

What Will it Take to Turn Around Higher Education in Malawi?

The State of Higher Education in Malawi

The Malawi higher education sector is still relatively underdeveloped. Its two public universities and five private universities together enroll about 12,000 students. The supply of qualified graduates is highly inadequate, both in terms of numbers and quality, and the research output of the two public universities is small. The quality assurance system is still nascent, and the governance system needs to be revisited to bring in other stakeholders such as the private sector and civil society organizations.

Despite the government spending a relatively high share of its education budget on higher education (28 percent in 2010, as shown in Figure 1), the higher education system does not have sufficient resources to sustain enrollment growth and improve quality. Finally, from an equity viewpoint, students from high-income families are disproportionately represented in higher education (91 percent).

Recognizing the Need for Improvement

The Malawi Growth Development Strategy II (MGDS II) recognizes the crucial role of higher education as a key driver of competitiveness and growth. The Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (MoEST) supported by the World Bank, has recently assessed the performance of the higher education system with a view to exploring policy options

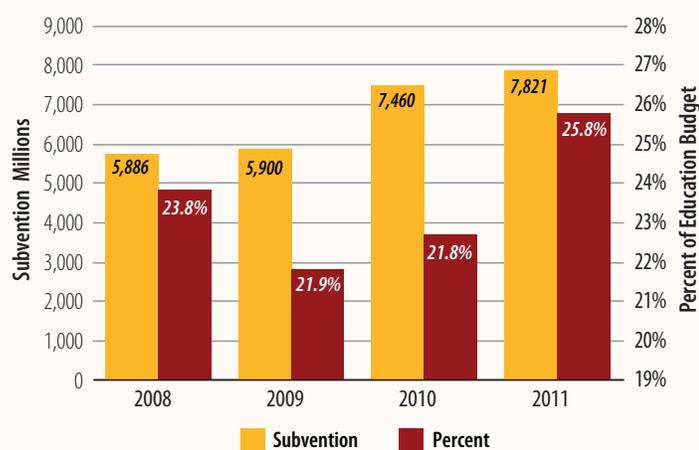
KEY MESSAGES

- The Malawi Growth Development Strategy II recognizes the crucial role of higher education as a key driver of competitiveness and growth.
- The country's higher education system needs to be overhauled to take in more students, achieve greater equity in enrollment, and offer higher-quality programs relevant to market needs.
- A major concern is that there are far too few qualified graduates to meet market needs in the country—a gap that is bound to negatively affect the economy if unaddressed.
- University management should include private sector and civil society representatives to ensure that learning is delivered more efficiently and is aligned with market needs.
- Encouraging private providers and exploring more sustainable avenues of financing are critical to bridge Malawi's financing and capacity gaps in higher education.

that increase equitable access and provide quality education relevant to the labor market in a financially sustainable manner. Data and information were collected from

both public and private higher education institutions to assess the focus areas of access and equity; quality and relevance; governance and management; and financing.

Figure 1. Higher education budget as a share of the total education budget



Source: Approved Estimates of Expenditure on Recurrent and Capital Accounts (Malawi)

