Summary

Young people are one of Africa’s greatest potential assets for its continued development. The ‘Ghana Opportunities for Transitioning Post-Secondary School Students’ research project investigates the transition of recent senior high school leavers into post-secondary education and the labour force. The project informs policy on education in senior high schools; admissions procedures into post-secondary institutions; and youth expectations and labour market outcomes.

Policy conclusions

- Policy makers must increase attention on youth needs and aspirations in order to avoid widespread social unrest;
- Better co-ordination of examination results and university registration deadlines could improve the transition from senior high school;
- Better information about student ability and the realistic prospects for continuing education would ease the transition of less academically capable students into further education or the labour market.

Contact details: e: csae.enquiries@economics.ox.ac.uk t: +44-1865-271084

Project background

The Millennium Development Goal of achieving universal primary education by 2015 has influenced the focus of both research and resources toward primary education, with considerable success. Enrolment rates of primary school age children in sub-Saharan Africa increased from 58% to 76% between 1999 and 2010. Resources for secondary and tertiary education have, however, remained low in most developing countries. As 2015 approaches and countries achieve universal primary education, governments will turn attention to secondary and tertiary education.

62% of Africa’s population is below the age of 25 with more than 20% of the population between the ages of 15 and 24. These large youth cohorts represent a potential asset for Africa. However, the youth unemployment rate remains nearly three times that of the adult rate. The success of youth transition to work has important implications for national economies and social cohesion. Behaviour during the Arab Spring has revealed discontent among educated young people whose job opportunities fall short of their expectations.

In 2007, the Ghanaian government decided to increase secondary schooling by one year. The ‘Ghana Opportunities for Transitioning Post-Secondary School Students’ research project investigates the transition of recent senior high school leavers into post-secondary education and the labour force, as well as student learning.
Project findings in more detail

Researchers evaluate whether working in small groups of 2-5 students is a more efficient way of learning compared to individual study. Findings show that working in small groups benefits most students and leads to much higher achievement, though in some cases, group work may penalize some of the best performing students. This suggests that most students would benefit from being encouraged to work in small groups; and that small group learning may be a useful teaching tool in some contexts.

The project also investigates the education decisions of secondary school leavers. Many graduates choose not to attend technical and vocational colleges or enter the labour market upon graduation, instead attempting several times to re-take the West African Senior School Certificate Examination (WASSCE) in an attempt to gain admission to more prestigious universities. Results suggest that students have unrealistically high expectations of the opportunities created by more education coupled with unrealistically high expectations of their own ability.

This leads many students to re-take the WASSCE multiple times, even though failure rates are very high, and it is unlikely they would improve their grades enough to be able to attend tertiary institutions. Project results suggest that better information about the students’ ability and prospects for continuing education would facilitate the transition of less academically capable students much more rapidly into ability-appropriate post-secondary options or the labour market.

For students who do gain entrance into tertiary institutions, the wait is often significant. High school leavers take an average of 2.5 years between high school graduation and matriculation, during which a significant number of high-school graduates remain unemployed. Among other reasons, such as the necessity to secure funding, this long waiting period is also due to institutional constraints, notably the time lag surrounding the reporting of WASSCE grades in time for students to meet university application deadlines in the same year, and the fact that registration for the November/December WASSCE is closed by the time students receive the May/June WASSCE results. This means that if a student does poorly in the May/June examinations, they are not able to re-sit for 12 months.

The high levels of unemployment among senior high school graduates during the transition period from school to tertiary education represent a significant wastage of skilled human capital in the economy.

Some sections of the WASSCE are standardized across a number of West African countries, including Ghana and Nigeria. Taking advantage of the temporary Ghanaian government policy to increase senior high school by one year, researchers looked at what impact this had on student achievement. Comparing the Ghanaian results to those of Nigerian students before and after this change, the findings show that on average, the additional year of schooling in Ghana lead to significant gains in achievement across a range of subjects, and also substantially increased the overall pass rate.

For more detailed information

- Ksoll, Christopher and Kim Lehrer. 2013. The slow transition into the labour market and post-secondary institutions in Ghana: Ability bias and high returns.

Available from Christopher Ksoll, Christopher.Ksoll@uottawa.ca

ABOUT THE RESEARCHERS

Christopher Ksoll is an Assistant Professor in the School of International Development and Global Studies at the University of Ottawa and a Research Associate at the Centre for the Study of African Economies and Nuffield College at the University of Oxford.

Kim Lehrer is an Assistant Professor at the University of Sherbrooke and a Research Associate at the Centre for the Study of African Economies.

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