



Reconfigure HE for employable graduates, relevant research

Mark Paterson and Thierry M Lancher 28 July 2022

Peter Matern, chief programme officer for the Mastercard Foundation, says:

Higher education systems must be reconfigured in order to produce the skills and knowledge African countries need for their development, according to Peter Matern, chief programme officer for the Mastercard Foundation.

To this end, a new regime of incentives should be introduced that places a premium on the production of employable graduates and economically and socially relevant research, he says.

Meanwhile, at the systemic level, the evolution of higher education should not be shaped merely by the drive to massification, he argues, as it is in support of quality policies which promote the provision of common educational opportunities over fostering a wide range of knowledge production, vocational and professional education within a differentiated system.

"The purpose of the institutions in the sector cannot be merely to absorb students coming from high school," said Matern. "The program has to be connected to the demand side: to the socio-economic development of countries, markets and the continent."

It notes that "many countries need to have a productive division of labour between universities, polytechnics and TVETs," until political intervention led to polytechnics being converted into universities, which he describes as a "huge mistake".

"Particular institutions are created for particular purposes," says Matern. "But that group has now drifted through the problems to apply the knowledge he has deployed... So, I think the higher education system needs to be reconfigured."

Accordingly, he advises that some broad decisions need to be made to reconfigure national higher education systems and the institutions in them so that they address actual socio-economic needs.

"The continent has more than 2,000 universities, and [the number] is growing. It is unrealistic to expect that all of them can be brought up to the same level at the same time," says Matern. "So, choices need to be made, and those choices must be linked to the priority drivers of economic transformation."

Incentives for economic transformation

In reshaping the sector, the incentives regime at universities must be changed, he argues, so that those institutions can become drivers of transformation in the economy.

"Implementing effective incentives does not mean asking universities to stop promoting people on the basis of their research outputs, but rather saying that this criterion for performance is insufficient on its own."

"So, promotion should not be based only on being a good teacher and undertaking research. The academic must also demonstrate the impact of their work in the community and the economy and an economy that is dynamic and universities should develop criteria for assessing performance accordingly."

Similarly, Matern argues that discussions about transforming the curriculum should address "the issue of relevance" as a priority.

"It's not just producing fields of study that are fit for purpose, not just 'putting the hat on the table', he points out. "In this regard, the present higher education institutions, particularly the larger, more established ones, lack the ability to adapt to the changing knowledge and skills needs of a rapidly shifting global economy."

In this context, Matern identifies the rate of graduate absorption into the labour market as a key measure of institutional effectiveness. "In other words, those universities which the labour market would describe as 'doing things that are fit'."

He notes that there are a number of universities which perform well according to this metric.

These, he says, include Addis Ababa University in Ghana and the African Development University in Niger, both of which are relatively small institutions with a high rate of graduate transition into the workplace.

Given the importance he attaches to transition rates as a metric of institutional success in higher education, Matern advises that there should be more tracer studies on graduate outcomes in terms of employment and livelihoods so that comprehensive, comparative information on this may be produced across the continent.

"At present, such data is very patchy," he points out.

Linkages to job opportunities

Notwithstanding the absence of comprehensive data on this, Matern has identified two main requirements to the delivery of well-prepared young graduates into jobs and livelihoods, which are being addressed by a number of programmes funded by the Mastercard Foundation.

One is a lack of appropriate linkages, he says. "Many young people may not have a comprehensive understanding of where the opportunities are; while those on the demand side may not know what kinds of graduates are available."

So the foundation is supporting internship and volunteer programmes in order to "diversify their employability".

The second requirement, he says, is the lack of formal jobs and employment opportunities in Africa.

"So, there is a need to empower graduates to create their own jobs, their own companies, and so on. This entails, not only equipping them with the appropriate knowledge, but also providing seed funding."

The Mastercard scheme, called Young Africa Works, also offers support whenever the young person creates employment, including by helping him or her to expand their enterprise so that more people can be hired.

This drive to create the benefits of development at the grassroots level informs Matern's promotion of the virtues of diversification, which he considers critical both "to meet the need for knowledge production that can create solutions, as well as the need to produce competent people who can deploy that knowledge to create products and services that make a difference to people's lives."

Support for differentiation

He believes that people support for a diversified system would soon manifest once the public realise the democratic benefits that it can bring.

"I believe the value of establishing a differentiated system becomes evident once the plethora of opportunities that arise from establishing different levels of institutions start to be realised," Matern says.

He cites the example of a new class of institutions established outside Senegal's most recent reform of the tertiary education system: the Institut Supérieur d'Études Professionnelles or Higher Institute of Professional Studies, which places the emphasis on professional rather than academic studies as part of the country's dual education system.

"It's the faculty at these institutes are permanent teachers in the university and the other half are people actually working in the industry which is the subject of the qualification," he says. "The students spend three days in the classroom and two days at the workplace."

"Interestingly, the model quickly became popular. For example, a number of high-performing people who had been admitted to the University Cheikh Assia Bey in Dakar, although included as an SEP instead, on the basis that this educational path would lead to certain employment."

In this regard, Matern views "agility" – a higher education institution's capacity to address the needs of its current dynamic socio-economic environment – as a key aspect of its resilience, alongside good governance and a sustainable financing system.

In relation to those metrics, although smaller universities have tended to demonstrate greater flexibility, they do not have a monopoly on either agility or resilience, which, he says, "is an achievable goal for every institution, whether large or small."

At the same time, Matern notes that some of the new, smaller universities have much to teach the larger ones, and, in this, may, indeed have a broader impact.

"For example, Addis is leading a collaboration among universities that is focused on governance. The institutions are learning from each other about how to govern so that they can improve their performance and achieve resilience."

He notes that "there are a number of other existing networks across the continent that advance systematic learning among institutions".

This article is based on an interview conducted by Professor Shorten Swartz for "The Impact of Education" project, which is being implemented by the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC), South Africa, in partnership with the Mastercard Foundation. This project, which includes a series of critical engagements with experienced scholars and thought leaders on the resiliency of higher education in Africa, investigates current and future challenges facing the sector, including best practices and innovations. A full transcript of the interview can be downloaded from the HSRC's website. Mark Paterson and Thierry M Lancher edited the transcript for focus and length.

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