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WHY CHOOSE LSM?

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Nicos Nicolaou, chief executive, UNICAF

► students in Nigeria compete for the half million places available; potentially leaving over a million qualified college-age Nigerians without a post-secondary place.

Providing these tertiary qualifications is crucial if Africa's economy is to continue to develop, however meeting this demand is obviously impossible if Africa goes down the traditional Western route of building \$50 million 50-acre campuses for each university.

Delivery models

This is where the role of the private sector becomes essential. A number of providers are operating across the continent with models ranging from fully online courses to the establishment of on-ground campuses. Private university provision is a crucial element of the higher education sector in sub-Saharan Africa. The public sector is aware of the challenges it faces and so welcomes the high-quality provision offered by private institutions.

At present, UNICAF operates two different models, firstly through partnering with Western universities to offer its degrees initially online, but increasingly 'blended' including some tuition on the ground in Africa, to African students. Secondly, UNICAF offers its own locally accredited degrees to African students, again through a combination of online and blended study and the university is currently setting up eight more campuses in other African countries.

On-ground providers are not the only institutions hoping to help themselves to Africa's wealth of prospective students. Other western institutions are beginning to take advantage of the distance learning revolution to offer their degrees to students across the continent. The University of California, Berkeley now offers its MBA programme online to African students for a cost of \$60,000 upwards; significantly cheaper than the costs associated with travel to study in the US, yet still a figure out of reach for the majority of Africans. Local providers offer degrees for substantially less, yet these are often of poor quality and aren't recognised by multi-national employers. The cost of a degree itself is often not the only issue associated with study for African students. In contrast to the west, the median age of students studying with UNICAF in sub-Saharan Africa is between 25 and 40, made up largely of young professionals keen to learn skills that will help them in

their current roles and improve their future job prospects. As these students need to support themselves while studying and in many cases care for family at the same time, they require options that allow them to study flexibly with payment plans that suit their current situation. Further challenges come from the often under-developed infrastructure that exists in many African nations with wi-fi frequently unreliable and only available at a low bandwidth.

This is where the blended partnership model becomes effective. By partnering with western universities students gain a recognised degree which will improve their future career prospects. Blended and online learning allows students to study in their free time with some contact with faculty and other students at locations near their workplaces. Without the need to build campuses, providers can cut the cost of studying by as much as 80%, making the cost of study around \$3,500 for a master's degree. This is a fraction of the cost of attending an equivalent quality university, and importantly it offers a flexibility that enables students to continue to work while they study, making affordability less of an issue.

Increasing demand

This model has proved extremely successful. UNICAF has over 8,000 students today, and is on track to reach over 60,000 students by the end of 2020. The sub-Saharan African education market is immense but extremely complicated. Assuming Africa continues to build its knowledge based economies and resource extraction becomes increasingly complex, the demand for high quality educational offerings will only continue to grow. As illustrated with the success of Lagos-based software developer training and talent firm, Andela, there is a huge thirst for high quality education that is likely to only be quenched by the private sector.

With the compound effect of growing demographics, increasing affluence and desire for education, sub-Saharan Africa remains a rich-ground for higher education providers capable of delivering economies of scale across a challenging infrastructure. Furthermore, with foreign investors continuing to drive development across the region these potential challenges are slowly being overcome which should only boost provision in sub-Saharan Africa's HE sector over the next decade. ■

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