

Aiming higher: Why the SDG target for increased higher education scholarships by 2020 misses the mark in sustainable educational development planning

Dr. Stephanie Bengtsson, Research Scholar, Wittgenstein Centre for Demography & Global Human Capital (corresponding author)

stephanie.bengtsson@wu.ac.at

+43-(1)-31336-5968

Welthandelsplatz 1, Building D5

1020 Vienna

Austria

Dr. Bilal Barakat, Research Scholar, Wittgenstein Centre for Demography & Global Human Capital

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One major criticism of the Millennium Development Goal (MDG) agenda has been that, while it led to rapid progress in several key development areas, this progress was far from inclusive, and many segments of global society found themselves left behind (Kite, Roche & Wise, 2014). In recognition of this problem, the ambitious Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) agenda, with its 17 goals and 169 accompanying targets, explicitly pledges to leave no one behind as we progress towards sustainable development by 2030, and to attempt to “reach the furthest behind first.” The agenda includes a number of ‘means of implementation’ targets, which not only exist as targets to be attained in and of themselves, but also are intended to support local communities and countries in attaining the other targets, and thus the SDGs as a whole. There are three means of implementation targets accompanying SDG 4 to “ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all”: one for improving learning environments (4a), one for higher education scholarships (4b), and one for improving teacher capacity (4c).

In this paper, we explore the implications of meeting target 4b, that is, by 2020, to:

...substantially expand globally the number of scholarships available to developing countries, in particular least developed countries, small island developing States and African countries, for enrolment in higher education, including vocational training and information and communications technology, technical, engineering and scientific programmes, in developed countries and other developing countries.

Drawing from the literature and using population data from UNESCO’s Institute for Statistics (UIS) and other sources, as well as information on existing higher education scholarships and the global state of higher education, we demonstrate that, in its current form, target 4b may in fact serve as a barrier to inclusive progress within education, and, indeed, the other development sectors. Compounding this problem, the only proposed indicators for targets 4a-c are to do with money spent by national governments and donors respectively, with no guidelines about appropriate levels of spending, nor how to target that spending in an effective and efficient manner to ensure access, equity, and quality.¹ By examining two broad (at times overlapping) population groups that are the

¹ Among the proposed indicators to measure progress towards the SDGs, there are two specifically related to the achievement of targets 4a-c: (95) Domestic revenues allocated to sustainable development as percent of GNI, by sector; (96) Official development assistance and net private grants as percent of GNI (Proposed indicators taken from <http://indicators.report/goals/goal-4/>)

most marginalized when it comes to higher education (Africans and refugees), we show that, while increased attention to higher education on the global agenda is a positive development, and investment in higher education for these groups should be an international priority, increasing the number of scholarships (as set out in target 4b) is, at best, an inadequate strategy, and, at worst, a spanner in the works of building a thriving higher education sector in most of the so-called developing world. In other words, we contend that target 4b in its current form falls far short of serving as a means of implementation, and in fact potentially serves as a threat, not only for the achievement of the other SDG 4 targets, but for the achievement of the SDG agenda as a whole.

As we will demonstrate in this paper, target 4b has multiple flaws. These will be expanded on in the discussion below, but an overview of the flaws is presented here. First, given the expansion in the number of secondary school graduates implied by other SDG education targets, even 'substantial expansion' in scholarships will – at best – maintain the relative share of eligible recipients who benefit from scholarships. To actually increase this share would require up to a tenfold increase in the number of scholarships available in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), for instance. Second, given that learning inequalities begin early, and are primarily driven by disparities in wealth interacting with other forms of disadvantage (Rose & Alcott, 2015), higher education scholarships would be out of reach for many of the most disadvantaged, and thus would most likely serve to preserve higher education as a privilege for the elite. Third, absent a stipulation that scholarship recipients would have to 'give back', "[p]roviding northern doctorates at a cost of \$150,000 a throw is an expensive form of development, if the only beneficiary is the individual" (Kirkland, 2016). Fourth, by stipulating scholarships as a necessity to be achieved, funds earmarked for higher education by donors and governments will likely be diverted from the strengthening of national education systems and higher education sub-systems, towards providing resources to individuals (Rose and Zubairi, 2016).

Higher education has long been under-prioritised in education budgets, and, given increasing international pressure to achieve universal primary and secondary schooling, higher education system strengthening is unlikely to make its way up the funding priority list. Using the limited resources available for higher education to fund scholarships is thus not a cost-effective way to improve access, equity, and quality of provision for students from low and middle income countries (LMICs), nor to bolster higher education systems in LMICs such that they are in a position to fulfil functions critical to national development, including teaching, research, and community engagement. We argue that targets 4a and 4c should be prioritised in educational planning ahead of 4b, with a stipulation that *all* levels of the education system be considered (and in relation to each other), as investments in infrastructure and professional development, salaries for academic staff, academic exchange programmes, etc. in LMICs are much more likely to lead to inclusive progress within the sector and, consequently, the agenda as a whole.

