

Improving Equity in Tertiary Education in Ghana

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ABSTRACT

The United Nations sustainable development goals in education aim at inclusive and quality education for all. To achieve this, Ghana has a Draft Inclusive Education Policy which seeks to address the diverse learning needs of all citizens. Furthermore, the 1992 constitution provides the legal basis for the provision of higher education to be equally accessible to all. Equity in education means making sure that equitable and quality education is accessible to all students irrespective of their background. This paper based on review of literature, sought to identify interventions implemented in enhancing equity in tertiary education institutions, identify gaps which remain and suggest strategies to close these equity gaps. The gaps include enrolment by gender, disability issues and spatial disparity.

Keywords: affirmative action, blended learning, equity, inclusive education, tertiary education.

INTRODUCTION

Education could be a goal in itself or a means to achieving a goal. Education in general reduces inequalities, can break the cycle of poverty, foster tolerance, facilitate gender equality, and empower people to live more healthy lives and attain more productive livelihoods (United Nations Ghana [UNG])

& Civil Society Platform Ghana [CSPG], 2017). Higher education is perceived to be instrumental in social development in this knowledge economy the world finds itself (Cloete et al., 2011). To this end, Martin (2010) points out that several countries of the world are working towards providing equitable access to tertiary education. The ultimate aim of attaining tertiary education is being employed. All things being equal, if access to tertiary education is equitable and a person successfully passes through there is likelihood of that person finding a job.

The business of creating avenues for access and success in tertiary education for all persons has been around for a long while (Swanzy et al., 2019). Martin (2010) acknowledges that there have been concerns over equity in higher education since the 1970s and these concerns, Swanzy et al. (2019) indicate have been the basis for many tertiary education reforms in several countries. Swanzy et al. add that these reforms resulted in expanded access for formerly underrepresented groups in higher education to gain increased access in these countries.

For instance, Samoff and Carol (2003) indicate that concerns over equity in education were raised around 1992 in Ghana and so it got enshrined in the 1992 constitution but its implementation had to wait till 1993. Ghana has since then made frantic efforts at ensuring equity in her higher education system. Unfortunately, available data on Ghana suggest that tertiary education is still bereft with gross inequity (Atuahene & Owusu-Ansah, 2013).

The Concept of Equity in Education

Barrow and Grant (2019) explained equity in higher education to be generally linked to the equal opportunity - that is access, and equal outcomes narratives that are influenced by the removal of barriers and, usually enhanced by implementing targeted programmes. Barrow and Grant's exposition is evident in Ghana's strife for equity in higher education. In the last decade, Ghana has with targeted programmes like affirmative action, (such as lowering the entry requirement for females into universities) made strides in getting some marginalized and underprivileged individuals, enrolled in higher education (Darvas et al., 2017). In spite of this success chalked, several other intellectually competent students are denied admission by reason of institutional barriers – including insufficient academic and residential facilities (Atuahene & Owusu-Ansah, 2013). Equity in higher education does not end with access; and so, the African Higher Education Summit (AHES, 2015) has emphasized the need to have holistic and responsive strategies to ensure equity. AHES asserts that these strategies should go beyond access to

tertiary education to challenge equity issues that impede the participation and performance of vulnerable groups within higher education institutions.

Similarly, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD, 2012) has indicated that equity in tertiary education provides equal opportunities for access and success. This means that circumstances beyond an individual's control such as birthplace, ethnicity, language and disability should not influence a person's access and success to tertiary education opportunities (OECD, 2012). Essentially, equity in tertiary education goes beyond providing individuals the opportunity to enter a tertiary education system but also making room for these individuals to meaningfully participate in and interact with the educational system for the best possible outcome. This explains why Tudzi et. al (2020), state that although tertiary institutions in Ghana are trying to ensure equity to all, including people with disabilities, there are only a handful disability friendly systems and facilities on campuses in the Ghanaian tertiary education space. Thus, there is more to be desired in ensuring equity (Tudzi et. al, 2020). Furthermore Ashigbi (2011) has bemoaned that it is general knowledge that people with various forms of impairment are seriously challenged in their daily interaction with the tertiary education system in Ghana. It is worthy however to note that the University of Ghana, has put in place systems like the Office of students with special needs which has facilities like braille library for visually impaired students to successfully and meaningfully participate and interact with the educational system (University of Ghana, 2019).

