, get more involved in higher education.

Higher education is important – as evidenced by the huge response to the Association of Commonwealth Universities' (ACU) recent consultation on how it can better advance development objectives. It is also naturally suited to international collaboration – leading universities are global institutions already. There is clear potential for mutual benefit in higher education. In developed countries, universities have become dangerously dependent on overseas students, while developing countries continue to have unmet demand for it. Higher education is experiencing rapid change – the need for objective international advice is greater than ever.

Higher education is an area in which the Commonwealth can draw on existing branding – not least the 30,000-plus individuals who have benefited from Commonwealth Scholarships – and the work of several bodies that are already prominent in the area. The ACU brings together 540 universities throughout the Commonwealth. The Commonwealth of Learning, an inter-governmental body established to focus on open and distance learning, gives higher education a high profile. The recently set up Commonwealth Tertiary Education Facility aims to provide a source of independent analysis to policy makers.

Defining the issues

The paper to be considered by ministers focuses on four issues – cost and access; relations between higher education and employment; generating the next generation of academics; and staff and student mobility. This does not pretend to be a comprehensive agenda for higher education, but one that is

particularly suited to Commonwealth initiatives.

At face value, access is increasing massively. Higher education enrolments are projected to increase from 100 million at the turn of the century to around 260 million in 2025. Nearly all of the growth in the next decade will come from developing countries. These increases are demand-led – reflecting, in particular, the rise in qualified candidates coming through secondary education. Kenya provides a typical example – public universities increased their numbers by 487 per cent in the decade to 2012, and 219 per cent in the last three years of that period alone. Despite this, 57 per cent of qualified school leavers could still not be offered a place.

Rapid expansion does not necessarily produce greater equity. Commentators in both Asia and Africa have warned that too rapid an expansion could compromise quality. If it does, then first-generation students, whose families have made the greatest sacrifice and who are less able to access international or private sector alternatives, will suffer most. Worse still, confidence in higher education might erode, with disastrous consequences for universities and wider society.

Much of the demand can be met by the private sector – a broad term that embraces commercial, for-profit, not-for-profit and charitable or religious foundations. There is also a wide range of new delivery options, including the much lauded massive open online courses (MOOCs), which make the content of thousands of higher education courses freely available. Regulatory systems in both developed and developing countries have struggled to keep up with the challenges of enforcing quality, but the critical role that non-public institutions play is now widely accepted. A decade ago, it was common to ask questions about 'the role of the private sector'. In future, there will be equal pressure on *public* institutions to justify the distinctive role that they play to justify their investment. In doing so, they will stress equity, research, community engagement and the ability to teach a full range of subjects.

The ability to deliver employable graduates is vital to both sectors. Students entering higher education expect long-term career benefits from their investment. While there is overwhelming evidence to suggest that increasing graduate numbers will support economic growth, international experience points to significant time lags. However well universities perform their role, jobs will not be created at the same rapid rate as student numbers. The result may be a decrease in the differential between graduate and non-graduate employment, with graduates finding jobs hard to come by in those occupations traditionally associated with university education, and having to look elsewhere. The resulting frustration will not only damage universities, but society as a whole.

Moreover, employer needs do not only relate to technical ability. In many countries, they report a mismatch between the skills of



University of Nigeria, Nsukka

To restore the dignity of man

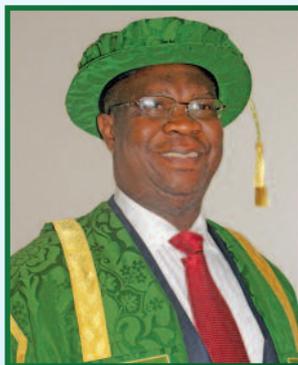
The University of Nigeria was established as a land-grant university on the eve of Nigeria's independence in October 1960, making it Nigeria's first indigenous and autonomous university.

Its mandate, as prescribed by its founder and Nigeria's first President, Rt. Hon. Dr Nnamdi Azikiwe, was to provide the manpower needed to build the newly independent black nation.

Benefiting from the mentorship and technical assistance of Michigan State University, USA, and the University of Exeter, UK, the University of Nigeria built a reputation for excellence and is credited with many inventions and discoveries while its graduates often excel, even in the diaspora.

The University has since grown in leaps and bounds to become one of Nigeria's most reputable universities and, with a student enrolment of nearly 40,000, it is also one of its largest. As a comprehensive university, degrees are offered in courses under 16 faculties, including Agriculture, Arts, Biological Sciences, Business Administration, Dentistry, Education, Engineering, Environmental Sciences, Health Sciences, Law, Medicine and Surgery, Pharmacy, Physical Sciences, Social Sciences and Veterinary Medicine.

