

FEES HIKE IN HIGHER EDUCATION DISCUSSION PAPER

1.0. Introduction

While there have not been a detailed study to establish the overall tuition increases over the last decade, there are however indications that public universities spend MK2.5 million per student per year. While this implies, on one hand, that government is subsidizing over 90 per cent for normal students, mature students, on the other hand, have to meet these costs at 100 per cent. In line this perception, public universities have witnessed increases in fees in 2014 and recently in 2016.

Both the University Council and The Minister of Education, Science and Technology have justified the increments, arguing they are aimed at keeping pace with the costs of running universities. The cost of higher education is certainly cause for concern in Malawi hence the continued call for the state to increase its spending on higher education as a proportion of GDP [gross domestic product], and optimize access of the majority on merit, rather than socio-economic status. The major cost drivers are academic and administrative salaries, the rise in the costs of municipal services, including electricity, water, the cost of powering laboratories, libraries and other teaching and learning amenities, and maintenance of infrastructure as well as other teaching and learning inputs. Higher enrolment rates also come at a huge cost, because they influence academic staff-to-student ratios. In addition, Malawian public universities have a historic debt – money owed as a result of student shortfalls in tuition fees, year-on-year. The debt is also extended to different service providers.

However, the above notwithstanding, in an unequal society such as Malawi, higher education is the only great leveller between the rich and the poor. While the economic conditions justify these increments from the face of it, the same economic conditions are biting the individuals or households who are expected to pay the adjusted tuition fees, implying that the University Council is simply transferring its burden to individuals or households who are subjected to the same economic shocks. This paper therefore seeks to examine the merit of the increments and their impact on the right to education for poor young people. The paper also explores whether the available Government Loans Scheme and other varying scholarships are adequate to mitigate the negative consequences of the increments. Finally, the paper strategic recommendations on both the short and long term regarding what government, donors, charities and other agencies could do to safeguard the right to education for poor young people especially girls and women.

2.0. The University of Malawi Proposed Fees Schedule and Its Justification

2.1. Fees Schedule

In 2016, the University Council of Malawi proposed fees increment as shown in **Table 1 below**:

College	Average Unit Cost	Generic Students (12%)	Mature Entry Students (25%)
Chancellor College	K3, 506, 944	K400, 000	K900, 000
College of Medicine	K5, 054, 352	K600, 000	K1, 400, 000
Kamuzu College of Nursing	K4, 075, 427	K450, 000	K1, 000, 000
The Polytechnic	K3, 789, 451	K450, 000	K950, 000
Average for Colleges Continuing Students	K4, 104, 543	K400, 000	

2.2. Justification as Advanced by University Council of Malawi

The Council own rationale for raising the fess was primarily based on considerations of maintaining academic quality. This rationale arose from the purported unit cost analysis which demonstrated that for the generic and mature entry students, the fees contribution constituted 12% and 25% respectively of the full cost for training a student in the University of Malawi as shown in the table streamlined by the colleges above. In addition, the Council have argued that the proposed fees hike would not pose a challenge to the majority of students as there are mechanisms in place to support needy students through the Loans Board and other alternative funding sources.

3.0. Prevailing University Scholarships

In support of its decision to effect fees adjustment, the Council argued that in addition to the existence of the Loans Board, there are other alternative sources of funding sources for supporting need students in colleges which have already been operational. For Chancellor College, the external scholarship providers include the African Development Bank, Tertiary Education Scholarship Trust, Soko Fund, J’Africa Foundation, Nchima Trust, Higher Education Science and Technology and Muslim Association. For College of Medicine, the external providers include Dossani Trust, Lab Processors, Ali Mahomed Trust, Lions Club of Bavaria, and CBM, I-TECH, Centre for Disease Control, Global Health, St. Andrews University, Consortium for Advanced Research in Africa, Southern African Research Consortium, St John of God Hospital, Malawi Liverpool Welcome Trust, NORHED Surgery, Sight Savers International, Malawi Vaccine and Nkhoma Synod. For Kamuzu College of Nursing, the external scholarship providers include Bill and Melinda Gates, Global AIDS International

