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Implementing Public University Education Policies in Ghana: Challenges

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Abstract:

The purpose of the study was to find out whether the objectives of post-independence reform policies of public universities in Ghana have been achieved and if not the challenges which have hindered their implementation. The study covered major priority areas such as funding, relevance, quality, access, equity, governance and management. The study was located within a qualitative research using historical comparative research design and involved 10 people who were selected through purposive sampling. Data were collected through interviews and documentary analysis. The interpretative approach and discourse analysis technique were used to analyse the data. The study concluded that massification of students and under-funding have had profound effects on quality, relevance, management, access and equity of university education. The study recommended that a system of differentiation which means the provision of distinct types of tertiary education, articulation which refers to the mobility of students within the tertiary institutions and Open University should engage the attention of policy makers and government. This is because it has the potential of dealing with an increased demand for access to higher education at a lower cost.

Keyword: Differentiation, articulation, higher education, open university

1. Introduction

Higher education institutions the world over are facing new challenges which require reforms in their management and governance styles (Jowi, 2003). The rise of new stakeholders, internal factors, together with globalization and the rapid pace at which new knowledge is created and utilized are among the recent developments which challenge higher education institutions. While they have responded rather slowly in the past, to changing circumstances, there is now an urgent need for them to adjust rapidly in order to fulfil their missions and the needs of other stakeholders (Jowi, 2003).

Ghana in this regard has introduced a number of reform policies since independence to overhaul the entire education system. Nkrumah's Accelerated Development Plan of 1951 (GoG, 1951) led to the comprehensive expansion of the nation's primary and Secondary Education system. However, as a result of the inadequacies associated with the development plan, serious criticisms were levelled against the government's policy. While basic and secondary educations were expanded by the government policy, little or no such attention was paid to the development of a higher education system to admit graduates from secondary schools. At the same time, there were no corresponding job opportunities available for secondary school graduates (Little, 2010).

In 1961-1962, higher education was under the administration and governance of the metropolitan institution in London. Plans were put in place by the government for the sovereignty and independence of institutions in Ghana. In 1960, Nkrumah's government carried out the first structural reforms of the tertiary education sub-sector. The Botsio Commission was formed to investigate the position of higher education in the country to identify the possibility of making institutions in Ghana independent from the metropolitan powers (MOE, 1963). After further deliberation the commission proposed for (1) the independence of Kumasi College with its own governing council, (2) the planning, coordinating and financing aspects of institutions were placed within the jurisdiction of a proposed National Council for Higher Education and Research and (3) a proportionate increase of Ghanaian teaching staff in universities (MOE, 1963). In 1987, the University Rationalization Committee released its preliminary report about the state of higher education in the country and detailed in it changes that needed to take place in the structure, administration and governance of institutions. The main objectives of the URC were to develop strategies to expand access and equity, to improve efficiency and effectiveness at the university level, and to improve on the quality and relevance of degree programs.

1.1. Statement of the Problem

Governments of Ghana over the years have designed a number of reform policies with the view to restructuring and reforming the higher education sector to live up to its statutory mandate. The reform policies undertaken in the higher education sector after independence to the present represents a sustained attempt to redefine the place of university education within the Ghanaian economic and political landscape. Considerable efforts have been made to scrutinize the sub-sectors' articulation internally and externally, especially with the preliminary and intermediate cycles of education; to increase access and to quantify the types of tertiary education required. Attempts were made to improve upon the relevance and quality of programmes of the sector to reflect

the socio-economic needs of the country. The achievements chalked regarding the implementation of university education reform policies have been marginal. This is because universities in Ghana have been challenged both internally by their own publics and externally by governments and communities to address these critical issues: expanding access with equity; quality and relevance; knowledge production and its application to the problems facing society; sustainable funding and resource management, all of which have called into question the roles and mission of universities in Africa. The public universities have faced competition from offshore universities (mainly religious-based plus a few secular private universities) as well as from other non-university centres of knowledge production and research. This new competition is taking place within the context of neo-liberal economic policies characterized by market-led reforms and private sector initiatives.