This paper begins with a brief discussion of the relationship between higher education and global development, followed by an examination of the position of higher education in the SDG agenda. Then, we turn to an analysis of the issue of higher education scholarships in relation to Africa, and the global refugee crisis, respectively. Finally, we consider a potential way forward, calling for a modification of the target and for other sectors to recognize the strengthening of higher education, particularly in LMICs as a powerful means of implementation for the sustainable development agenda as a whole.

The relationship between higher education and global development

Until recently, higher education has been quite low on the list of international community priorities, largely thanks to World Bank research from the 1980s which suggested that there are diminishing rates of return to higher levels of education, and that basic education is a more worthwhile investment, with a much higher rate of return (Collins, 2013; Power et al., 2015). As a result, even within the global education movement itself, higher education received very little attention, with no specific mention in the six Education for All (EFA) Goals,² or the United Nations (UN) Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)³ (Dryden-Peterson, 2011). Further, a popular public (mis)conception holds that higher education is primarily a *private* good that leads to market benefits for individuals, and that those individuals ‘lucky enough’ to secure a place at a university, should therefore bear the cost themselves, unless they exhibit a certain level of capacity and need, which would entitle them to financial support (McCowan, 2012; Collins, 2013). In other words, until recently, the international development community has, by and large, found little reason to make significant investments in higher education as a sector.

However, in the last couple of decades, there has been pressure for higher education expansion from ‘above’ (as governments want to compete in the new global knowledge economy) and ‘below’ (as individuals want to improve their own social mobility and/or make a bigger contribution to society) (Wallerstein, 2012). Further, some scholars have demonstrated that higher education has non-market, collective, and social benefits, in addition to individual market benefits (McMahon, 2009) and that higher education potentially has a key role to play in national development. According to Power et al. (2015), the function of higher education is “the production, distribution and consumption of knowledge, through teaching, research, and community engagement” (p.15); i.e. it goes beyond the mere upskilling of individuals for their own private gain. In fact, Yusuf (2007) claims that the majority of technological advances with national and international economic consequences can be linked (directly or indirectly) to universities, either because of the training provided, research and development activities conducted, or knowledge that ‘spills over’ to the community. For this reason, Kofi Annan has called for the university to become “a primary tool for Africa’s development in the new century” (cited in Collins, 2013, p.22). And yet, most countries have low net access rates: compared with a global rate of 26%, low income countries (LICs) enroll only 7% of the age cohort on average, meaning significant numbers of individuals are unable to obtain access to higher education (McCowan, 2012). In the following section, we will discuss the role of higher education in the new SDG agenda, to explore if and how the targets allow for a redress of this enrolment imbalance and contribute to individual and societal market and non-market benefits.

Problems with how higher education is conceptualized in the SDGs

Within SDG4 itself, higher education is specifically mentioned twice: target 4.3,⁴ which has to do with ensuring equal access for women and men to affordable quality technical, vocational and tertiary education, including university, and target 4b (see above). Target

² The 6 EFA goals are to do with (1) early childhood, (2) free and compulsory primary education, (3) meeting the learning needs of young people and adults, (4) adult literacy, (5) gender equity in primary and secondary education, and (6) education quality.

³ The second MDG called for universal primary education.

⁴ Target 4.3 is to “By 2030, ensure equal access for all women and men to affordable quality technical, vocational and tertiary education, including university.” Among the 100 proposed indicators to measure progress towards the SDGs, there is one specifically related to the achievement of target 4.3: (37) tertiary enrollment rates for women and men (Proposed indicator taken from <http://indicators.report/goals/goal-4/>)

4.4,⁵ which has to do with substantially increasing the number of youth and adults who have relevant skills for employment, decent jobs and entrepreneurship, and target 4.5,⁶ which has to do with eliminating gender disparities and ensuring equal access to all levels of education, do not mention higher education directly, but are dependent on higher education, as implied by the proposed indicator (tertiary enrollment rates), which is the same as for target 4.3.

