Leaving No One Behind in Ghana Through University Education

Interrogating Spatial, Gender and Class Inequalities

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Introduction to Working Papers on Universities and Social Inequalities in the Global South

This paper is part of a project which explores what role universities play in overcoming persistent and rising inequalities. Participation in tertiary education has increased significantly across the globe, in parallel with heightened social aspirations and the expectation of better labour market opportunities stemming from a university degree. However, these assumptions rely on certain economic and social conditions being fulfilled, some of which have worsened in the age of jobless growth. The project asks: What potential does higher education have today to increase social mobility, reduce inequality and contribute to the advancement of society through the production of knowledge and skills? Are institutions of higher education contributing to inequality rather than equality, and if so, through what specific actions and mechanisms? How can the transformative potential of such institutions be fully harnessed for overcoming inequality?

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AFUF   Academic Facility User Fees
CKT-UTAS   C. K. Tedam University of Technology and Applied Sciences
ESP   Education Strategic Plan
GET Fund   Ghana Education Trust Fund
GHS   Ghanaian Cedi
GII   Gender Inequality Index
GLSS   Ghana Living Standards Survey
GoG   Government of Ghana
GSS   Ghana Statistical Service
HDI   Human Development Index
IDI   Inclusive Development Index
ICT   Information and Communication Technology
KNUST   Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology
LESS   Less Endowed Secondary Schools
MDG   Millennium Development Goals
MoE   Ministry of Education
NAB   National Accreditation Board
NCTE   National Council for Tertiary Education
NDC   National Democratic Congress
NDPC   National Development Planning Commission
NPP   New Patriotic Party
RFUF   Residential Facility User Fees
SDGs   Sustainable Development Goals
SLTF   Student Loan Trust Fund
SSNIT   Social Security and National Insurance Trust
STEM   Science, Engineering, Technology and Math
UCC   University of Cape Coast
UDS   University for Development Studies
UEW   University of Education, Winneba
UG   University of Ghana
UN   United Nations
UNDP   United Nations Development Programme
UNESCO   United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation
UNRISD   United Nations Research Institute for Social Development
URC   University Rationalisation Committee
WASSCE   West African Senior School Certificate Examination

Abstract

The number of higher education institutions in Ghana has soared in the last three decades and university enrolments have shot up in tandem. Yet the number of Ghanaians living in poverty is higher than ever before, and social inequality is on the rise. Against this backdrop, this paper critically examines the role universities play in addressing the problem of social inequality in Ghana. It specifically explores the possibilities and limitations Ghana faces in meeting the targets of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), specifically SDG 4 on education. Based on analysis of secondary data, both qualitative and quantitative, the paper argues that the widening of participation in university education in Ghana is not inclusive in terms of gender, class or geographic location. Far from addressing inequalities in access to university education, the dynamics shaping the provision of university education in Ghana exclude marginalized social groups such as women and the poor, as well as those living in rural areas and in the northern part of the country. The paper concludes by highlighting critical areas and issues needing further research to inform policy reforms aimed at widening access and promoting equity in higher education in Ghana.

Keywords

Bios

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1. Introduction

The trend of higher education massification has spread across the globe over the last three decades, and Ghana is no exception.[1] Universities and other higher education institutions have exploded in number in the country (Apusigah 2009), with student enrolment shooting up to match. For example, "from a total of about 10,000 in the early 1980s, student enrolment in public universities reached about 110,000 in the 2008/2009 academic year" (Effah 2011:376); and in 2014, about 157,626 students were enrolled in higher education institutions, more than double the enrolment in 2005.[2] Paradoxically, as will be discussed below, inequality between the poor and the rich, men and women, and the northern and southern parts of Ghana has also been widening in the last three decades (Annim et al. 2012).[3] The widening social inequality in Ghana corresponds with current global trends in inequality.[4]

While we are by no means suggesting a direct causal relationship between the massification of higher education and widening social inequality in Ghana, the paper examines the ways in which trends in university education have influenced this problem. Specifically, it interrogates the spatial, gender and class dynamics shaping the prospects for and challenges of achieving Sustainable Development Goal 4,[5] which underlines the centrality of education in *leaving no one behind*, the axiom driving the SDGs. It seeks to "Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all" (UN 2015:14). This will equip people with the requisite knowledge and skillsets "to exploit opportunities and to participate fully in society" (UN 2015:7). One of the targets of SDG 4 (4.3) pivots on higher education: to "ensure equal access for all women and men to affordable and quality technical, vocational and tertiary education, including university" (UN 2015:17). The government of Ghana (GoG), through its Ministry of Education (MoE), has aligned its education strategic plan with SDG 4 (MoE 2019).

Situated in the current development thinking and practice of the SDGs, this paper addresses the following closely related fundamental questions:

1. How do overlapping inequalities in gender, class and geographical location affect access to quality university education in Ghana?
2. What role do universities play in widening social inequality in Ghana?
3. What are universities doing to address the problem of social inequality in higher education in Ghana?

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[1] Effah 2011; Mohamedbhai 2014; UNESCO 2016.
[2] See UNESCO (2017), Atuahene and Owusu-Ansah (2013), and MoE (2019).
[3] See also GSS (2018), Oxfam International (2019), Osei-Assibey (2014), Cooke et al. (2016) and Huq and Tribe (2018).
[4] Milanovic 2016; World Inequality Lab 2017; UNRISD 2019.
[5] Of course, these are not the only dynamics structuring inequality of access to university education in Ghana, and for that matter, the achievement of SDG 4 on higher education. There are other dynamics structuring inequality, such as physical disability and age (see Mosley et al. 2010). These and other dynamics of inequality of access to higher education are legitimate areas of research in Ghana.

Based on analysis of secondary data, both qualitative and quantitative, this paper argues that even though the Ghanaian government and universities in the country have shown their commitments to widening access in tandem with promoting equity in university education, there is still wide disparity in various dimensions, including gender, class and geography. This situation is microcosmic of a global problem. One of the major problems underlined by the global "Framework for Action" on SDG 4 is the limited opportunities for access to university education, especially by marginalized social groups and the poor in developing countries. The Framework for Action notes:

> All forms of tertiary education have expanded rapidly with total enrolment rising from 100 million in 2000 to 199 million in 2013. Yet wide disparity in access to tertiary education, in particular at university level, with regard to gender, to social, regional and ethnic background, and to age and disability remain. (UNESCO 2016:40)

Yet university education is widely known for its great potential to engender upward social mobility of the lower classes and disadvantaged social groups, including women. As fountains of knowledge and institutions of training, university education is, in Piketty's (2014:22) formulation, "a force of convergence in an increasingly unequal world." Quality university education provides the advanced knowledge and skillsets an individual requires to get a good-paying job based on merit. In addition, it enhances the capability and agency of the individual to act to reconfigure the power relations of inequality, thereby contributing to building a more just and peaceful society (Morley et al. 2010).[6] Increased educational attainment, as one authoritative source correctly notes, "helps transform lives by reducing poverty, improving health outcomes, advancing technology and increasing social cohesion" (UNESCO 2016:10). The Ghanaian state recognizes the central role universities play in the economy by "producing a class of highly qualified Ghanaians to support the economic and social development of the country" (MoE 2019:54).

Prioritizing primary education, the World Bank previously viewed university education