In many cases a good deal of the ground work has however been done, and the prospects for future development are potentially promising. Some of the initial policy agreements have been reversed or apparently forgotten and many of the key structural features impeding reform scarcely addressed (Girdwood, 1999). Many of the reviews regarding the tertiary education reform policies have been government commissioned work without much work being done on it by academics. The research takes as its point of departure, the analysis of the reform policies of university education and provides an external perspective on the challenges of public university education in Ghana. Based on the above, this study specifically sets out to

1. Analyse the objectives of reform policies regarding university education
2. Find out why the reform policies of public universities have not been fully implemented.

1.2. Research Questions

In order to achieve the above objectives, the study sought to provide answers to the following research questions:

1. To what extent have objectives of reform policies in public university education in Ghana been achieved?
2. What have been the challenges of public university education since independence in Ghana?

2. Literature Review

Higher education development worldwide at the turn of the century has witnessed drastic challenges ranging from affordability, accessibility and equity, financial austerity, faculty recruitment and retention, and how to fund for the improvement of physical facilities. While these challenges pose a serious threat to the development of quality higher education, there is no other challenge that affects the core of institutions than the one posed by financial stringency.

The seriousness of this problem is addressed in a report issued by the World Bank/UNESCO (2000), which posits, "The lack of sustainable financing therefore continues to limit enrolment growth and to skew higher education toward low-cost, low-quality programmes" (p. 55).

2.1. Funding

The increased demand for higher education coupled with the rate of population growth in most African countries, without any expansion and improvement of existing physical facilities, such as lecture halls, residential facilities, laboratory facilities for science education, etc. has created a state of malaise hindering the enhancement of an effective and efficient system of tertiary education. As the authors of the report of the World Bank/UNESCO (2000) noted "expansion, in both public and private universities, has been unbridled, unplanned, and often 'chaotic,' resulting in deterioration in average quality, continuing inter-regional, inter-country, and intra-country inequalities, and increased for profit provision of higher education" (p.27).

Confronted with the diminishing public resources, it was imperative for universities to develop new administrative, accounting, and financial management mechanisms to diversify their sources of financial support. An attempt developed by government and university authorities to introduce cost sharing led universities into another level of crisis in Ghana. Student demonstrations and strikes are marked examples that show students dissatisfaction with cost sharing. As argued by Court (1999), who studied the financial revolution in Makerere University in Uganda, attempts to introduce cost sharing in 1990 in Makerere met with demonstrations, boycotting of classes, and the death of two students, led to the closure of the university.

2.2. Expanding Access and Equity

In African Higher Education entitled Trends and Perspectives in African Higher Education, Teferra and Altbach (2003) delineate the access challenge faced by Africa institutions. They believe that while the total number of higher education institutions has increased over the years as a result of the newly created private institutions, enrolment at public universities is highly restricted because universities' facilities remain unexpanded and cannot absorb all qualified applicants. Citing examples from some of the well developed higher education systems in Africa, the analysis provided by Teferra and Altbach (2003) reveals that even though South Africa, for example, has a well developed system of higher education with twenty-one universities and fifteen technikons, the country is ranked third in the enrolment of students. Egypt, the highest, has 22 percent of its 18-24 age group admitted to higher education; Nigeria, rated second, has a "gross enrolment" of five percent of the 18-22 age cohorts, while Ghana has less than 3 percent (Teferra & Altbach, 2003).

In Ghana, Effah (2003) compiled statistics from the Ghana Education Service (GES) about enrolment and participation rate. With a deteriorating economy coupled with rampant coup d'états, and corruption, Ghana's education system witnessed serious problems in the 1970s and 1980s. Drastic policy reform spearheaded by the International Monetary Fund and World Bank known as the Educational Sector Adjustment Credit (EDSAC) was launched by Ghana to improve the condition of education in the country (Effah, 2003).

The reform then proposed for an increase in access to basic education and a complete reduction of the number of years spent at secondary education level, among others. The aftermath of the reform was the graduating of more high school pupils than the

available higher education system can admit but efforts were made to increase admission. Effah (2003) noted that enrolment in universities increased by 165 percent between 1991 and 1999 and by 730 percent at the polytechnic between 1998 and 1999. Nevertheless, of the 83,193 candidates from the nation's public and private secondary institutions who took the 1997 University Entrance Examination (UEE), only 9,730 were selected for admission. It is important to point out that the selection committees' decision was not only based on performance of students, but also the existing facilities at the universities were inadequate for such numbers of qualified students. Of course, the UEE was abolished after it was established that there is a correlation between student performance on the UEE and the level of attainment at the Senior Secondary School Certificate.

