



Paper for the Africa Knows! Conference; Panel A03: *Africa's current knowledge infrastructure and institutions creation*

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Paper Title: Increasing the impact of scholarships for young people in sub-Saharan Africa

Paper Abstract: Scholarships can provide essential opportunities for young people from developing countries by building their academic capacity, strengthening institutions, and transforming lives. The role of scholarships in development is recognised as part of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, in Target 4.b: to expand the availability of scholarships by 2020.

This paper will examine the challenges facing scholarship funders and providers to maximise the impact of scholarships for young people from sub-Saharan Africa. It draws on the knowledge and experience of RUFORUM, an experienced provider of scholarships to young Africans, and Education Sub Saharan Africa (ESSA), whose research has fed directly into the evaluation of SDG 4.b. for UNESCO's 2020 Global Education Monitoring (GEM) Report on Education & Inclusion.

ESSA's mapping of 350 scholarship providers and in-depth analyses of the practices of 20 of the top 50 providers shows that as demand for quality higher education across Africa surges, scholarships for sub-Saharan African students look to be increasing too. However inclusive development is often not prioritised, and many programmes lack focus on impact for young people.

This lack of prioritisation is troubling. RUFORUM's experience points to the fact that inclusive scholarship provision in sub-Saharan Africa requires deliberate effort. It needs a streamlined institutional and policy environment with agile development partners willing to unlearn and re-learn to support co-creating working models. Inclusion will only be achieved with purpose and financing that comes with supportive criteria and looks beyond the narrow outcome of attaining a higher education qualification.

The paper will highlight four common challenges that undermine even some of the best programmes:

1. Inclusive access: are scholarships reaching marginalised groups?
2. Completion rates: are scholarships being delivered in such a way as to enable completion?
3. University engagement: what are effective ways of working between universities, scholarship providers and recipients?
4. Transition to employment: what is the best way to support graduates as they make the transition from education into work?

It will then go onto describe how a group of scholarship providers and funders, based across sub-Saharan Africa, Europe and North America are coming together to build consensus on the shared agenda to increase the impact of scholarships. This agenda for change will be supported by

development of benchmarks, establishing good practice and tracking KPIs. We propose that these KPIs, once tried and tested, could form the basis of a new global indicator for scholarships, focussed on outcomes for young people.

Keywords: Scholarships, Students, Impact, sub-Saharan Africa, Youth, Education, Employment

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Introduction

The Oxford English Dictionary gives one definition of the noun ‘**scholarship**’ as “an amount of money given to somebody by an organisation to help pay for their education”. Scholarships are typically awarded based on academic excellence and winning a scholarship is usually a competitive process.

One of the 17 important Sustainable Development Goals¹ (SDGs) established by the United Nations in 2015, to be achieved by 2030, is **SDG 4**. This goal aims to “Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all”. **Target 4.B** of that goal, which focuses on **scholarships**, states that “By **2020**, there will be a need 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”. This is an essential target to aim for, since millions of people in Africa - the continent with the youngest population in the world, are at risk of missing out on education and hence the opportunity to secure decent jobs. Surprisingly and unfortunately, there is no data collection mechanism or a comprehensive database of scholarships, for monitoring and reporting on progress for SDG 4.B. Therefore, **Education Sub Saharan Africa** ([ESSA](#), an organisation that aims to use data and evidence to transform education in sub-Saharan Africa, in order to help the youth to secure decent employment), conducted research with the aim of filling the scholarship information gap, focusing on numbers and trends for students in/from sub-Saharan Africa (Figure 1).

ESSA mapped over 350 scholarship providers for sub-Saharan African students over an 18-month period. The quantitative and qualitative evidence and insights obtained fed directly into the evaluation of SDG 4.B – Scholarships, for UNESCO's 2020 Global Education Monitoring (GEM) Report², as the official monitoring of the Sustainable Development Goal 4.B, scholarships.