While an increasing focus on higher education in SDG 4 is a promising development after the relative radio silence on this issue during the past decades, we contend that the way the targets and their proposed indicators are presented is problematic. First, while quality, learning outcomes, and equity are mentioned (4.3, 4.4, and 4.3 and 4.5, respectively), access and increasing numbers of learners are clearly prioritized: not only do all of these targets mention access and/or increasing numbers, the only proposed indicator to do with higher education for all four of these targets is tertiary enrolment rates. In the case of 4b, as stated above, increasing the number of scholarships is emphasized and the only proposed indicators are about money spent on doing this. Thus, taken as a whole, these targets can be said to emphasize increasing access over quality, learning outcomes, and equity. Recent research has demonstrated that prioritizing access over quality in basic education has led to the troubling development that many children have spent several years in school without building even the most basic literacy and numeracy skills (UNESCO 2015).

Second, and relatedly, the emphasis on numbers of higher education learners in all four of these targets, as well as the specific mention of the building of “relevant skills for employment, decent jobs and entrepreneurship” suggests a privileging of individual market benefits over social benefits and the development of society as a whole. In other words, the way that the agenda is worded prioritizes access to higher education for individuals, rather than the building of strong institutions that can benefit society as a whole. McCowan (2012) argues that higher education should not only be considered a right, and thus made available to all, “but it should also be considered a privilege in the sense that it is a precious opportunity that must be taken advantage of as fully as possible and then used for the benefit of society” (p.120). When it comes to target 4b in particular, Kirkland’s (2016) point (above) that scholarships are “an expensive form of development, if the only beneficiary is the individual” is well taken. In fact, the UNHCR-led DAFI scholarship programme for refugees (which will be discussed in more detail below) *does* stipulate that recipients ‘give back’ to their communities and has found that its beneficiaries by and large have done just that (UNESCO DAFI, 2014). However, UNHCR and partners have recognized that as successful as this programme has been,

⁵ Target 4.4 is to “By 2030, substantially increase the number of youth and adults who have relevant skills, including technical and vocational skills, for employment, decent jobs and entrepreneurship.” Among the 100 proposed indicators to measure progress towards the SDGs, there are three specifically related to the achievement of target 4.4: (35) secondary completion rates for girls and boys; (36) % girls and boys who achieve proficiency across a broad range of learning outcomes, including in literacy and in mathematics by end of lower secondary schooling cycle, based on credibly established national benchmarks, which are to be developed; (37) tertiary enrollment rates for women and men (Proposed indicators taken from <http://indicators.report/goals/goal-4/>)

⁶ Target 4.5 is to “By 2030, eliminate gender disparities in education and ensure equal access to all levels of education and vocational training for the vulnerable, including persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples, and children in vulnerable situations.” Among the 100 proposed indicators to measure progress towards the SDGs, there are four specifically related to the achievement of target 4.5: (31) % of children (36-59 months) receiving at least one year of a quality pre-primary education program; (33) primary completion rates for girls and boys; (35) secondary completion rates for girls and boys; (37) tertiary enrollment rates for women and men (Proposed indicator taken from <http://indicators.report/goals/goal-4/>)

given the relatively small number of direct beneficiaries, on its own it is not a viable strategy for promoting higher education for refugees and affected populations.

This notion that scholarships are an expensive (and potentially ineffective) form of development has been picked up elsewhere. Rose and Zubairi (2016) argue that the indicator associated with target 4b, which calls for donors to spend more on higher education scholarships, should be scrapped, if the overall aim of the SDGs – that no one is left behind – is to be achieved. According to these authors, education aid is once more on the decline, and a large share of education aid never leaves the donor country in the first place, as over two thirds of aid to higher education is spent on scholarships for students from LMICs to study in donor countries. With most moneys for scholarships never leaving the donor countries, and an influx of ‘brain gain’ through the scholarship recipients themselves, the problem of “status competition” (between universities and between national higher education systems) identified by Marginson (2011) is compounded, as well-established, financially stable institutions and systems continue to be strengthened, and institutions in LMICs continue to be marginalised. Marginson (2011) has discussed how this status competition has confirmed “the dominance of the comprehensive Anglo-American science university”, guaranteed “the favoured nations more than their share of private goods”, and narrowed “the diversity of knowledge that secures global value, through which public goods are created” (p.429). In other words, both economic and human capital continue to accumulate in high income countries (HICs) and their institutions of higher learning. Again, DAFI operates differently to the trend, as will be discussed below – DAFI students predominantly participate in higher education in LMICs, but given that there are fewer than 2,500 DAFI students worldwide, and the lower costs of higher education in these countries (therefore less money is injected into these country economies through the scholarships), this is hardly enough to provide a counter-balance.

