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**Beyond Primary Education:
Challenges and Approaches to Expanding Learning Opportunities in Africa**

Session 5

Access and Equity

**Achieving Universal Post-Primary Education in Africa:
Innovative modalities and cost implications**

By: Cream Wright (UNICEF)

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Association for the Development of Education in Africa (ADEA)

International Institute for Educational Planning
7-9 rue Eugène Delacroix
75116 Paris, France
Tel.: +33(0)1 45 03 77 57
Fax: +33(0)1 45 03 39 65
adea@iiep.unesco.org
website: www.ADEAnet.org

Fortunately, children in most African countries increasingly enjoy their right to basic education. While much remains to be done to achieve universal access, notable strides have been recorded in primary education enrolment and completion rates in recent years. Between 1999 and 2005, countries in sub-Saharan Africa recorded an impressive 40% gain in primary school enrolment, and despite rising population pressures the number of children out of school declined from 42 million to 33 million over the period. Progress is also being made in the area of gender parity, although data for 2005 shows that only two countries in sub-Saharan Africa have actually achieved the EFA gender parity goal. In general many African countries have made rapid progress from a low enrolment base, largely due to national policies and investment in education as well as sustained external support by partner agencies.

A logical consequence of these achievements is increased social demand for post-primary education. Unlike primary education the cost of universal post-primary education is likely to be extremely high and probably prohibitive for most countries, based on existing models of provision. However, much systematic work is yet to be done on such a costing exercise. African countries would therefore be “shooting in the dark” if they were simply to adopt a policy of universalizing post-primary education. Also, there are complex considerations relating to what is the most appropriate, cost effective and equitable ways of providing access to post-primary education opportunities for all the eligible age group, given their attendant diversity in talent, motivation and aspirations.

In addition, when it comes to post-primary education it may be necessary to look beyond the “rights” argument to justify the levels of public expenditure likely to be involved. Thus whilst most African countries seem keen to meet rising social demand by addressing the need for expansion in post-primary opportunities, they are also concerned about expected benefits in terms of increased income generating skills and employment prospects that would fuel economic growth and help to justify high levels of public expenditure in this area. This concern is reflected in a resurgent interest in technical and vocational aspects of post-primary education. There is a need to treat this renewed call for a vocational emphasis in education with some caution. Amongst other things, it raises the specter of extensive investments made by African countries in diversified secondary education and vocational training during the late 1970s and 1980s, which simply did not yield the expected benefits.

Against this background this paper has three foci. It highlights what we know about patterns of provision of post-primary education and offers an analysis of the determinants of these patterns in different countries. Secondly, it provides an Africa-wide cost estimate of the additional financing needed to expand post-primary coverage universally using current models of provision. Finally, in the context of the relationship between primary, post-primary, and tertiary education, the paper explores innovative responses and pragmatic policies that will offer a wider variety of models for provision of post-primary opportunities. It then reviews the cost implications of these different patterns of innovative provision that would increase the feasibility of achieving universal post-primary education in most African countries.

An important starting point for this paper is the equity argument that all children in the relevant age group should have access to some form of post primary learning opportunity. Currently it is estimated that 185 million children of secondary school age worldwide are missing out on secondary education and that 127 million of these children are still attending primary schools. Inequalities are also dramatically magnified at the secondary level, with more children from rural

areas and belonging to the poorest households out of secondary classrooms in comparison to their urban and wealthier peers, gender disparities are also pervasive.

Given this situation the paper argues for an inclusive post-primary education system that can accommodate a range of alternative modes of provision. The idea presented in this document is that alternative learning opportunities to the traditional path of a general secondary education should be cultivated. This would allow for other channels through which children could pursue their education once they complete primary schooling. Moreover, these different modalities or alternative pathways should not close the option of moving horizontally from one variant of the system to another. In other words the argument is not for silos of post-primary provision but for a network of linked options that cater for different interests, talents and aspirations of the learners. Finally, there should also be options for children who missed out on their primary education to be able to be reinserted into the system and eventually be able to continue to tertiary education.

On this basis of an inclusive system with alternative patterns of provision, the paper offers an estimate of the financial needs of ensuring universal access to post primary education for children and youths in African countries. Besides these broad cost estimates, which as could be expected are quite high and out of the realm of possibilities for most African countries, the paper provides some suggestions on ways to reduce unit costs. Several simulation exercises are used to explore these options for reducing unit costs.

In these simulations, the unit costs are adjusted according to alternative assumptions (e.g. changing the pupil-teacher ratios, or incorporating the secondary school age children attending primary into accelerated programmes). The alternative unit costs are used to recalculate the broad global costs. These can be used to provide policy options to African countries seeking to rapidly expand their provision of post primary education.

Previous attempts at costing post-primary education have only analyzed a few countries while in this paper a truly global cost is presented. Also, previous studies have concluded that the goal of universal post-primary education is not attainable and, consequently, the goal should be scaled down. Instead of reducing the goal, the effort presented here is in terms of finding alternative ways to provide schooling (e.g. modifying the relation ship between vocational training and traditional secondary education).