In effect, Effah (2003) contended that In spite of the expansion in enrolment at the tertiary level, the participation rate for the 18 - 21 age group in tertiary level education is less than 3 percent in Ghana, compared to participation rates of between 30 and 40 percent for the corresponding age groups in developed countries (p. 340).

2.3. Governance and Management

University governance was characterized by a relatively fragmented organizational structure, the diffusion of decision-making, power among many semiautonomous units, and the substantial authority and initiative vested in individual academics (especially the professoriate) over important matters (Sawyer, 1994). "Too often, relations between public universities and their governments were defined by conflict rather than partnership" (Ajayi, Goma & Johnson, 1996, p.176).

In Ghana, according to a speech given by Professor Kwesi Yankah, pro-vice-chancellor, UG, a guest speaker at the student Representative Council (SRC) series of public lectures on the 29th January, 2010, regardless of the provision made by the 1992 constitution granting universities intellectual and academic freedom, there are still some traces of government interferences in the governance of universities. This suggests that the government sometimes influences the decision of the council which has been mandated to govern the institution.

Effah and Mensah-Bonsu (2001) contend that the most critical area in which the government influences the governance of universities is in the area of funding. This is because universities and polytechnics depend on government for funding; it is through financial control that government influence is most decisive.

2.4. Relevance and Quality

Comparatively, universities in the advanced countries are preferred to Ghanaian or African universities. This is because in the ranking of higher educational institutions published by Shanghai Jiao Tong University Worldwide rankings in 2005. Only 5 universities from Africa appeared in the first 500. The ranking placed UG number 46th (out of 100) in Africa and 5,794th in the world, while KNUST ranked number 62nd and 6,405th in Africa and the world respectively. UCC, UDS, UEW and UMAT did not feature in the ranking. This raises a lot of questions about the quality of university education in Ghana and Africa.

Girdwood (1999) contends that although bodies like NAB, NCTE and NABPTEX have been established, they have not been adequately resourced to fulfil their core mandate. The activities of these bodies have been hampered by under-funding and lack of staff. This he noted has had far-reaching consequences on the relevance and quality of university education.

The final Report of the URC considered teaching quality issues, but again largely by implicating and less explicitly than might have been expected for such a central aspect of the policy framework. While it was frequently iterated that there was a need 'to design academic programmes and courses which would provide relevant and integrated education for students' (Final Report, 6. B, p. 4), little clarification was given as to what this would mean in terms of teaching aims, objectives and the modalities of delivery and assessment within the institutions. Critically, no reference was made to comparison with internationally-recognized norms and standards. Instead, the URC gave very detailed consideration to the range of disciplines/academic programmes which should be offered and where they should be provided (which was subsequently seen as a breach of institutional autonomy) (Girdwood, 1999).

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

The historical nature of this research necessitated the use of a qualitative historical comparative research design. Historical comparative research is a collection of techniques and approaches and can be found within historical research. Historical research has been defined as the systematic and objective location, evaluation and synthesis of evidence in order to establish facts and draw conclusions about past events. (Borg as cited in Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2005).

3.2. Population and Sample

The population for the study comprised administrators of public universities which include vice chancellors, pro-vice chancellors and registrars of universities, committee members of university reforms and members of National Council for Tertiary Education. These people were consulted because they were involved in the formulation and implementation of reform policies in public universities.

The sample included members of the Committees on reforms of public universities, National Council for Tertiary Education and past administrators of public universities in Ghana. The sample size for the study was 10. I chose this sample size in order to do critical and in-depth analysis of issues that emanated from the study.

For the sake of this research, purposive sampling technique was employed to select a sample size of 10 respondents which include two members of the committees of reform policies of universities, two members of National Council for Tertiary Education and six past administrators comprising Vice Chancellors, Pro-Vice Chancellors and Registrars representing Public Universities.

3.3. Data Collection

The interview guide and documentary analysis technique as the most appropriate instruments for the study. The interview guide was used to elicit responses from policy formulators and implementers in public universities.

Documentary analysis is seen as one of the important approaches of getting information for qualitative study. Documents captured for this study include official government publications from Ministry of Education and Ghana Education Service and Publications from the National Council for Tertiary Education. Additionally, government policy papers on higher education and reports from University Rationalization Committee and president's educational reform committee and corporate strategic plans of the six public universities were consulted, analyzed and extensively incorporated into the study.