So, what is the exact magnitude of the problem? According to Rose and Zubairi (2016), while aid to scholarships has increased by an average of 0.7% annually from 2006 to 2014, direct aid spent on higher education in recipient countries themselves fell by an average of 4% annually over the same period. In fact, they demonstrate that, in 2014 scholarships to higher education received just over one quarter of overall education aid, as depicted in the figure below:

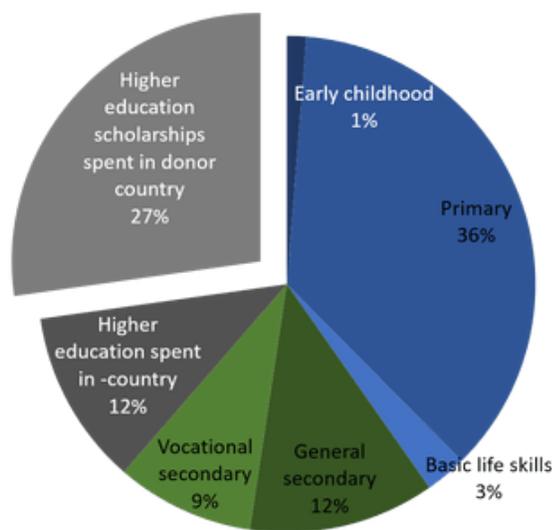


Figure: Share of direct education aid by sub-sector, 2014 (Rose and Zubairi, 2016, based on data from OECD-CRS, accessed May 2016)

Further, they claim that in 2014, 2.8 billion USD went to higher education scholarships, which is more than the decline in overall education aid. Of the 4 billion USD of higher education aid, therefore, only 1.2 billion was actually spent directly on higher education in recipient countries. According to the authors, over 75% of the 2.8 billion USD was spent on students from middle income countries (MICs), with students from LICs hardly benefiting. While they recognize the importance of scholarships for higher education, to benefit the poorest, they argue, this money “must be reallocated from higher education scholarships to basic education.” However, we would argue that this holds true only if education is looked at as a sector in isolation from other development sectors. While it is true that “extremely few of the most disadvantaged make it to higher education due to lack of opportunities to quality education at the primary let alone secondary level” and that therefore only basic education programmes and/or improvements to them have a real chance of directly reaching the poorest, we believe there is a strong argument to be made for considering (1) the education system as a whole, and not pitting different parts of the system against each other; (2) that higher education has many positive indirect impacts for society as a whole, including the poorest, which could even serve to justify increased spending by other development sectors, not on scholarships, but on higher education systems strengthening.

On the first point, quality basic education is highly dependent on the quality of teaching staff, which, in turn is dependent on the availability of high quality, relevant, and appropriate teacher education programmes. In the economic crisis of 2007-8, 20,000 trained teachers drained from the system in Zimbabwe, to be replaced by un- or under-qualified staff (MoESAC, 2012). Perhaps unsurprisingly, numbers of unqualified staff soon began to concentrate in poorer, rural areas, where there were few to no accessible teacher training colleges. Upskilling these teachers technically falls under the remit of higher education, but the impacts will be felt throughout the education system, particularly at the basic education level.

On the second point, we have argued elsewhere that the SDGs as a whole encourage silo-thinking and that outside of SDG 4, any reference to education is largely implicit, meaning that non-educationists would find it difficult to see the potential role education can play in supporting the achievement of their own individual goals (Bengtsson & Barakat, 2016). SDG 17, which is the means of implementation goal that all sectors are supposed to consult for guidance on achieving the other goals refers to ‘capacity building’ rather than education. Given the role that universities can play, not only in ‘capacity building’ in various key disciplines, including health, nutrition, education, political science, law, etc., but also in terms of research and development and community engagement in these areas, it seems that the SDGs are missing out on an opportunity to promote “development universities” as described by African leaders in the Accra Declaration of 1972 (Collins, 2013; Botman, 2012). In short, stronger higher education systems in and between all countries will strengthen overall education systems, and ensure that more solutions are to be found in-house to development problems, and that local and indigenous knowledges come to be valued more highly.