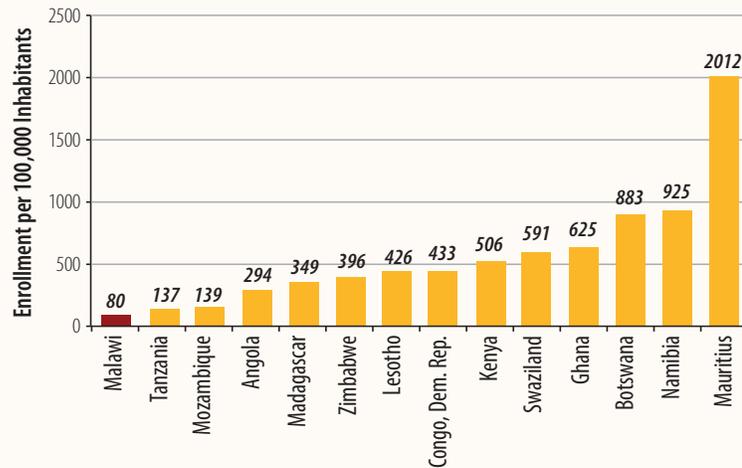
ENSURE ACCESS AND EQUITY

At less than 1 percent, Malawi's tertiary education enrollment rate is among the lowest in the world and well below the average for Sub-Saharan Africa. In 2011, the country had only 80 students per 100,000 inhabitants, compared to 211 for the region (see Figure 2). Socio economic and gender disparities are stark: 91 percent of those enrolled in universities come from the richest quintile of the population while less than one percent are from the poorest quintile. Further, the average share of females was 45 percent in private institutions, but 35 percent in public institutions. Very few disabled students are enrolled because the infrastructure in most universities is not accessible to those living with disability. MoEST is prioritizing access and equity in higher education because of the low enrollment in this subsector and the unmet demand for qualified graduates. Figure 3 offers a detailed view of the evolution of enrollment by gender and provider type in Malawi.

BUILD QUALITY AND RELEVANCE

Malawi's higher education institutions have struggled to maintain quality as they have tried to accommodate

Figure 2. Enrollment per 100,000 inhabitants in selected African countries (2009)



Source: Anglo American 2012 Sustainable Development Report

the rapid increase in enrollment in the past few years. A shortage of qualified academic staff has left students without quality teaching and also resulted in a rise in the student/lecturer ratio. Inadequate infrastructure and equipment has constrained access and compromised quality. Lack of funding has meant that most institutions can no longer afford objective external examiners.

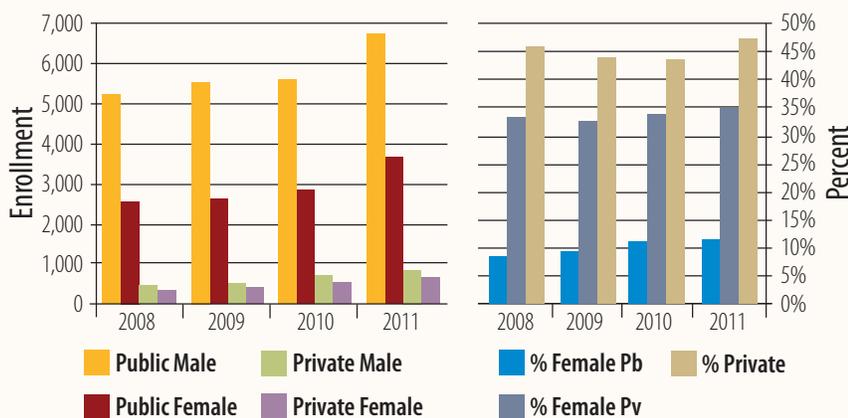
Further, employers are expressing concern over the relevance of the programs offered. Despite the demand for qualified labor in

the country's key growth areas of engineering, business, information and communication technologies, tourism, mining, agriculture and construction, the education sector has largely not been able to supply graduates with the relevant skills and knowledge base.

In order to expand postgraduate studies, constrained by lack of senior staff, Malawi could consider participating in regional initiatives aimed at setting up centers of excellence that combine advanced studies at the masters and doctoral levels with high-quality research. The Nelson Mandela Institute of Technology and the Ouagadougou-based International Institute for Water and Environmental Management are two examples of successful regional institutions that offer advanced training and research at an internationally recognized level. A complementary approach would be to facilitate strong partnerships with a few carefully selected universities to help build postgraduate teaching and research capacity in Malawi.

An important recent development at the system level has been the establishment of the National Council

Figure 3. Evolution of enrollment in Malawi by provider type and gender (2008 - 2011)



Source: Higher Education Institutions

for Higher Education (NCHE), whose role will be, among other things, to ensure quality in higher education institutions.

STRENGTHEN GOVERNANCE AND MANAGEMENT

Malawi's public higher education institutions fall under the jurisdiction of MoEST, which develops the overarching vision, mission and strategic direction for higher education. Each individual institution is expected to elaborate its own strategic plan based on the MGDS II and the National Education Sector Plan (2009–2017) (NESP). While Malawian universities are relatively autonomous, their tuition fee levels are set by the government, resulting in serious underfunding. Further, the university governing councils could benefit from the participation of a wider pool of stakeholders, including from the private sector and civil society, instead of having only university representatives and government members. MoEST could support senior management in universities with skills training in academic planning and financial management.

A key area for improvement is the coordination between the MoEST and the post-secondary vocational education providers. At present, there is a fragmented tertiary education system with insufficient communication among the various types of providers, lack of coherence in the curriculum across institutions, and little intra-system student mobility. Moving forward, it would be important to embrace a holistic approach to human capital development.

