



HEHD RESEARCH BRIEF

PRIVATE HIGHER EDUCATION AND HUMAN DEVELOPMENT IN ZAMBIA

Edward Mboyonga
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About this research brief

This brief considers the role of private universities in advancing human development in Africa. It is a summary of a doctoral research project conducted between 2020 and 2022 on the role of private universities in widening access and expanding students' capabilities in Zambia. The brief is intended to be of use to higher education managers, educators, researchers, and policymakers concerned with addressing the challenges of widening university access and participation and enhancing human development through education.

Research context

Although many countries recognise the centrality of higher education in steering development, most higher education systems in sub-Saharan Africa grapple with inadequate funding and limited infrastructure in public universities to meet the social demand for university admissions. In Zambia, for instance, policy documents show that universities can absorb only 12% of the students from the approximated annual total of 180 000 high school graduates (MoHE, 2019). Clearly, this threatens the country's aspirations of realising the Sustainable Development Goal (#4) of ensuring equal access to quality education for all by 2030. As a practical alternative to increase access, the private higher education sector has emerged and is now the fastest-growing segment in the higher education systems of many African countries, Zambia included. Currently, Zambia has 53 private and 9 public universities (HEA, 2022). Despite the unprecedented growth in the number of private higher education institutions, there is a lack of scholarly data on the opportunities for access to private universities offered to Zambian students and how such opportunities may transform students' lives through the acquisition of valued

capabilities that foster human development. To address this empirical and conceptual gap, research was conducted to explore the role of private universities in widening access and expanding students' capabilities in Zambia.

Theoretically situated within the capability approach (Sen, 1999; Nussbaum, 2000), the findings of the study point towards the necessity to rethink access to higher education beyond mere entry into universities (physical access) to access transformative knowledge (epistemological access) as a means to promote people's freedom to achieve well-being. In addressing its primary aim, the study attended to the following research questions: (i) How do private universities promote formal access to higher education in Zambia? (ii) What conversion factors shape epistemological access among students in private universities? (iii) What conversion factors shape students' general experiences in private universities and how do these conversion factors enable or constrain the expansion of students' capabilities? (iv) What are the valued capabilities and functionings developed by students in private universities?

Methodology

A qualitative case study design was employed to analyse real-life situations at two private universities in Zambia by drawing on multiple participants' perspectives and lived experiences. Purposive sampling was utilised to select the private universities and 43 research participants, including a government official from the higher education regulatory agency, 14 university staff, and 28 students. Data was gathered through a triangulated approach using various research tools: semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, document review, and observations. Thematic analysis was applied to identify themes and sub-themes, which are presented as key findings.

Key findings

The findings demonstrate that private universities improve access to higher education in Zambia by offering flexible admission policies, providing financial support and low tuition fees, addressing students' diverse needs, and establishing satellite campuses in rural provinces. The research also identifies six key capabilities and functionings valued by students in relation to accessing private higher education in Zambia: These six capabilities are as follows:

- i. **The capability of epistemological access:** Accessing and gaining knowledge through private universities; participating and achieving in and through higher education, enabled by private universities.
- ii. **The capability for epistemic contribution:** Gaining knowledge and being able to share knowledge.
- iii. **The capability for aspiration:** Making plans for one's future career or setting personal goals; mobilising plans to improve the lives of others now and in future.
- iv. **The capability for recognition, respect, and belonging:** Using one's voice, being respected, recognised, and treated with dignity; having a sense of belonging to the university.
- v. **The capability for ubuntu:** Displaying and exercising humane values such as empathy,

care, tolerance, or respect for others.

- vi. **The capability for employability:** Gaining various skills that graduates can mobilise to make a living; being employable and having entrepreneurial skills for self-employment.

Through the above capabilities, the research demonstrates how private universities in low-income countries can provide young people with opportunities to access higher education and how that access enables students' valued capabilities. On the other hand, it identifies various limitations or conversion factors in the private higher education sector that affect the quality of education, thereby hindering equitable access and outcomes among students and constraining their ability to acquire capabilities for human development more broadly. These limitations include a lack of qualified staff, inadequate student accommodation, poor infrastructure, and insufficient student finance to support living. The research concludes that for human development to be met, access to higher education needs to ensure not only physical access but also epistemological access as the development of knowledge that is able to transform students' lives and society.

Recommendations for private higher education institutions, government, and policymakers

Based on the research findings and implications, the following recommendations are proposed:

Private higher education institutions

- Address quality issues and provide conducive learning environments by employing well-qualified teaching staff; construct adequate lecture halls, laboratories, libraries, hostels, and student amenities.
- Provide financial support to low-income students by extending scholarship support to cover accommodation and stipends for students to meet their daily needs. The evidence from the study showed that scholarships were limited to tuition fees and were primarily used for marketing purposes.
- Offer continuous development training programmes in pedagogy for lecturers to enhance their teaching practices.

Government

- Extend the student loan scheme policy to private universities. Other developing countries in the sub-Saharan region, such as Kenya and Tanzania, have extended government loan schemes to students in private universities to enhance access to higher education. The current 'tracer' system for students used by the Higher Education Loans and Scholarships Board shows potential for recovery of loans, which can be used as a revolving fund.
- Provide periodic tax exemption for private universities to purchase educational materials such as digital technologies, laboratory equipment, and textbooks. The tax exemption must be subject to the condition that private universities provide needs-based scholarships. This can help private universities to sustain their daily operations but at the same time lessening the fees that are transferred to students. Such a policy may provide more opportunities for young people from low-income households to access university education via private universities.

- Increase funding to the Higher Education Authority (HEA) to effectively carry out its mandate in quality assurance.

Higher Education Authority

- Conduct regular institutional audits at private universities to ensure adherence to the provision of quality education.
- Recruit more trained human resources to effectively execute its mandate of regulating quality standards in higher education. In particular, the agency can benefit from employing those with specialisation in fields such as higher education studies.

References and selected for further reading

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