Salmi and Bassett (2014) add a new perspective to the equity conversation when they identify three dimensions of equity in relation to tertiary education as:

- equity of access, which consists of offering equal opportunities to enrol in tertiary education programs and institutions.
- equity of results, which relates to opportunities to advance in the system and successfully complete tertiary level studies; and
- equity of outcomes, which looks at the labour market outcomes of various groups.

These dimensions give angles from which the equity in higher education can be looked at, that is, admission, experiences and completion. Tackling equity from the access dimension, Ghana has seen the growth and establishment of several higher education institutions, both public and private. These growth and establishments expand access to higher education (Akplu, 2016). Again, for equity of results, Ghana has put in place Students Loan

Trust Fund which help students to access funds. Also, a good number of tertiary institutions have students' financial aid and scholarship offices to help remove cost barriers that may prevent a student from pursuing their educational goals (University of Ghana, 2017). With equity of outcome, the National Accreditation Board has been instituted to ensure strict compliance quality standards in order to ensure all students pass out of tertiary institutions exposed to quality education (Utaka, 2008).

In another vein, Thomson (2013) explains equity in higher education as an 'arithmetic equation of the distribution of goods/benefits [such as higher education] among population groupings [should be] roughly the same proportion as they are in the wider society' (p. 175). Thomson's explanation indicates that there is lot to be done to achieve this in the Ghanaian tertiary education space. A critical look at the tertiary education space in Ghana shows a disproportionate concentration of tertiary institutions in the southern zone to the detriment of the northern zone.

Education System in Ghana

The Ministry of Education (MOE) is ultimately responsible for the education system in Ghana, specifically, policy formulation. Other agencies report to MOE and the largest is Ghana Education Service (GES) which is responsible for delivering pre-tertiary public education. Basic education consists of two years kindergarten, six-year primary and three years Junior High School (JHS) which are free and compulsory. Beyond this is secondary level which leads to tertiary education. People with disabilities have special education. There is also non-formal education to improve literacy levels.

Government contributes a major part of the financing of education particularly, paying of wages. The Ghana Education Trust Fund (GET Fund) has an earmarked proportion that is spent on goods, services and capital. Internally generated funds (IGF) are also available and at the tertiary level and contribute 50% of expenditure (MOE, 2018). There are three autonomous bodies in charge of management of Education in Ghana: The National Inspectorate Board (NIB), the National Teaching Council (NTC) and the National Council for Curriculum Assessment (NACCA) responsible for systems accountability.

Private tertiary institutions are directly under MOE and make about half of all tertiary institutions in Ghana. Most tertiary institutions are self-regulated though there are supervisory bodies – National Council for Tertiary Education (NCTE) and National Accreditation Board (NAB) (now known as Ghana Tertiary Education Council) to oversee their activities. Tertiary

education in Ghana consists of Universities, Colleges of Education, Nursing Training Colleges and Technical Universities. As of 2018, there were a total of 212 accredited tertiary institutions in Ghana. These were mainly made up of private institutions offering degree and Higher National Diploma (HND) programs (38.2%), public Colleges of Education (18.4%), public Nursing Training Colleges (11.8%) private Nurses Training Colleges (6.1%) and public universities (4.7%) (National Accreditation Board, 2018).

In spite of the number of tertiary institutions in Ghana, authorities acknowledge the difficulties surrounding ensuring equity in tertiary education (Glavin, 2017). This is in spite of the provisions in the 1992 constitution of Ghana. Section 25c of the 1992 constitution states “higher education shall be made equally accessible to all, on the basis of capacity, by every appropriate means, and in particular, by progressive introduction of free education” (p. 24). In addition, one of the objectives of education in this same constitution is “The state shall subject to availability of resources provide ...equal access to university education or equivalent education...” (p.35). These provisions in the constitution are expected to provide equity in tertiary education in Ghana as this constitution provides legal backing for this to be achieved.

The Constitution goes on to specifically make provision for people with disability in Ghana to be properly catered for. Section 29 (6) of the 1992 constitution of Ghana which deals with people with disabilities states that “As far as practicable, every place to which the public have access shall have appropriate facilities for disabled persons” (Republic of Ghana, 1992, p. 26).