At the helm of affairs of this University is its 14th Vice-Chancellor, Professor **Benjamin Chukwuma Ozumba**. An astute administrator, Prof Ozumba has an enviable record of accomplishment of achievements



Vice-Chancellor, Prof. Benjamin Chukwuma Ozumba MB BS MD MRCOG FRCOG FACOG FACS

within the academic and administrative circles of his career as a Professor of Obstetrics and Gynaecology as well as Dean of the Faculty of Medicine and former Provost of the University's College of Medicine. Within weeks of taking the office of Vice-Chancellor, he restored peace and tranquility within the campuses as well as improved relationships among the students.

This move has led to the seamless appointment of Heads of Department and Units as well as conducting successful elections of Deans into the various faculties of the University.

This served as a prelude to his visionary mission of a stable pedestal towards achieving his priorities:

- Enhanced research capabilities and re-equipped laboratories
- Expanded external contacts in favour of UNN
- Enhanced knowledge and usage of ICT by staff
- Improved standards in ethics utilisation orientation
- Infrastructural development
- Improved internet services

- Maintained and improved upon on-going projects
- General staff welfare through collaboration with international bodies
- Attracted further grants from international bodies

In his quest for excellence, the Vice-Chancellor has over the past six months accelerated making good on his promises at inauguration in the following areas:

- Successfully hosted the accreditation panel from the National Universities Commission.
- Facilitated various committee efforts at improving the University's global visibility.
- Celebrated the University's 54th Founder's Day and provided the platform for interaction with the Alumni and Government on the Vice-Chancellor's strategic development agenda.
- Successfully hosted his first convocation ceremony (January 2015) by graduating 15,904 students. There were four honorary degree award recipients from the government and private sectors. Two serving professors of the University were rewarded for excellence as professors emeriti.



graduates and employment needs. All too often, this relates to 'soft skills' such as the ability to work in teams and analyse information. Universities have introduced innovative means to meet this gap – supervised work experience, individual assessments, and project and team exercises are all examples. Often, however, these require exactly the type of intensive teaching methods that are threatened by excessive growth in student numbers.

Wherever it is provided, high-quality education requires qualified staff. Yet in most countries the growth in numbers has not been matched by an equal rise in resources. Nor is it clear where such staff will come from. Countries such as Malaysia, Pakistan, South Africa and Kenya have all set ambitious targets to increase the proportion of academic staff that hold doctorates. Meeting these goals will require a combination of increased domestic capacity and international partnerships. More could also be done to utilise well-qualified teachers already in the system. Studies by the ACU and others show that the early years of an academic career can be a deeply frustrating experience, with post-doctoral staff reporting a deep sense of isolation.

A further issue is international mobility. The number of students studying outside their own country will continue to be a small minority of total university enrolments – but can be disproportionately important for both sending and receiving countries. There is a need to ensure not only that such opportunities grow, but that they are mutually beneficial and evenly spread geographically. Mobility must not relate only to students moving from the south to the north. The potential for new types of mobility and exchange, often instigated by universities themselves, is enormous. Moreover, plans for academic mobility must relate to staff as well as students. Yet staff opportunities tend to be less well publicised and easily become focused on elites in the profession. The majority of staff in higher education experience little international contact. We know too little about their needs.

What can the Commonwealth do?

These are big issues – too big to be solved by any single international agency or initiative. Yet the Commonwealth has mechanisms that already bring together the key stakeholders –

governments, universities, employers, students and civil society more widely. By exercising this potential, it can act as a real catalyst for change elsewhere. To this end, several initiatives are already in place:

- The Commonwealth Scholarship and Fellowship Plan provides international study opportunities for more than 1,000 students each year, embracing both conventional and new teaching methods, such as distance learning and split-site scholarships
- The Commonwealth of Learning continues to innovate on new delivery methods that bring education (including higher education) to previously excluded groups
- The ACU has started new funds, specifically intended to bring international exposure to students and early career staff who have not previously had such opportunities
- The Commonwealth Secretariat, in conjunction with the ACU, has successfully established an endowment fund to support international post-graduate scholarships in low- and middle-income countries – a contribution towards two-way mobility
- The recently established Commonwealth Tertiary Education Facility is establishing a major project to look at the supply of doctoral education, particularly in Africa
- By identifying relations between higher education and employment as a key topic for its 2016 Conference of Executive Heads, the ACU is providing a vital forum for exchange of experiences between sectors and countries

Individually, these initiatives are small compared with the size of the problems that they seek to address. Promoted together, they represent a good starting point for a Commonwealth-wide presence. What is needed now is clear endorsement and support from member governments, which must demonstrate the will to use the Commonwealth as a means of achieving their objectives. The forthcoming ministers' conference will be vital in determining whether that will exists.

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