

# EDUCATION SYSTEMS IN EASTERN AFRICA: CREATING LIFELONG LEARNERS FOR DEVELOPMENT IN EASTERN AFRICA

## About This Policy Brief

This policy brief is based on a study entitled *Education Systems in Eastern Africa: Creating Life-long Learners for Development*.

The study was designed as the significant scientific output from the Expert Committee's deliberations on the multi-faceted research question: *"How can we develop a society that values education—not just the achievement of certifications and high grades, but the actual process of learning itself?"*

The full report is available from the Uganda National Academy of Sciences: [www.unas.org.ug](http://www.unas.org.ug)

The Eastern African region is experiencing a crisis in learning despite impressive and sustained improvements in enrollment. Education systems in the region base student assessments primarily on the ability to recall information while neglecting student creativity or problem-solving skills, making it difficult to know what students are actually learning. This multi-dimensional crisis in learning extends from primary to post-secondary education. Despite decades of efforts to improve education, teacher absenteeism patterns, low parental involvement, outdated examination methods, and highly siloed disciplinary teaching persist. As a result of these challenges, a growing number of private-sector employers express concern that graduates from the region are not well-prepared to participate productively in the workforce.

The future success of education systems in the region will depend mainly on their ability to produce graduates who can successfully engage in a highly competitive global knowledge economy. Indeed, many African leaders have placed knowledge capital as a centerpiece of their national visions and development strategies. However, this new definition of success in the education system will require a radically different individual: a lifelong learner.

Creating education systems that produce lifelong learners is not an easy proposition. It defies simple solutions such as carrying out curricular reforms or implementing internship programs. Building lifelong learners requires



Sciences For Prosperity



Ethiopian Academy of Sciences

የኢትዮጵያ ሳይንስ አካዳሚያ



a *mindset shift* among everyone: students, parents, teachers, and policymakers, at every level of an education system. Primary and secondary education will have to shift focus towards fostering genuine curiosity and love of learning among students. In effect, the tools and thinking behind education will have to adapt to this shift to sustain national development in the region.

To respond to this challenge, the Uganda National Academy of Sciences (UNAS) convened a multi-disciplinary committee of experts to advise how education systems in the region could adapt to produce lifelong learners. The Committee made recommendations based on the most up-to-date evidence, focusing on primary and secondary education, higher education, marketization of the higher education system, education sector quality control, and education sector governance. The sections below convey the Committee's consensus conclusions and recommendations for action.

## **Primary and Secondary Education**

High-quality primary and secondary education is crucial for the success of the higher education system. Creating a tertiary education system that can produce critical thinkers and leaders begins at the earliest stages of an education system. Despite the crucial importance of primary and secondary education, all Eastern Africa countries face significant deficiencies in students' actual learning experience at these levels. To respond to those deficiencies, policy-making and investment need to happen in a more

cohesive and balanced manner across the whole education system.

### ***Based on the above conclusions, the Committee recommends:***

1. Governments should pursue a holistic education plan that acknowledges and addresses the linkages between primary and secondary schooling levels and the tertiary education system's quality.

## **Curricula and Assessment**

In most of sub-Saharan Africa, national examinations still comprise the main focus of educational assessment. This excessive focus on national examinations actually undermines the learning process. A more prudent option is continuous assessment, which refers to smaller, lower-stakes tests and assignments completed throughout the year. Expanding constant review can free national examination organizations to pursue other goals such as providing planning tools and accountability information for ministries and donors.

Simultaneously, the current Science Technology Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) curriculum in the region is dull. It focuses too much on rote learning, despite its critical importance to national development. Programs that integrate arts and science curricula cohesively show some promise in engaging and promoting student participation and critical thinking in STEM subjects. Despite various interdisciplinary success stories from the region, siloed thinking and research continue to dominate the higher education system. A transition towards more

significant interdisciplinary research promises clear benefits to students and society through its ability to help solve wicked problems.

***Based on the above conclusions, the Committee recommends:***

1. Governments should promote continuous and varied progressive assessments to encourage creativity and innovation in learning.
2. Curricula review bodies should strive for a complementary balance between the sciences, humanities, and the arts and encourage integrated teaching experimentation.
3. Higher education institutions should reintroduce or reinvigorate mandatory liberal arts-based general education courses to foster critical thinking and communication skills.
4. Institutions of higher learning should strengthen their promotion of interdisciplinary research and training.

## **Teacher Absenteeism**

Excessive teacher absenteeism in primary-level classrooms is a significant issue in the region, driven by social factors and official policy gaps. High rates of teacher absenteeism have a direct negative impact on student learning in Eastern Africa.

***Based on the above conclusion, the Committee recommends:***

1. Governments should fund research to track the root causes of authorized and unauthorized teacher

absenteeism for more targeted, evidence-informed decisions in the future.

2. Governments should seek to limit administrative and policy gaps that promote excessive authorized absences from the classroom, including but not limited to possible ICT solutions for salary disbursements.

## **Decentralization of Education**

Decentralization and devolution of education have not necessarily led to quality service delivery or better learning outcomes.

***Based on the above conclusion, the Committee recommends:***

1. Education ministries should more forcefully implement existing quality control standards or revise existing standards where necessary.
2. National governments should ensure that allocated public funds are disbursed expeditiously and in an accountable manner.

## **Marketization of Higher Education**

Marketization has had some clear benefits in expanding access, securing much-needed funding, strengthening institutional independence, and encouraging better alignment with private sector needs. However, marketization has also had significant distortionary effects, particularly by making the roles of responsibilities of different institutions in the education sector unclear. Coupled

with marketization, the higher education system's massification has negatively impacted education and research quality. As a result, a widespread perception has grown in the region that Eastern African graduates are not adequately equipped to participate productively in the workforce.

***Based on the above conclusions, the Committee recommends:***

1. Governments and regulatory agencies should establish clear guidelines to differentiate the responsibilities of different institutions in the higher education system and ensure that funding and financial incentives accurately reflect the requirements of those responsibilities.
2. To maximize marketization benefits, higher education institutions should partner with private sector organizations to carry out regular tracer studies of their graduates to ensure their labor market suitability.
3. Governments should contribute financial resources and seek to expand quality internship and apprenticeship programs.
4. Governments and education institutions should consult stakeholders, including the private sector, to formulate curricula and policies.

## **Education Sector Governance**

Quality assurance (QA) mechanisms are best implemented internally, but this

requires strong leadership and resources. Regulatory agencies in the region unevenly enforce policies and rules between private and public institutions because of unclear roles and responsibilities. Unrest within higher education systems has disrupted long-term institutional improvement and negatively impacts student learning outcomes. Public institutions and governments are not doing enough to learn from episodes of unrest and take mitigating actions.

***Based on the above conclusions, the Committee recommends:***

1. To limit administrative burdens, national regulatory agencies should offer oversight exceptions to institutions that adequately prove they have the leadership and resources to implement robust internal QA mechanisms.
2. The criteria for oversight exceptions should be enforced universally on all institutions and transparently communicated to all institutions through outreach programs.
3. Regulatory agencies should take a risk-based approach to QA and focus their efforts primarily on those institutions that have been shown to violate established quality standards repeatedly.
4. Higher education institutions, and in particular public universities, should implement transparent structures for institutional learning and adaptation following periods of student unrest