Another document in Ghana that seeks to provide the educational needs of all citizens is the Draft Inclusive Education Policy (Republic of Ghana, 2013). This policy states that under no circumstance should tertiary and higher education institution (both public and private) deny an applicant admission on the basis of his or her special needs. Admission therefore should be given to an applicant who satisfies the minimum admission requirements. It further states that concessionary admission should be given to candidates who manifest special needs (Republic of Ghana, 2013).

With these provisions in the constitution, the government and other stakeholders in tertiary education in Ghana are mandated to ensure the provision of equal access to tertiary education for all. What is evidently missing in the 1992 constitution is the issue of equity which is what Ghana should be striving to achieve. Equal access is good but not sufficient in the provision of education. What is more important is equity which is expected to ensure fairness and better access to all.

On this basis, this paper focuses on tertiary education in Ghana with the objective of identifying some initiatives which have been implemented to

enhance provision of equity in tertiary education in Ghana, gaps which still remain in the provision of equity, particularly equity of access, in tertiary education and then suggest strategies for filling these gaps.

PROVIDING EQUITY IN TERTIARY EDUCATION IN GHANA

With regards to equity in tertiary education, Darvas et al. (2017) have reported that Ghana is one of the success cases in Sub-Saharan Africa. According to them “Ghana is one of the few countries in the region wherein students from households in the bottom quintiles of income distribution represent a respectable share of tertiary enrolment” (page 79). This section highlights some efforts made towards providing equity in tertiary education in Ghana. It follows up with some gaps which still remains and then finally outline some strategies to overcome these gaps.

Some successful initiatives that have been put in place to ensure equity and these include the running of access courses, evening and weekend schools and the growth and expansion of tertiary institutions.

Access courses for mature students

Adu-Yeboah and Forde (2011) define mature students [mature applicants] as students with no tertiary education who attempt undergraduate studies at or after the age of 25 years and also possess non-standard entry qualifications. Just like several other tertiary institutions in Ghana, the Ghana Technology University College (2020), for instance, reports of taking mature applicants through some courses referred to as access courses. They usually undertake basic topics in Mathematics, English and General Paper. These are the basic subjects that enable applicants without the standard entry requirements for tertiary education to attain tertiary education (Ghana Technology University College, 2020). These courses usually cover a period of about six weeks and are done at weekends to enable these applicants who are mainly workers to have the time to participate. This intervention provides an avenue for those who do not meet the traditional entry requirements for them to gain admission into tertiary institutions. The main challenge with this is that younger prospective applicants will have to wait till they are twenty-five years or more to be able to access this opportunity.

Evening and Weekend Schools

There are a number of degree and professional programs such as accounting and administration that are done on part-time basis. Classes for such programs are usually held in the evenings and during weekends. This is another avenue for students who are mainly full-time workers to further their

education. The main challenge posed by this is that these workers have time constraints, hence they may hardly make time for other social activities because the time for these activities are taken up not only by lectures but time to read, research and undertake assignments (Goode, 2017).

Growth and Expansion of Tertiary Institutions

The last decade has seen a tremendous increase in the number of tertiary institutions in Ghana. Data from the National Accreditation Board (NAB, 2019) indicate that between 2010 and 2020, there has been an increase in the total number of public universities from as low as eight (8) institutions to as high as twenty-four (24). Additionally, the number of private high education institutions has shot up from fifty-one (51) to eighty-nine (89) for the same period (NCTE, 2019). Accompanying these growths and expansion is a tremendous increase in enrolment - that is, an increase from 147,727 in the 2010/11 academic year to 348,845 in the 2018/19 academic year (NCTE, 2019).

Additionally, the growth and expansion has led to the opening of new tertiary institutions and satellite campuses in regions where there were few or no tertiary institutions. This tends to reduce the spatial disparity in access. On the face value, this growth and expansion demonstrates the opening-up of educational opportunities for marginalized social groups such as women, poorer segments of the population, and residents of marginalized northern parts of Ghana (Ayelazuno & Aziabah, 2021).