Alliance, Tertiary Education Scholarship Trust, Soko Funds, Moyo Fund, NAC Global Fund, UNFPA, ICAP-NEPI, Nchima Trust, Ali Mahomed Trust, Elma Foundation, USAID World Learning, Christian Health Association of Malawi, Clinton Health Access Initiative, David Livingstone Memorial Clinic Fund. Finally for the Polytechnic, these include Higher Education Science and Technology, David Livingstone Awards, Nchima Trust, Soko Fund, David Livingstone Scholarship, Tertiary Education Scholarship Trust and Total Malawi. Table 2 shows number of students supported by external scholarship providers and the Loans Board as follows:

College	External Scholarship providers	Higher Education Students Loans Board	Total Number of Students Supported
Chancellor College	140	759	899
College of Medicine	235	262	497
Kamuzu College of Nursing	434	358	792
The Polytechnic	229	760	989

A critical analysis of the provisions clearly confirm inadequacy of the support mechanism to guarantee the right to right for the poor young people especially girls. Statistics from the TEST scholarship between 2012 and 2014 show reduction in the number of beneficiaries by 202 and 145 respectively. These trends are a clear sign that access to scholarships will continue to decline in subsequently years especially where the increase will exert more economic demand on the providers. In addition, in 2015/16 academic year, over 15000 needy students applied for loan however, only 5 000 were granted the loans. This represents 30% of all needy students. The resulting effect would be potential dropout of the 10, 000 students representing 70 % of the enrolment. If such happens, they may not be able to contribute positively to the development of the nation because they would not have the necessary skills, knowledge and attitude that would have been acquired at the university.

Furthermore, while other external scholarships have increased, the number of beneficiaries have not increased. For instance, the SOKO Fund has increased while maintaining the number of beneficiaries to 48. The increment is due to increase in the living allowance from MK60, 000 to MK100, 000 per annum. Also Dr. Harry Potter Scholarship has increased the living allowance to MK250, 000 per annum while maintaining the number of beneficiaries to 2. Arguably, this is a clear evidence that more scholarships are needed to support and guarantee the right to right for the poor young people and girls.

3.1. Access and Equity in the Loan Scheme

Despite the National Education Sector Plan (NESP) (2008-2017) outlining access and equity as one of the priority pillars in education, it is evident that the loan scheme does not have clear guidelines on equity to ensure that marginalized students such as students with disability and girls are prioritized. This is the case because of weak screening process which at times awards loans to ineligible students at the expense of needy students as the case of the last but one selection would attest. As a public loan facility, one would have expected the loan scheme to address gender issues so that equal opportunities are given to girls. However, in view of the gaps, one would wonder whether the loan scheme is paying attention to national call for gender equity as galvanized by the Gender Equality Act of 2012. As it stands now, about 10, 000 students qualify for entry into the university out of which only 2, 000 students get admitted per year. Within the 2, 000 students admitted into the university, girls constitute around 38% due to cultural approach to girls and the low transition of girls from primary to secondary which is currently at 46%.

It has also been observed that most of the scholarships or support for girls only cater for primary and secondary levels of education. This approach to supporting girls does not provide meaningful empowerment which changes significantly the attitudes of women and their contribution in national development. Unless we also focus on girls' education in higher education, there will be continued low migration of women into the middle class cadre which is a critical sector or social fabric for national development.

4.0. Critical Review of the Hike vs. The Right to Education

It is undebatable that education is not only a human right in itself but an indispensable means of realizing other human rights. It is a powerful instrument for breaking inter-generational poverty and for bridging inequality. As an empowering right, education is a powerful tool to the growth of the middle class hence critical to the empowerment of the economically and socially marginalized communities. From this perspective, education as a right makes only sense if it is made available, accessible, affordable and of good quality. This is why section 13 (f) of the Republican of Malawi Constitution obligates the State to provide adequate resources to the education sector and devise programmes in order to— (i) eliminate illiteracy in Malawi; (ii) make primary education compulsory and free to all citizens of Malawi; (iii) offer greater access to higher learning and continuing education.

