

SOUTHERN AFRICA: Study identifies 20 HE challenges

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A study of higher education in 15 countries of the Southern African Development Community, SADC, has identified 20 leadership challenges facing the region, governments and institutions. They range from improved data collection, access, student success, staffing and funding to policy and planning, capacity, infrastructure, private provision and quality. The challenges identified, says a just-published report of the study, show the considerable amount of work needed to build a strong and sustainable higher education system across the region.

The Southern African Regional Universities Association (SARUA), the organisation representing vice-chancellors of public universities in SADC, commissioned several studies in 2008 designed to provide baseline information on higher education in Southern Africa. The studies were reported earlier this year.

Now SARUA has published the first in a Leadership Dialogue Series, titled *Leadership Challenges for Higher Education in Southern Africa*. The series is edited by SARUA Chief Executive Piyushi Kotecha and the first report is written by her, Pam Watson and Enver Motala. It highlights 20 leadership challenges identified from the 2008 research.

The aim is to provide evidence to inform higher education policy and practice in Southern Africa, and to broadly disseminate information and ideas. "We want to ensure that we find Southern African answers to Southern African problems within a Southern African context," writes Kotecha in the foreword. "It is of utmost importance that we formulate a unique response to the challenges we face and not merely duplicate global 'best practice'."

SADC comprises 15 countries with various histories and cultures, and uneven economic and social development. "The region suffers from a high degree of poverty and from the worst HIV-Aids crisis in the world. In addition, challenges include high infant mortality rates, low life expectancies, low literacy rates, low gross domestic products, low levels of technology development, and low levels of education participation," says the report.

The SARUA research found that SADC has 66 public universities, 119 publicly-funded polytechnics or colleges and 178 private universities or colleges.

South Africa has 23 of the public universities and 70% of overall enrolments in the region. Five of the 15 countries - Angola, Botswana, Lesotho, Namibia and Swaziland - have a single public university. In other countries, numbers range from two in Malawi and Mauritius to nine in Zimbabwe. Zambia has three public universities, Democratic Republic of the Congo and Mozambique have four, Madagascar has six and Tanzania has eight. The 15th SADC country is Seychelles.

Private higher education institutions outnumber public institutions in all SADC countries but most enrolments are in public institutions and 72% are in contact study.

SADC has very low gross tertiary enrolment ratios - the proportion of 18- to 24-year-olds in post-secondary education - according to the SARUA research. Most countries fall into the 2-4% range. Only Mauritius (16% in 2005) and South Africa (14%) have tertiary gross enrolment ratios of above 8%. In comparison, the world-mean on this statistic for lower and middle-income countries currently stands at 19%.

The report points out that the notion of regional cooperation in higher education in Africa is not new. The earliest agreement was the 1981 Arusha Convention on the recognition of qualifications. The 1997 SADC Protocol on Education has sections devoted to cooperation in higher education and on research and development. The same goals are set by 2007 African Union Harmonisation Policy for Higher Education.

"However, not much progress has been made to date on any of these policy commitments, despite there being little quarrel with the underlying rationale of cooperation for system development and enhancement. Particularly in countries where higher education is limited, regional cooperation could be a valuable aid at many levels. Combating isolation and developing a community of peers are probably the most important of these," the report says.

"But this cooperation is made difficult by different systems, a lack of data and a lack of planning capacity, as well as by restrictions on movement in the region and differing national priorities."

Further, the report points out, the issue of regionalisation and what it might mean for national higher education systems is still relatively unexplored. But, given strong, competitive blocs in many parts of the world, it is assumed that unless SADC countries act together they will remain marginal in international development - or might fall even further behind.

Following decades of neglect, high education in Africa has been boosted by growing recognition on the part of governments, multilateral agencies and donors of the sector's critical importance to national and regional development. This opportunity, says SARUA, must be used "to work towards the revitalisation of higher education in Southern Africa, and to develop our systems so that they can contribute to regional upliftment more broadly."

Southern Africa's 20 higher education challenges

1- Data collection and availability

There is a lack of data on higher education in countries and in the region. "Accurate and comparable data is essential for system planning, for understanding where capacity lies and where it is lacking, for research and for collaboration efforts." There is a need to align definitions, and to begin setting compatible educational data collection systems in place.

2- Access

There are just over a million higher education students in SADC countries, the SARUA research found, more than 70% of them in South Africa. Although enrolments have grown rapidly in the past decade, there has not been a commensurate increase in resourcing and student access remains too low across the region. There are critical shortages in the areas of health sciences, engineering and teacher education, and deep gender disparities in about half of the countries. Sufficient funding is crucial for increased access and student success.