THE EXISTING GAPS

Gender Disparity in Enrolment

The National Council for Tertiary Education as shown in Table 1 indicated that no tertiary institutions in Ghana have been able to achieve the national target of 50:50 for all students, (that is, equal numbers of both males and females) enrolled in tertiary education institutions (NCTE, 2014). It is only in private Colleges of Education that the expected ratio is quite close (54:46) with the worst 'offenders' being the public universities, polytechnics (now called Technical Universities) and particularly Colleges of Agriculture. At the other end is Nurses Training Colleges which tend to be female biased having a ratio of 20:80 (male to female). This shows that in spite of the tremendous increase in enrolment, gender disparity still remains an issue to be dealt with. Moreover, in some Universities in Ghana for instance, although the issue of affirmative action is captured in their strategic plans, there is no document on affirmative action to aid its implementation (Taylor, 2016).

Table 1
Male-Female ratios in tertiary institutions in Ghana

No.	Name of Institution	Male-Female Ratio
1.	Public Universities	65:35
2.	Polytechnics (Technical Universities)	65:35
3.	Public Colleges of Education	57:43
4.	Private Colleges of Education	54:46
5.	Public Specialized Institutions	59:41
6.	Private tertiary Institutions	57:43
7.	Nurses Training Colleges	20:80
8.	Colleges of Agriculture	91:9

Source: NCTE, (2014)

Less Disability Friendly Tertiary Education

Statistics available at the Ghana Statistical Service (GSS) indicate that very few people with disabilities have attained education at the tertiary level. For the whole country, only 4.5% have gone beyond the secondary level (GSS, 2014). According to Ashigbi (2011), these few individual's with various forms of impairment who get enrolled also face grave challenges with the mainstream educational system. They are faced with challenges like inaccessible built environment, negative social stigmatization and exclusion in their quest to acquire quality education. These challenges tend to manifest themselves as learning barriers to students (Kpodoe et al., 2019). This puts equity at bay, particularly equity of results as espoused by Salmi and Bassett (2014).

Spatial Disparity

Analysis by Atuahene and Owusu-Ansah (2013) on three of Ghana's leading public universities revealed that majority of their students were largely from five of the then ten administrative regions of Ghana. They added that these five regions are those regions considered to be relatively well-resourced economically, and they include Greater Accra, Ashanti, Central, Volta and Eastern regions. In essence, access to and participation in tertiary education are disproportionately skewed against the deprived areas. No wonder Atuahene and Owusu-Ansah averred that the chances of gaining admission into a Ghanaian higher education institution is about 10 times less likely for students from schools located in deprived areas. Additionally,

private tertiary institutions are unfairly distributed across the country as presented in Table 2.

Table 2
Distribution of private tertiary institutions in Ghana

Region	Private tertiary Institutions*		
	Frequency	%	% of Population**
Western	1	1.2	9.6
Central	9	11.0	8.9
Greater Accra	39	47.5	16.3
Volta	3	3.7	8.6
Eastern	6	7.3	10.7
Ashanti	14	17.1	19.4
Brong Ahafo	4	4.9	9.4
Northern	3	3.7	10.1
Upper East	2	2.4	4.2
Upper West	1	1.2	2.8
Total	82	100.0	100.0

Source: *National Accreditation Board (n.d.)

** Ghana Statistical Service (2012b)

Matching the distribution of population size with the distribution of private tertiary institutions shows that the distribution is not balanced. Two instances can be stated here. The first is Greater Accra region and the next is Northern region. Greater Accra region's portion of the population size of Ghana is 16.3% however, it has almost 48% of the private tertiary institutions in the country. In the case of the Northern region, while its share of population size is 10%, it has less than 4% of private tertiary institutions in Ghana. Proximity has been identified as only one aspect of access (Segbenya et al., 2019). Abdul-Kahar and Mahmoud (2014) for instance have indicated that other issues, especially having the financial means to pay for fees, meals, etc. are very critical in students enrolling and staying in school. This is especially at the tertiary level of education where some of these expenses are borne by students.