While agreeing that the fee hike was expected and long overdue, it is evident that the proposed fee hike is blatantly unreasonable, ill-timed, unmanageable and restrictive to the poor young people, especially girls. While 85% of Malawians live in rural areas, 75% of Malawians live on less than a dollar per day implying that the majority of Malawians living on less than one dollar are those whom live in rural areas. Therefore, it is undoubtedly clear that the majority of Malawians are struggling in the face of a failing economy and unprecedented high costs of goods and services. The economic forecasts by the World Bank for the last two years do not seem to show that poverty levels are declining but rather suggest increasing poverty level in Malawi. It is a fact that the cost of providing education service has increased thereby necessitating an increment, but we find it unbecoming for the University Council to expect ordinary Malawians to raise such an amount of fees when government is failing to raise the same to adequately support the institutions. In addition, the observation that Malawian Universities are the cheapest require more substance than form because it needs to find its roots in the socio-economic conditions of the comparable countries. It could be that the economies of other countries within the region are better off than Malawi, and admittedly, graduates in Malawi earn on average MK210, 000.00 per month at entry point. It is therefore undebatable that most people in the formal employment are struggling every day, and expecting them to raise MK1, 400, 000.00 per annum on the part of mature entry student is but a deliberate ploy by government to further push the poor to the margin of misery.

Reflections on the proposed hike speak against the commitments outlined in the Sustainable Development Goals, in particular Goal number 4 on education which demands for inclusive and quality education for all and the promotion of lifelong learning, which Malawi adopted. As such the proposed fees hike has the probability of pushing the fees even higher in private universities resulting in Malawi's higher education being a luxury and not a necessity. This will pose a huge economic strain on parents who continue to earn enslaving wages and with its minimum wage being the lowest in the continent (USD 0.92/day or MK687.70) Malawi will grow a huge uneducated population. Even where loans are awarded to all, there is need to be careful not to over burden the graduates who will leave college with huge debts making them difficult to be employed as they will be a risk to the employers given that their prime priority will be to repay the loans once employed. From this perspective and in the context of Malawi, loans may not an answer as repayment of the same within 5 years after graduating remains a challenge. In addition, it does not fit into the cultural context as loans might imply taking away money from supporting the extended families. It also becomes a challenge in that students on the scholarship are unlikely to get a loan for living expenses and this would certainly disadvantage students who are partially supported by alternative sources.

It is however commendable that there are mechanisms to support needy students through the Higher Education Students Loans and Grants Board and other external

scholarship providers. It is also notable that the Council is vigilantly exploring other avenues to adequately support needy students. However, it is clear that the current provisions are not adequate to cover all needy students based on the standing. Even the support from funding alternative sources is not adequate as few poor young people and girls are targeted. For instance, there were 15, 000 applications for loans in 2015 but only 5, 000 were actually awarded. This means that the adjusted fee hike would exert more economic pressure not only on the Students Loans Board but also on the other alternative funding sources to finance needy students.

Furthermore, it would be naïve to completely ignore fees adjustment but it would make more sense this decision takes full cognizance of the socio economic conditions of Malawians and the existing financing pressure that both the Loans Board and existing scholarship facilities face. While it is generally meriting to promote responsibility of concerned students to finance a fair share of their education, such consideration is practically amenable in situations where the socio economic allows. As such, the Council should be encouraged to re-evaluate both the economic factors and the Students Loans Board's capacity in order to arrive at a reasonably manageable percentage increment through constructive dialogue. It would appear from the ongoing debate that it would make economic sense if the rise in university fees was done every year but not over 400% in 2014 and 35% in 2016.

5.0. Should Higher Education be Expensive or Affordable?

It must be acknowledged at the outset that the cost of going to college has gone up dramatically in the past few decades. These costs are genuine and there is a compelling call that university isn't for everyone. Indeed, there is a false notion in Malawi that if a person attends college and performs well, then he or she will be able to get a job that pays well, purchase a decent home, start a family, and live the 'aspired, dream life.' This notion is far from the truth. On this basis among many other reasons, there are dissenting views that universities should become expensive by making it more difficult to obtain student loans. This view is in sync with the proposition that the government funding to higher education continues to decline, along with rapidly rising costs of the different services and products that universities have to provide.