3- Postgraduate registrations

There are around 57,700 masters and 10,600 doctoral students in SADC, most of them in South Africa. Postgraduate registrations are thus critically low through much of the region, impacting on high level skills available. Developing greater capacity for postgraduate training - especially qualified staff - must be a priority.

4- Student success

There are low overall graduation numbers, particularly at postgraduate level - just over 180,000 degrees awarded, around 1,300 at doctoral level. Success rates for the region are 15% for undergraduate programmes, 40% for postgraduate diplomas, 20% for masters degrees and 13% for doctoral degrees. "There is an acknowledged need to improve graduate outputs and the throughputs of individual degrees. Student support mechanisms are crucial to this achievement." There is also a need to ensure a match between outputs and economic need, given graduate unemployment in some countries.

5- Staffing

There is a critical shortage of qualified staff throughout SADC. There are some 32,500 academic and research staff (13,600 outside South Africa). The main reasons are lack of resourcing, poor working conditions and lack of facilities for research - exacerbated by a brain drain and the impact of HIV-Aids. Only 26% of academics have PhDs, and there are gender imbalances in staffing. Attracting and retaining highly qualified and experienced staff is a priority, but it unlikely to occur in the absence of resources. There are mechanisms to attract and retain qualified staff, which could be enhanced by development initiatives, exchanges and qualifications upgrading schemes, and regional mechanisms for staff mobility.

6- Funding

Higher education in SADC has been under-funded for decades. Funding is now increasing but systems still face severe constraints. At the same time, student numbers are increasing. Quality has suffered. Countries have different funding arrangements but most universities remain heavily dependent on state funding - for more than 60% of income in most countries. SARUA identified 'good practices' in financing, including public-private partnerships, differentiated funding models, cost-sharing, provincial scholarships, loans to students in the private sector, loan schemes to address equity, funding formulae to promote equity, linking higher education planning to budgeting, and funding to improve quality.

7- Planning capacity

The links between planning and budgeting for higher education are not explicit in many countries and only South Africa uses a funding formula to give weight to planning priorities and to steer the system. It is crucial to develop the capacity to plan higher education and to manage its financing, at national and institutional levels, to ensure adequate funding for growing student numbers, and to explicitly link higher education funding to national development priorities.

8- Infrastructure and space

There are severe infrastructure constraints in most institutions, affecting the capacity for teaching and research and limiting student access. Lack of research infrastructure may be a primary contributor to the brain drain of scientists, says the report. Infrastructure capacity and constraints should be investigated and strategies recommended. More positively, new institutions and facilities have opened in the region in recent years.

9- Private provision

This is a means to address capacity constraints as the sector has grown rapidly. Private provision is often fee-paying and attracts students unable to access the public sector, raising concerns about equity. In many countries, frameworks to monitor private providers are absent and there are questions whether they serve skills needs, as well as about quality and sustainability. Quality assurance is crucial. There has been semi-privatisation of public institutions in some countries - dual-track teaching with state-sponsored students taught in regular classes and a second stream of private, fee-paying students. This provides much-needed income but overloads staff, fee-paying streams often have a vocational focus and the dual path appears not to have contributed to institutional development.

10- Commercialisation and entrepreneurialism

Lack of funding is driving institutions and individuals to supplement their incomes. There are many forms of commercialisation, including teaching arrangements, contract research, and the commercialisation of research. There are benefits to such activities but they should not be allowed to occur at the expense of the core academic mission. A balance needs to be found between engagement, the need to supplement income, and pure commercial interests.

11- Research development

Research output is low and is a major challenge. South Africa produces 79% of research and its output of articles per million of the population is 119.3. Botswana follows at 85.5 but no other country has figures above 40. Output has been increasing since 1990 - in seven countries by 100% or more - but SADC is not keeping pace with world research growth. Means must be found to improve research data collection and access, and to increase publication. There is a need for research capacity development at all levels, including governance, institutional research management, funding and staff capacity, and mechanisms must be found to improve regional collaboration, such as networks and specialist centres.

12- Mobility

Staff and student mobility in SADC is seen as key to achieving many goals of regional higher education - especially developing a community of scholars through staff exchanges and visits that could provide support for staff in fields where capacity is low and help to maximise use of expertise. Mobility might help to share capacity, reduce duplication, develop a regional identity and promote cultural understanding. As shown by Europe's ERASMUS scheme, mobility can act as a quality improvement catalyst. Constraints include visa and immigration formalities, difficulties and costs of travel, and lack of qualification comparability and of agreed quality assurance systems. There is a need for more data on mobility in the region.