Expensive Private Tertiary Education

Private Tertiary Institutions (PTI) have been established to among others, help handle the high demand for tertiary education (Atuahene & Owusu-Ansah, 2013). Kwakwa et al. (2012) explains that these PTIs mostly

admit qualified applicants who do not get absorbed by the subsidized public tertiary institutions and will be able fund an unsubsidized tertiary education. Data from the National Accreditation Board (2016) implies that PTIs enrol about 26% of students who complete senior high schools every year. Swanzy et al. (2019) admit that despite the commendable efforts of these PTIs in closing this equity gap, they find it difficult to close the gap for people from low socio-economic background and rural areas due to their relatively high fees. Anecdotal evidence suggests that they look for other means to pay their fees. Such means include borrowing, depending on relatives and doing 'odd' jobs to earn some money. With this situation, GETFund allocation will go a long way to ease the cost burden on students, thereby enhancing students' access and success in tertiary education institutions. It has been argued that for equity of access to be achieved, there should be fair financing. This means that funds should be available to help support students who may not be able to pay fees. This is because if one cannot enter a tertiary institution because one cannot pay fees then all other benefits provided at the tertiary level will also not be available to that person.

MEASURES FOR IMPROVING EQUITY IN TERTIARY INSTITUTIONS

Affirmative Action for Vulnerable Groups

Higher Education Institutions (HEI)s use affirmative action to correct imbalances skewed against certain vulnerable groups trying to access higher education (Yusif & Ali, 2013). With affirmative action, concessions are made for vulnerable and less privileged individuals in the society who at least meet the minimum requirements for a competitive enrolment (Swanzy et al., 2019). There is an apparent confidence in affirmative action to help redress the inequities in the Ghanaian higher education sector particularly against women; no wonder certain institutions like University for Development Studies (UDS) increased its female enrolment by 61% in 2004, 8% in 2005, 56% in 2006, 41% in 2007, and 27% in 2008 with affirmative action (Swanzy et al., 2019). Other institutions can implement certain affirmative action interventions to tackle the inequities against women.

Additionally, affirmative action can be used to secure admission for students with special needs i.e., those with physical disabilities as well as those from less endowed schools (Atuahene & Owusu-Ansah, 2013). Less endowed schools are those that lack basic amenities and are sited in rural areas and poor urban communities (Swanzy et al., 2019). These schools lack teachers and infrastructure among other facilities, all schools follow the same

curriculum and write the West Africa Senior Secondary Certificate Examination (Opoku-Asare & Siaw, 2015). This clearly is an issue of equity as it does not provide fair opportunity for students from these less endowed school to enter tertiary institutions.

It is the view of Morley et al. (2007) that tertiary education institutions would do well to provide a quota of their admissions to students from such schools to provide equity at the tertiary education level. The Ministry of Education has provided policy guidelines for this (Atuahene & Owusu-Ansah, 2013). The Ministry of Finance through the Ministry of Education should provide resources for tertiary education institutions which make efforts at providing access to students of all backgrounds to encourage them to do more. This will also be an incentive for other institutions to follow suit.

Implementation of Inclusive Education

Inclusive Education (IE) is explained by Senadza et al. (2019) to be a dynamic process of addressing and responding to the varying needs of all students by removing any form of exclusion caused by the educational system. Senadza et al. further state that this form of education accommodates all [students] irrespective of their physical, intellectual, social, emotional, linguistic or other conditions, including [people] with disabilities. However, Mullins and Preyde (2013) have stated that in tertiary education institutions, students with disabilities are often faced with challenges like inaccessible curricular, negative attitudes and architectural barriers. Also, according to Morgado et al. (2016) these challenges emanating from tertiary education institutions narrow access to higher education for these students with disability and may cause them to discontinue their studies even before they get their first degree. This means implementing inclusive education will ensure students with special needs are well received and supported to successfully go through tertiary education. It is thus recommended that IE be implemented by incorporating the needed technology, for example braille and other learning aids, into the curricula, restructure universities' architecture to make it more accessible for students with disability and establish support systems especially for these students (Morgado et al., 2016).

The University of Ghana for instance has created an office with facilities for students with special needs and must be commended for it. There is however, still room for improvement. There is the need for the general environment and facilities in all tertiary institutions to be made friendly to accommodate these students. At the secondary school level and below, special schools have been created for them. At the tertiary level however,

there is no such thing and they are integrated into the mainstream. Since these students are ideally expected to move to the tertiary level, it will be appropriate for tertiary education institutions to re-engineer their systems - be it curriculum, facilities or infrastructures, to accommodate more of such students.