The case of Africa

While Africa since the 1960s has been the scene of the largest education expansion drive in history, it still lags behind the rest of the world in terms of enrolments in higher education (Wolhuter & Wiseman, 2013). According to UIS, the tertiary gross enrolment ratio (GER) in Africa is 8.23%, compared with the overall global tertiary GER, which is

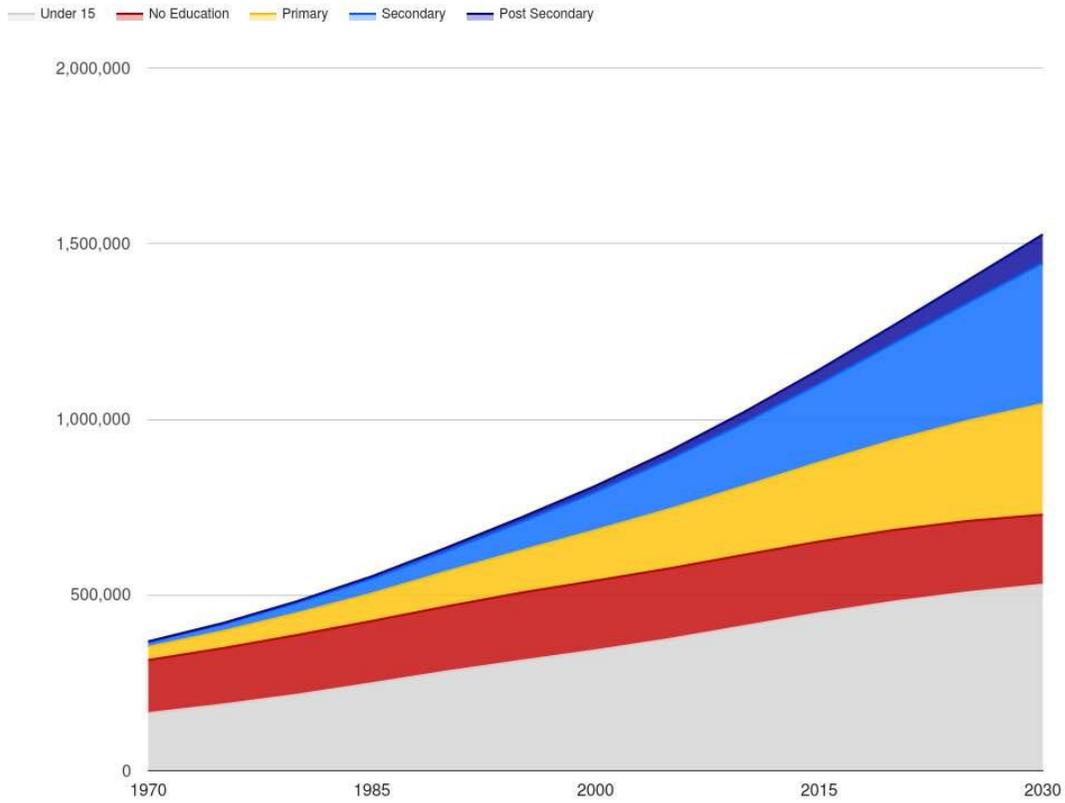
34.4%. In fact, Africa lags significantly behind every 'developing' region in the world: in Latin America and the Caribbean, the GER is 44.45%; in Central Asia, 25.73%; in South and West Asia, 22.75%; in East Asia and the Pacific, 39.03%. To put this in perspective: according to UIS, the absolute enrolment in post-secondary and tertiary globally in 2014 was approximately 217 million respectively (having risen significantly from 180 million in 2009), while in SSA, approximately 7.1 million were enrolled in tertiary, and 1.3 in non-tertiary post-secondary in 2014. Given that SSA is home to just under 15% of the world's population, if there was an equal distribution of tertiary enrolments by region, approximately 30.5 million would be enrolled in post-secondary and tertiary education in SSA. Applying Trow's (2005) taxonomy of higher education access,⁷ while around the world, education has shifted from elite to mass higher education (and is approaching universal higher education in several high income countries), in Africa, higher education largely remains a sector for the elite. Even in the case of Namibia, which is now classified as an upper-middle income country by the International Monetary Fund (IMF), higher education enrolment rates fall between the elite and mass schemas (Matengu et al., 2013). Given the sheer magnitude of the enrolment gap between Africa and the rest of the world, increasing the number of available scholarships alone is obviously far from an effective and/or cost-effective way to increase enrolments by over 20 million (allowing Africa to 'catch up' to the rest of the world).

It should be noted that above we have only considered current enrolment rates and not future projections for 2020 (the target year for target 4b) and 2030 (the target year for the other SDG targets). According to UN World Population Prospects, the population share of under-25s for Africa in 2015 was 23% (19% for SSA). According to the medium UN projection variant, the share is projected to increase to 29% (25% for SSA) by 2030. Even the more conservative estimates from the Wittgenstein Centre (18.4% and 23% for SSA in 2015 and 2030 respectively), suggest that Africa will be home to a significant proportion of the world's youth population in the next 15 years. This implies that for SDG 4 – to “ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all” – to be met by the whole world by 2030, special attention will have to be given to improving the education sector as a whole in Africa, where approximately one quarter of the whole population will be within the target age-group for the entire gambit of formal education.