3.4. Data Analysis

Since this research is exclusively a qualitative endeavour, the qualitative analysis techniques were used to analyse the data. The interpretative approach and discourse analysis technique were used to do the analysis of the data. To make sure that all important information was captured during interviews, an audio tape recorder was used and notes were taken during the interview. The various responses from the interviewees were transcribed from the audio tape recorder onto paper.

Furthermore, the findings of the individual interviews were then generalized and differences and similarities identified, allowing the development of emerging themes.

4. Results and Discussion

The perspectives of stakeholders in policy formulation and implementation regarding university education were sought to corroborate the existing literature.

When the respondents were asked whether the reform objectives were achieved, their responses bordered on areas such as access, equity, quality, relevance, funding, management and governance. With regard to access and equity, the respondents lamented that although some achievements have been made, there are a number of qualified students who do not get access to university education. One past university administrator admitted that over the years there has been an increase in student population without a corresponding increase in infrastructure in public universities. The growth of student population does not commensurate with the increase in academic and residential facilities in the various universities. Other respondents emphasized that currently most developing countries are experiencing population growth and increasing demand from the youthful population for better access to higher education. There is an imbalance between the numbers of students who apply to attend higher education institutions, and the limited spaces available for admissions into higher education programmes. They concluded that in simple terms, demand for higher education in Ghana far outstrips current provisions for higher education.

This confirms a speech given by Professor Addae-Mensah, former Vice – Chancellor of the University of Ghana on the occasion of matriculation.

He said:

Every year, we are faced with the painful decision of having to reject a large number of highly qualified students. We have now reached, or probably even surpassed, the optimum number of students that our present facilities and staff strength can cope with, last academic year the total population of the university reached about 14,600. Statistics available to me indicate that our population is over 15,000. In both absolute numbers and percentage increase in enrolment, the university has tried to meet the aspirations of a large number of the qualified students, but the sheer increase in the number of qualified candidates every year is making this a really daunting task (Addae-Mensah, 2001, p.47). This suggests that the increased enrolment figures for Ghana's public universities mask distortions in access and equity.

In a lecture at the Ghana Academy of Arts and Sciences, Addae-Mensah revealed that, although there are over 600 senior secondary schools producing applicants to Ghanaian Universities, more than 75 percent of those admitted came from only 50 schools. This revelation prompted some discussion in the public media (few schools contribute students to universities; Daily Graphic, 31 August, 2002). The foregoing clearly indicates that there are some inherent disadvantages in access with respect to types and locations of secondary schools, region of origin and students' socio-economic background and gender.

One of the respondents further emphasized that regardless of the policies adopted by the various public universities to improve female participation, the ratio as of 2008/2009 was 66:34 for universities. He concluded that the national policy of 50:50 gender parity is still a dream.

A reform committee member indicated that the Government of Ghana accepted in its 2004 white paper the recommendation of the 2002 Education Review committee to establish an Open University which would provide avenues for work – study programmes and life-long education and post-secondary education opportunities for large numbers of people. He ended by saying that an Open University concept being pursued by government has not yet come into existence in Ghana.

On the issue of governance and management, all the respondents, recognized the fact that although the 1992 constitution has granted a greater degree of autonomy to the governing councils of public universities, government interferes in the governance and management of public universities since these institutions are largely financed by the government. They drew the conclusion that until public universities wean themselves financially or attain financial independence; the government will continue to exercise its control in these institutions.

This clearly indicates that the most critical area in the relationship between government and the higher education institution is in the area of funding. As may be expected, because of the total dependence of universities on government for funding, it is through financial control that government is mostly decisive.

According to a speech given by Professor Kwesi Yankah, Pro-vice-Chancellor, UG, a guest speaker at the Student Representative Council (SRC) series of public lectures on the 29th January, 2010, regardless of the provision made by the 1992 Constitution

granting universities intellectual and academic freedom, there are still some traces of government interferences in the governance of universities. He cited one important incident bordering on academic freedom which did not pass unnoticed. It had to do with a rather strange incident at the university of Development studies in 2005, where the university's attempt to confer an honorary doctorate degree on former president Jerry Rawlings, was aborted under bizarre circumstances. On January, 17, 2005, the UDS Academic Board had decided to honour six distinguished individuals including the sitting president J.A. Kuffour and H.E. Flt. Lt. J. J. Rawlings.