Taking cognizance of the above factors, the public higher education institutions must realise that perceptions of unaffordability have implications for their legitimacy as public institutions and also their stability. The price of education should go up at a reasonable rate and that government, other agencies and charities should help students out with more financial aid and more grants. Where government's coffers are limiting, deliberate efforts should be made to mobilise the private sector and create a conducive policy environment for them to support education. Efforts should also be made, to promote private (individual) sponsorship where individuals who have the capabilities could commit to sponsor one or more students regardless of whether they are related or not. Everyone who wants an education should be able to get an

education and shouldn't have to work the rest of their lives to pay it off. Education should be affordable at all levels for anybody that wants to learn. Learning is the foundation upon which the future is built, and making it hard to attain higher education is not only retrogressive but also a disgusting way to run the country we live in. The cost of higher education can be kept low in Malawi if higher education institutions were to cut costs, contain wastage and operate efficiently. This calls for further rethinking of the modes of delivery, such as distance education and online education, which under the prevailing conditions could also help with proper and strategic investments.

The rationale for making education affordable has, admittedly, been the major driver for unprecedented economic growth, industrialisation and social development of the developed world. Firstly, economy of a country depends on the number and quality of its human capital. It must therefore be the priority of the government to have quality and competitive human capital, and that's why they need to grant scholarships for talented students. Secondly, the students' loans are very important for poor families who don't have enough money to pay for higher education. Without help those students could not find good job or gain requisite lifelong skills or build a better future. Also, the price for tuition in universities should be affordable in order to involve more students who do not have any financial aid. Many options should be created for them such as low interest student loans, tuition waivers, internships, and part-time job opportunities. There is also need to utilise the existing intellectual resources. Students who have mental capacities but no means of paying for education should be taken into consideration. Government wouldn't want to lose brains because we want to make money. Therefore, the ministry of education and the Higher Education Loan Board are urged to look into similar cases in order to benefit from present rational resources.

It is also submitted that education is one of the fundamental human rights: it is a leverage right as it equalises opportunities between the rich and the poor. The human rights approach to education demands that education should not only be available, accessible, acceptable and affordable but that it should also be of good quality. Malawi's Constitution that provides that every person has the right to education regardless of his or her circumstances. Malawi is also party to the Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN CRC) and African Charter on Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACHRWC) which reaffirm the right to education. From this perspective, my view is that education should meet the set criteria and be at optimum affordable rather than being expensive. Where education is expensive as is seen to be the case under the circumstances of this discussion, it is morally wrong to make education as exclusive right for the haves and not the have-nots. This is why the State has the obligation to make education available to its citizens by devising mechanisms that will ensure that education is affordable.

6.0. Key Current and Future Contestations and Considerations

While the rationale for the loan scheme cannot be overemphasized, it however remains a fact that the current demand outweighs the provision. This is a clear evident that government subvention is unsustainable hence there is need to explore other alternatives to fill in the gap. There is urgent need for more investment for Tertiary Education in Malawi especially where there are only 20, 000 places out of 17 million Malawians.

Some of the options available are to strengthen corporate social responsibility that makes significant contribution towards education including sponsoring needy students. For this to happen, government must clearly provide policy guidance so that the corporate social responsibility is well regulated and governed. Part of the guidance would entail ring fencing the contribution towards education as other countries have done such as South Africa, Uganda and Ghana.

There is also need to promote private sponsorship. For instance, well to do Malawians and other interested individuals both within and outside Malawi could pledge or commit to sponsor two students regardless of whether they are their relations or not. Imagine, if five thousand (5000) private Malawians were do so, this would reach out to another 10, 000 needy students, and this would be a good catalyst to bridge the prevailing gap.

Above all, the credibility of the academic standards in Malawian universities needs to be enhanced. While charities that are providing scholarships are being squeezed, government and donors must rise up to the challenge. This is particularly important because development of competent and skilled human capital is key to the development of nations. Therefore, greater effort must be done locally and internationally to explore windows for sustainable investment for developing countries like Malawi.