According to Wittgenstein Centre projections, not only is the youth population set to increase over the next 15 years, but the number of individuals enrolled in and completing secondary education will increase as well. This is illustrated in the two figures below:

⁷ Sociologist Martin Trow identified three stages of massification in higher education:

1. Elite (0-15% HE enrolment): at this stage, universities are involved in the formation of a ruling class and elite roles within that class (in such contexts, privilege is often reinforced, such that those with most resources are able to access higher education more easily, and thus maintain (or improve) their position in society, than their less-resourced peers.
2. Mass (16-50% HE enrolment): at this stage, universities transmit key skills and prepare for a wider range of technical and economic roles.
3. Universal (50%+): at this stage, universities help the 'whole' population to adapt to rapid technological and social changes.

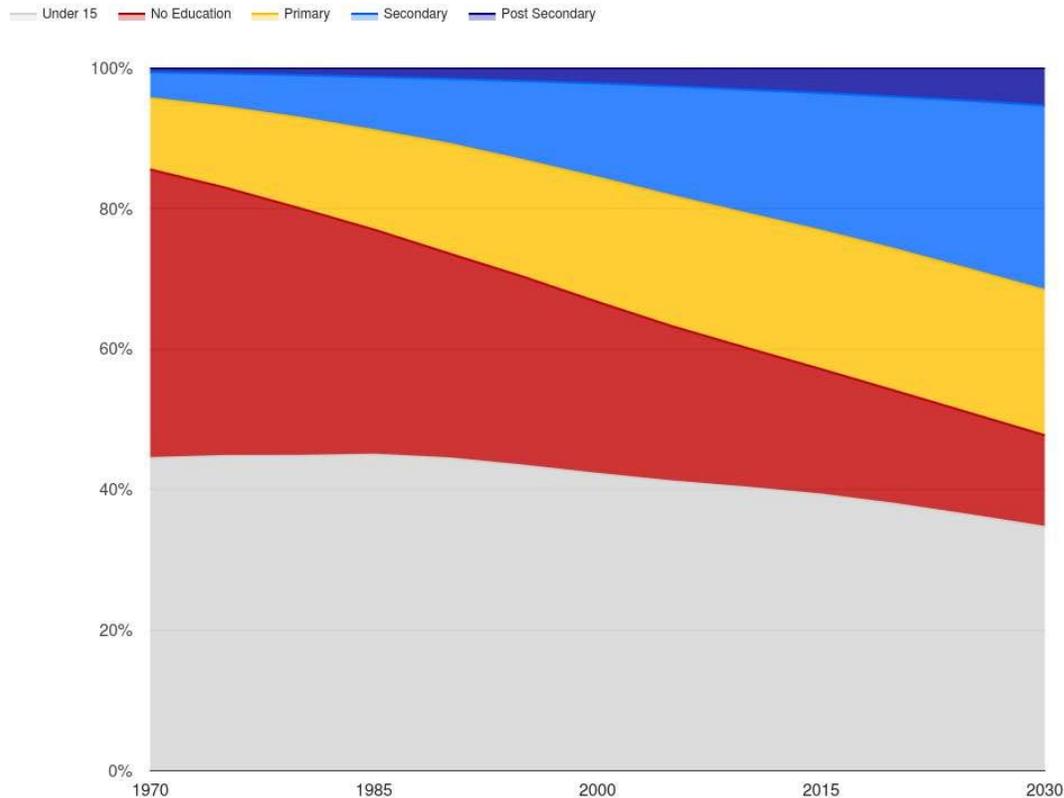


Source: Wittgenstein Centre for Demography and Global Human Capital, (2015). *Wittgenstein Centre Data Explorer Version 1.2*. Available at: www.wittgensteincentre.org/dataexplorer

Population (000's)
Africa
Medium (SSP2)

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Figure: Number of individuals in Africa with different levels of education from 1970 to 2030 (actual and projected)



Source: Wittgenstein Centre for Demography and Global Human Capital, (2015). *Wittgenstein Centre Data Explorer Version 1.2*. Available at: www.wittgensteincentre.org/dataexplorer

Population (000's)
Africa
Medium (SSP2)

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Figure: Proportion of population in Africa with different levels of education from 1970 to 2030 (actual and projected)

As can be seen from the figures, both actual numbers of individuals and proportion of population with secondary education has increased, and are projected to increase substantially by 2030. In 2015, 19.6% of Africa's population had acquired some secondary education, and 3.6% some post-secondary. By 2020, Wittgenstein projects 21.75% secondary, and 4.1% post-secondary, and, by 2030, 26.3% secondary, and 5.3% post-secondary.⁸ These growth figures imply that even the 'substantial expansion' in scholarships called for in target 4b will, at best, maintain the relative share of eligible recipients who benefit from scholarships. Increasing the *share* of scholarships, would require up to a tenfold increase in the number of scholarships available in SSA. Again, particularly given the financing concerns raised by Rose and Zubairi (2016) and Kirkland (2016), it is clear that the expansion of scholarships is not an effective or cost-effective way to promote sustainable development. As we have pointed out elsewhere, it seems the SDGs, as with prior global commitments and agendas, continue to be unfair to Africa (Barakat & Bengtsson, 2016).