On January 20, the UDS Council approved the decision of the Academic Board. The special occasion, which had been scheduled for March 19, 2005, however was called off at the eleventh hour, on the directive of the chairman of UDS Council, who cited security reasons for the cancellation. He concluded that whether this was from the long arm of government or was an exercise in self-censorship by the UDS Council is hard to tell, but it was quite clear that the university's academic freedom had been ruffled. The above discussion suggests that public universities cannot have absolute independence because these institutions are supported financially by the state.

When respondents' thoughts were sought on relevance and quality of university education, almost all the respondents bemoaned the poor quality of university education in not only Ghana but Africa in general. They added that our educational system does not promote innovation, creativity, critical and analytical thinking.

One of the respondents acknowledged that although the educational system of Ghana and Africa are modelled on foreign education, available statistics indicates that graduates of foreign universities are preferred to Ghanaian or African universities. This calls into question the quality of university education in Ghana and Africa. Personally, I agree with them because African universities performed poorly in the rankings of higher educational institutions published by Shanghai Jiao Tong University Worldwide rankings in 2005 which corroborates the literature reviewed.

Other respondents advanced an argument that the fact that today we have people who are paying huge foreign currency to send their children to universities outside tells us a lot. It tells us that the facilities we have here are no longer the standard and that if we were to invest some premium into our academic and residential facilities at our institutions of higher learning and make them institutions of excellence, people will pay for the service. These are the words of a past university administrator:

I have always said that sitting on interview panels where graduates have come to be interviewed for jobs clearly articulate the need for a lot of work to be done as far as academic standards are concerned. People do not know how to write basic CVs. Tenses are mixed in both written and spoken English. Pidgin English has taken over the Queen's English. Standards have simply fallen. This brings to the fore the extent to which the quality of university education has been diluted (An interview with a past university administrator).

Another past university administrator identified the explosion of student enrolment, infrastructural constraints, ill-stocked libraries and laboratories as factors undermining the quality of university education. He added:

The universities inability to diversify its methods of assessment of a student's instead of sticking to just examinations to me is one of the main reasons why examination malpractices have increased exponentially. Although examinations are not the only instrument for assessing and evaluating knowledge, it has emerged as the major established yardstick and the most practical way of assessment in Ghana (An interview with a past university administrator).

One of the respondents further stressed that field work, which lends a practical dimension to courses, are in most cases despised. He said that this is why we lag behind the rest of the world, especially the developed world where students are able to explore and innovate through field work thus adding to the body of knowledge. He concluded that our lecturers do not write textbooks or publish their research work. This is one of the criteria which are used to rank the universities. Most of the books students use in our universities is written by foreign authors.

Other respondents reiterated the fact that sadly, higher education development unlike other sectors of development has not kept pace with the ever increasing demand for higher education due to population growth. The increasing demand for higher education has created corruption in higher education admissions, examination malpractices, such as falsification of entry requirements, bribery of admissions officials for the limited spaces that are available. These they said have had some implications on the provision of quality university education in Ghana.

One respondent noted that based on education statistics and historical records we now know that Ghana at political independence had a very limited higher education system and at best an inadequate infrastructural provision for a meaningful development of higher education.

This confirms the report of the president's committee on the Review of Education Reforms in Ghana which notes that inadequate funding and lack of modern facilities for research, the growing teaching load on faculty due to an increasing number of students, lack of clearly articulated research priorities at the national and institutional levels, absence of strong academic and research leadership and an adequate number of well-motivated staff at the professional level have all hampered the process of knowledge production at the public universities (MOE, 2002).

In terms of funding, one of the past university administrators was of the view that the huge problem facing public universities in Ghana today is funding. Despite the paradigm shift from free university education to cost sharing by all stakeholders, the problem leaves much to be desired, he said. Another respondent added that in 1998, the government decided that it could no longer continue with periodical subventions and grants to cover the payments of students, residential and academic user fees because of budgetary constraints and therefore asked students to pay the fees in respect of the usage of residential and academic facilities. This promoted some serious reaction from university students not only through the exchange of broadsides and trading of accusations but also through street demonstrations and other forms of protestations.