13- Quality

Assuring quality is the key to achieving policy goals such as student and staff mobility and qualification portability, regulating private provision, qualification equivalence frameworks, and increased cooperative teaching. SADC has done the groundwork in establishing current practices and proposing a strategy for the region. At national levels, more than half SADC countries have already established, or are in the process of, establishing, a quality assurance framework. At the institutional level, 76% of institutions have quality assurance systems but much needs to be done to improve quality assurance practices while implementation capacity needs to be developed and national systems made comparable.

14- Qualification frameworks.

Qualification comparability is an objective of SADC and necessary to achieve mobility, credit transfer and student access. SADC has a vision for a regional qualifications framework but progress towards its adoption has been slow, impeded by the lack of strong national quality assurance systems. A regional framework would have to be a single framework but could be a meta-frame enabling national frameworks to relate to each other. Articulation with other regional frameworks will become increasingly important. The impact of the Bologna in Europe has been felt strongly in some SADC countries which are moving towards adopting this system. There is lack of understanding of different systems used in SADC and no consensus on shared terminology.

15- Curriculum

Curriculum relevance must be high on the SADC agenda. But university education must not be seen as purely serving the needs of the labour market while 'standardisation' of curricula is likely to lead to system weakness. The focus should be on staff development and cooperation: "A model should be sought in which there is strong developmental collaboration over specific curricula. Strengthening existing arrangements, such as external examiner input, joint teaching programmes, lecturer exchange programmes, or sharing of curriculum development expertise may be an appropriate way forward."

16- Information and communication technologies

Available bandwidth has grown in SADC but universities continue to experience critical constraints and have gaps in their ICT infrastructure and systems deployments. Access to computers is still low - in 2007, on average four lecturers per computer, three administrative staff per computer, and per 70 students per computer - and progress in developing research and education networks has been slow. A critical problem for research capacity is the lack of availability and accessibility of knowledge even within the region. "The adoption of open access publishing and licensing strategies, the development of institutional and regional research repositories, and the development of local journals are strategies proposed to move beyond the impasse." But adopting them will not be simple.

17- Policy and planning

To give effect to supra-national policy agreements, it is necessary to develop new and aligned regional and national policies and goals for higher education. It is essential to develop governance mechanisms at regional, national and institutional levels, as well as a critical mass in infrastructure and capacity, and to identify areas of national and regional strength so as to enhance regional collaboration. There is an acknowledged need to establish high-level policy forums to advise governments on national policy issues. It is also important to bring together researchers with representatives from government and the private sector, to engage around development issues, as well as vice-chancellors and ministries to discuss planning.

18- Engagement

Greater understanding is needed of the place of community engagement in higher education in SADC, as well as the types, purposes and good practices of current engagements, so as to meet the challenges of playing a renewed development role. African universities need to find ways of being responsive and engaged in a manner best suited to African conditions. SARUA research showed limited university-firm interaction, for a range of reasons, and few outcomes other than production of work-ready graduates or consultancy. Few universities have structures to facilitate innovation. SARUA identified key obstacles to interaction as lack of understanding of each other among universities and firms, lack of research capacity and infrastructure, and the need to overcome the dominance of foreign-driven research agendas.

19- Cooperation

Regional cooperation in higher education has been proposed as a means to overcome the legacies of poorly-funded systems and to enhance institutional performance, and is agreed at a political level as well as among institutions. There are collaborative projects underway, but too little is known about their extent and success and they face many challenges. To facilitate collaborations that are mutually beneficial and help to

develop higher education, expertise, activity and strength in the region needs to be 'mapped'. There is also a need to bring people together to facilitate discussion and build networks, and perhaps to develop a framework of basic principles for collaboration which stresses equality and mutual benefit.

20- Leadership

There are sufficient commonalities between higher education systems to suggest that some governance, leadership and management challenges are not unique to individual countries. There could be benefits in learning from other countries, and leadership at a regional level will be critical in forging strategic collaboration. At the institutional level, there has been a huge increase in attention given to developing higher education managers and leaders worldwide.

Changes in management practices have not been as profound in SADC where challenges are often a continuation of years of under-funding, poor infrastructure and insulated systems. But increasingly it is acknowledged that traditional models are no longer sufficient to position the sector for its role in national development. Developing leadership capacity will be the key to achieving goals as diverse as poverty reduction and participating in the knowledge economy.

"Achieving the aim of revitalising higher education will require a leadership strategy that incorporates governments, the private sector and institutions," says the SARUA report.

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