DAFI Scholarships for Refugees

⁸ To understand just how unprecedented this expansion in secondary education is, it is worth noting that, according to Collins (2013), at independence during the 1950s and 1960s, only 3% of high school age students received a secondary education.

While higher education scholarships have only recently made their way onto the official global development agenda, the Albert Einstein German Academic Refugee Initiative Fund (DAFI) programme (which is run by UNHCR) has been using this strategy to promote higher education for refugees since 1992. For UNHCR, supporting higher education for refugees is essential, as it:

nurtures a generation of future change-makers that can take the lead in identifying sustainable solutions to refugee situations. It provides young refugees and their families with an opportunity for increased self-reliance through gainful employment. The hope of participation in higher education contributes to greater enrolment and retention throughout primary and secondary school. (UNHCR DAFI, 2014, p.4)

Within refugee education, therefore, many stakeholders have come to realise that higher education has “a greater potential than other levels of education to contribute to the development of a ‘critical consciousness’ that will enhance the strategic choices that refugees make” (p.4) and that education should be seen as “a long-term investment for society”, (p.3) which is why investment in higher education is both desirable and justifiable (Dryden-Peterson & Giles, 2011).

DAFI was evaluated in 2007 (Morlang & Watson, 2007). The evaluation reported improved enrolments (including enrolment of women, which increased from 23% to over 40% in the 15 years since inception) and high completion rates among study participants (ibid.). The evaluation also found that most DAFI scholars return to their country of origin, to be employed in NGOs and other UN agencies, meaning that programme graduates are an important part of UNHCR’s ‘durable solutions’, returning home to their country of origin and contributing to that country’s development. In fact, according to Milton and Barakat (2016), 70% of DAFI Afghan scholarship recipient returnees were employed in development- and reconstruction-relevant sectors.

The success of the DAFI programme continues, according to their 2014 annual report (UNHCR DAFI, 2014). In 2014, over half of the 2,242 DAFI students were promoted to the following year, while just under a quarter were newly admitted and just under one fifth graduated. 1% of students were allowed to repeat the academic year. The following figure shows the make-up of the DAFI student body in 2014:

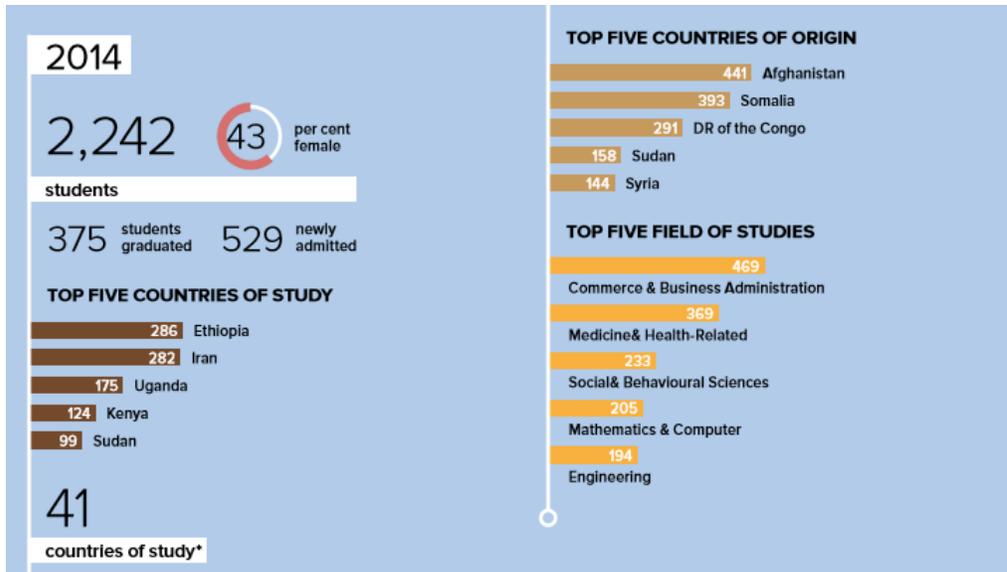


Figure: Indicative Global Overview of the DAFI Programme in 2014 (Source: UNHCR DAFI, 2014, p.12)

DAFI remains a flexible programme, and geographic coverage is continuously adjusted based on refugee movements and education needs. What is interesting to note is that the largest DAFI country programmes are currently in Ethiopia, Iran, and Uganda and in 2014, 63% of DAFI students were enrolled in SSA, meaning that, counter to most donor scholarships for higher education, which go to students from MICs for study in HICs, DAFI scholarships support students from conflict-affected (often LICs) to study in the region.