One of the respondents continued that it is because of the rising cost of tertiary education with its attendant problem of rising enrolment, the problem of funding tertiary education, reached its elastic limit during the beginning of 2000/2001 academic year

when the committee of principals and vice chancellors (CVCPS) threatened to close down the universities or cut down their admission intake till a solution is found to the chronic under-funding of the universities and other tertiary institutions as a result of starvation of budgetary allocations to the tertiary sector.

During the matriculation ceremony of the University of Ghana for the 1999-2000 academic year the then Vice Chancellor, Professor Ivan Addae-Mensah in his address also did express his frustrations over the dwindling financial support from the government to the university. He also said the university probably would have to cut down on admissions in tandem to the financial and other resources available to it.

Professor S. K. Agyepong, then Vice Chancellor of University of Cape Coast delivering a paper on private participation in tertiary education of the Pearson – Osea Appreciation lecture at Accra in November, 1998 cautioned, that if the problem of funding tertiary education is not addressed quickly, it would lead to the demise of certain academic departments in the existing public universities and other tertiary institutions.

Addressing the seventh matriculation ceremony of the Accra Polytechnic in January 2000, Dr. Baah Boakye, principal of the Polytechnic also complained that inadequate government subvention, irregular disbursement of the subventions and the disproportionate contribution by direct beneficiaries as well as the industrial and private sectors, have all contributed to make the sustained and viable funding of tertiary institutions very difficult and noted that funding remains one of the greatest obstacles and constraints to capacity building of the nation. This perhaps, sums up the frustration of chief executives of tertiary institutions in the country over the inadequate tertiary education funding.

Review of the existing literature emphasize the fact that higher education is in a state of crisis in practically all countries of the world under the pressure of serious financial constraints. It has to compete for public fund with many other sectors and very often, it is among the first to undergo severe cuts. These cuts have reached a dramatic threshold in developing countries especially several other countries have also suffered in the tertiary education crisis that Ghana is grappling with.

The World Bank (1998) stated that, the development challenge posed for tertiary education in Africa is in one important respect, more daunting that posed for lower education and that rare growth for public resources for the educational sector as a whole in most developing countries, is unlikely to keep pace with the growth of the population. The World Bank blamed the scarcity of funding tertiary education throughout the sub-region on the tragic consequences of economic downturn and the concomitant construction in public budget that has seriously undermined the quality of education in Africa's universities. To improve the share of stagnant rare public education expenditures devoted to tertiary education and in order to stem the deterioration that threatens the ability of most African institutions of higher learning to contribute to development, the World Bank chronicled recommendations such as fee-paying in universities, elimination of allowances, rationalization of programmes and faculties, assigning to non-public sources the full cost of housing and other welfare sources provided to students and staff, reduction of non teaching staff amongst others in order to save the universities from collapse.

5. Findings

Concerning the challenges which were or have been encountered in the implementation of public university education policies, it was revealed that there are some inherent disadvantages in access with respect to types and locations of secondary schools, region of origin and students' socio-economic background and gender.

The Open University concept which is to increase access to university education has not been established. There are traces of government interferences in management and governance of university. This is because these institutions are supported financially by the state. The explosion of student enrolment coupled with underfunding has undermined the quality and relevance of university education. Public universities are still faced with the problem of under-funding despite the paradigm shift of university education to cost sharing by all stakeholders.

6. Conclusion

Based on the findings of the study, a number of conclusions were made. The rapid increase in student enrolments and under-funding has had a far-reaching implication on quality, relevance, management, access and equity of university education. Also, it was generally agreed among the respondents that until public universities wean themselves financially from government they cannot gain absolute independence.

7. Recommendations

There is the need for the government to pursue vigorously the Open University concept which will lead to increased access to university education by removing all obstacles to participation and ensuring full gender parity.

The universities should continue to diversify their sources of funding by devising innovative ways of generating income to enable them become financially independent. Corporate bodies, private individuals and institutions must be encouraged to establish more educational fund, scholarship and loan schemes to financially support students.

The government as a matter of urgency must place high premium on differentiation and articulation of higher education since this has the impetus to ensuring effective policy formulation and monitoring, increase access and equity, improve management, and ensure efficiency and unit-cost control in the future.

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