INCREASE FINANCIAL RESOURCES SUSTAINABLY, ENCOURAGE PRIVATE PROVIDERS

The anticipated expansion of higher education enrollments to about 17,000 in 2015, up from today's 12,000, will

require substantial resources, estimated at around US\$ 33 million against expected revenues of US\$ 16.9 million, creating a financing gap of about US\$ 16 million. This emphasizes the need for additional sources of income.

While private universities rely chiefly on tuition fees, public universities have three main sources of revenue: government subventions which constitute about 80 percent of total income, tuition fees, and self-generated resources mainly through project and research grants. Even though the share of the government's overall education budget received by higher education institutions is relatively high (20–28 percent over the past few years), the amounts are largely inadequate to support the financial needs of the higher education system, which has suffered increasingly from insufficient resources to address its expansion and quality improvement needs.

Encouraging enrollment in private institutions could ease the burden of a growing student population on Malawi's public universities. At a policy level, the government will have to create a more favourable environment for private institutions. Limited government subsidies could be offered to private institutions willing to introduce high-priority study areas such as engineering or health sciences. Simultaneously, the government through the NCHE should establish appropriate quality assurance mechanisms (licensing and accreditation) to ensure good standards in the programs offered by private institutions. Technical colleges and other tertiary level institutions could absorb a number of secondary school graduates and offer them market focused courses. Distance learning is also an option worth exploring for its proven ability to reach students in rural areas and from the poorest social stratum.

Several resource mobilization measures could be taken to improve financial sustainability. First, public institutions should be allowed to charge higher fees, and the student loan system should operate more efficiently, especially in terms of loan recovery for those not able to afford the increased fees. The loans should also be accessible to Malawian students in private universities. Second, the government could offer matching grants to encourage universities and other higher education institutions to raise additional funds through contract work and fund-raising from alumni and private sector philanthropists. The private sector can effectively complement the public higher education sub-sector in meeting the country's needs for quality graduates at little or no cost to the government through establishment of Public Private Partnerships. Third, the government could introduce a combination of performance-based budget allocation mechanisms to encourage higher education institutions to be more innovative and make good use of scarce resources.

The Malawi Growth Development Strategy II

The MGDS II provides a useful framework to guide reforms in the higher education sector. A comprehensive vision should now be articulated for the development of public and private higher education institutions, with an appropriate quality assurance system. Efforts to expand enrollment and improve the quality and relevance of programs must be anchored in a sustainable financing strategy. Also, appropriate governance reforms and measures to improve the management capacity of institutions must be put in place in order to facilitate the implementation of the proposed reform program.

Table 1. A policy matrix for higher education in Malawi

Policy Objectives	Issues to be Addressed	Policy Options
Increase access	Low enrollment rate Insufficient supply	Expansion of non-university institutions Further development of private sector Expand loan scheme to all Malawians Emergence of distance education options
Improve equity	Under-representation of low-income students Gender imbalance in scientific disciplines	Targeted scholarships and student loans for low-income students (in both public and private institutions) Outreach programs to motivate girls in high schools to pursue STEM subjects Bridging programs for students from disadvantaged areas
Enhance quality	Insufficiently qualified academics Insufficient pedagogical resources for teaching and learning Weak internal quality assurance mechanisms Under-developed national QA system.	Government incentives programs for training of academics abroad and recruitment upon their return to Malawi Ring-fencing of resources for pedagogical aspects in institutional budgets Strengthening of broadband and ICT resources Development of internal QA mechanisms, including performance evaluation of academics External examination on a regular basis Strengthening of national QA Agency
Increase relevance	Lack of qualified graduates to meet need of expanding economy Under-developed graduate programs	Conduct regular tracer and employer surveys Closer linkages between higher education institutions and productive sectors (including participation in curriculum design) Open university Boards to representatives from productive sectors Participation in regional centers of excellence projects Strategic partnerships with foreign universities for capacity-building purposes
Allocate public subsidies on the basis of performance criteria	Budget does not reward efficient and effective use of resources	Design funding formula that takes unit costs and measures of effectiveness into consideration
Re-engineer the student loan scheme	Ineffective targeting and low repayment	Redesign the student loan scheme, improve targeting, modernize its management and strengthen repayment mechanisms
Strengthen institutional governance	Weak university boards	Include representatives from private sector and civil society and revise terms of reference of university boards

MORE ON THE TOPIC

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