Introduction of More On-line and Blended Programs

It has been found that 15.3% of young women and 23% of young men (15-24 years) use a computer at least once a week. In addition, 10.5% of young women and 18.6% of young men use the internet at least once a week (GSS, 2012a). Also, with the use of mobile phones and tablets now, internet has become more accessible to many more people.

A number of services which were previously provided face-to face are now being done on-line. Tertiary education has not been left out. Online and blended learning has enhanced access to tertiary education (Tagoe & Abakah, 2014). To this end, although most programs are run by the traditional mode of face-to-face, gradually, more blended and fully on-line programs are being introduced (Sweeney et al, 2016). Therefore, as part of their corporate social responsibilities, telecommunication operators could do the following for students: provide free data bundles, subsidize data bundles purchased and find innovative ways for their networks to get to hard-to-reach areas. To make this easier, government could provide a conducive business environment for telecommunication operators. It is expected that in the long run, students no matter where they are located in Ghana would then have access to totally on-line if not blended programs at the tertiary level of education.

Furthermore, what could also be considered is the establishment of open universities as can be found in other countries such as United Kingdom, Australia and Tanzania among others. This is expected to open-up more channels for tertiary education in the country. Ghana currently has only one open university: Laweh University in Accra.

Public Private Partnership (PPP)

Atuahene and Owusu-Ansah (2013) have averred that admission to any university in Ghana, especially the public ones, is influenced by the availability of academic and residential facilities, as well as Government subsidies to institutions. With the growing demand for participation and the unequalled pace of expansion in residential facilities, access to higher education is determined by available capacities of tertiary education institutions. With this situation, Odeleye (2012) asserts that PPP in university education service delivery comes with a propensity to expand equitable access

to quality education and improving learning outcomes. Odeleye's assertion was affirmed when in 2015 the then Vice Chancellor of the University of Ghana, Professor Ernest Aryeetey avowed that a PPP between the University of Ghana and Africa Integras was going to enable the University realise its long-held vision of building its capacity to welcome more students and also provide modern, world class teaching and research facilities to support these students (University of Ghana, 2015). This is one of the reasons why in recent times, public private partnership (PPP) has been endorsed as being crucial to expanding access to higher education and improving higher education programs' responsiveness to a country's needs (Boye, 2014).

Expansion of the GETFund to Cover Private Universities

There have been calls by stakeholders to expand the allocations of the GETFund to also include private universities. Professor Kwesi Yankah, the President then of Central University - one of Ghana's private universities, in an address at the Council of Independent Universities (CIU) called on the Government of Ghana to include private universities as beneficiaries of the GETFund-sponsored projects (Appiah, 2016). He added that the Government should consider students of private universities for GETFund scholarships since graduates from these universities also contribute to the country's human capital. Okebukola (2015) has indicated that expanding GETFund allocations to cover private universities will help reduce the cost of education borne by students - thus enhancing the access and success of students, particularly those with economically less-resourced background.

CONCLUSION

Ghana has made strides in providing equitable learning opportunities for all citizens at the higher education level yet there is still room for improvement. This paper sought to identify interventions that have been implemented in enhancing equity in tertiary education institutions, identify some gaps which still remain in delivering equitable higher education, and then suggest strategies to close these equity gaps.

The study realised that the introduction of access courses for people who have non-standard entry qualifications, introduction of part time classes for full-time workers, and increasing the number of private tertiary institutions to make up for the inability of public tertiary institutions to admit all qualified applicants, have gone a long way to enhance access to tertiary

education. In spite of these strides made, there are still some gaps that need to be filled in the provision of equitable tertiary education. These gaps include gender-biased admissions - where admissions in various tertiary institutions are skewed against a certain gender, spatial disparity - where people from certain parts of the country are more likely to access and participate in tertiary education than others and the largely unfriendly environment for people with disabilities.

The study thus recommends that equity in tertiary institutions can be improved by the use of affirmative action for vulnerable groups, practising an inclusive education system, public private partnership, introducing more on-line and blended programs, and the expansion of GETFund allocations to cover private universities.

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