One element that makes DAFI reasonably successful is its strategic priorities, which call for DAFI scholars to 'give back' in some way. The current priorities are to:

- promote self-reliance and empowerment
- develop qualified human resources
- contribute to the refugee community
- facilitate integration
- provide a role model (UNHCR DAFI, 2014)

This has led not only to DAFI scholars returning home to contribute to their societies, but also to various country initiatives promoting integration and development, e.g. in Ghana, where each DAFI scholar contributed 5% of their first allowance to sponsor girls from their communities in senior high school, and hosted sensitization sessions on different topics (ibid.). Further, DAFI budgets are set up in such a way that there are no prohibitive hidden costs once tuition fees are taken care of: DAFI also covers books and study material, subsistence, medical insurance (where not otherwise covered), and other support costs, including research, networking activities, language courses (ibid.).

In spite of the fact that UNHCR describes that the programme has undergone 'considerable growth' over the years, the reality is that a body of 2,242 students is a drop in the ocean when it comes to the overall population of refugees, which is currently estimated at over 20 million. In fact, UNHCR claims to have a highly competitive process for recruiting DAFI scholars (which is borne out in the research: according to Dryden-Peterson [2011], while the desire for higher education is strong among most refugees who have completed secondary education, a very low number of students actually succeed in winning these scholarships).

So, DAFI's success can be attributed to its small size, specific strategic objectives, regional placements, responsiveness, and willingness to collaborate with local universities. However, other ways of expanding higher education provision need to be explored in order to meet the demand for higher education among refugees and improve direct and indirect impacts of higher education on refugee communities abroad and back home, a fact recognized by DAFI and other key partners, who are currently exploring connected learning programmes and other opportunities. It remains to be seen whether or not the expansion of scholarship schemes they also call for is possible (or even desirable). What is clear is that, despite DAFI's successes, much work is needed before higher education can meet its full potential to support refugees: in fact, demand for teachers is high and growing in refugee communities and yet, in 2014, only 8% of all DAFI students were enrolled in teacher education.

Conclusion: Prioritising higher education strengthening over scholarships

Higher education is not a neutral or net positive investment for any individual or group of individuals [. . .]. However, if the systemic and institutional purpose and function is to create and disseminate knowledge in a way that benefits society and generates returns for the public good, then higher education becomes one of the best and most strategic investments for society. (Collins, 2013, p.24)

In this paper, we have argued that, while increased focus on higher education is a positive development of the SDG agenda, by reducing the discussion to one of enrolment rates and the expansion of available scholarships without any view to higher education system strengthening runs counter to the overall vision of the SDG agenda to "leave no-one behind" and to reach the "furthest behind first." McCowan (2012) has argued that the "right to education should not have a beginning and end point" (p.116). While McCowan is referring to an individual's life-span and the right to lifelong learning, i.e. points in time, we should perhaps also think about the right to education in relation to the SDG agenda not as starting and ending at the point of individuals (or indeed the education sector), but as an ongoing collective right of communities (which serves as an enabling right in other sectors, and should thus be enabled by other sectors). Target 4.7 sets out a powerful vision for what education can achieve, calling for us to ensure:

...all learners acquire knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including among other through education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship, and appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture's contribution to sustainable development.

However, it makes no mention of the key role universities can play in achieving this vision, through teaching, research, and community engagement. It is time to begin to think in terms of "strengthening the systems through which stand-alone initiatives are implemented" (Crea, 2016, p.13). Crea (2016) is referring to how a systems orientation to the integration of social and educational interventions when it comes to providing higher education for refugees, can be useful in identifying pathways for students to use their newly-acquired skills in their immediate contexts, and for longer term development. In other words, the SDG 4 targets referred to in this paper, need to be reworked in order to prioritise the strengthening of higher education systems, the relationship between different levels of education, and the relationship between higher education and overall development. Further, the potential role of higher education in the achievement of the

other goals needs to be made explicit, in order to encourage smart investment in systems strengthening.

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