¹ <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/development-agenda-retired/#:~:text=On%201%20January%202016%2C%20the,Summit%20%E2%80%94%20officially%20came%20into%20force.>

² UNESCO Global Education Monitoring Report 2020, Inclusion and Education: ALL MEANS ALL. Chapter 18, TARGET 4.B. Scholarships, 293-299.
<https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000373718/PDF/373718eng.pdf.multi.page=307>

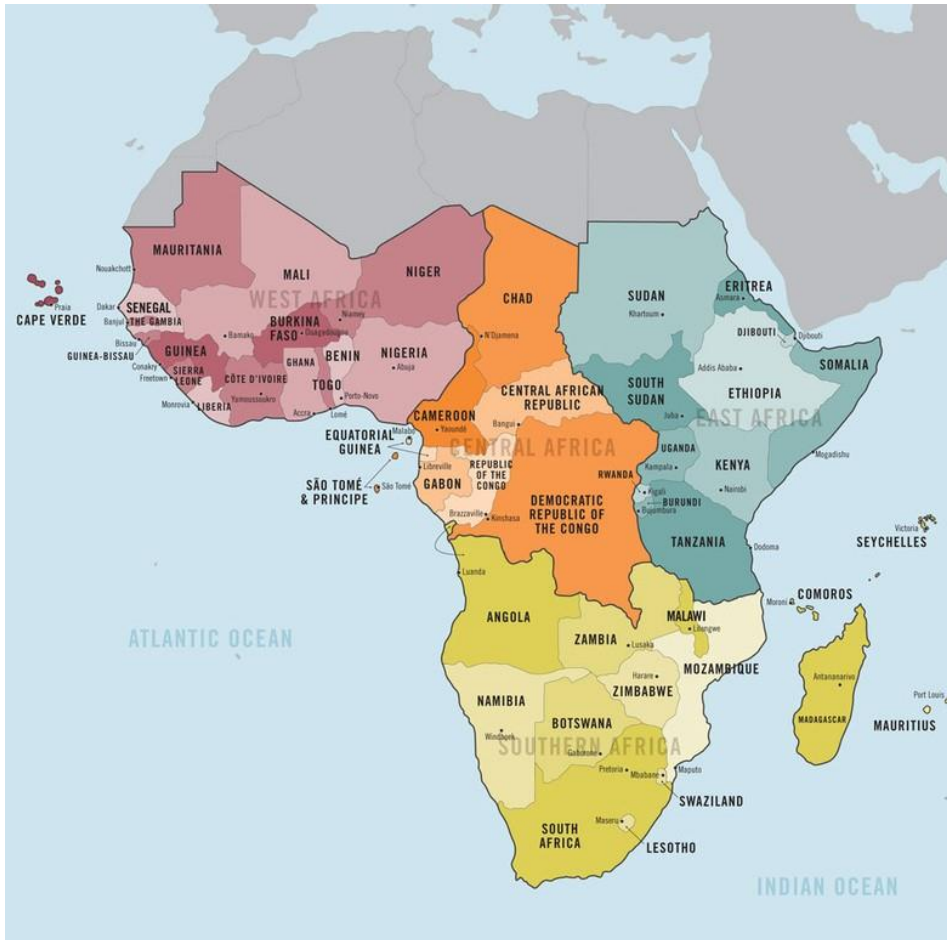


Figure 1. Map showing the countries in **sub-Saharan Africa** (i.e. all countries in the continent of Africa, excluding Algeria, Egypt, Libya, Morocco, and Tunisia, which are in North Africa).

The data obtained from ESSA’s research revealed that:

- For the academic year 2019/2020 alone, nearly 30,000 scholarships³ were allocated to young people from sub-Saharan Africa, worth over \$750 million.
- 94% of scholarships were offered by the top 50 providers.
- The Chinese Government was the largest provider of scholarships, offering 43% of total scholarships for students in sub-Saharan Africa annually.
- Trusts and foundations make up just 12% of scholarships but exemplify much of the best practice.
- Undergraduates receive 56% of scholarships targeted to sub-Saharan African students.
- Scholarships reached the equivalent of **0.4%** of the **8.1 million** sub-Saharan African tertiary education students.
- 31% of all scholarships were assessed and classified as **inclusive**, with 31 of the top 50 providers offering inclusive scholarships.
- Where providers did measure performance, there was a huge range of outcomes:
 - Female participation rates ranged from 30 to 57%.
 - The ratio of appointable applications to spaces was rarely higher than 1:1.

³ ESSA’s working definition of a scholarships is as follows: A competitive award that is equal to, or greater than, 50% of the total funding towards tuition fees, living and subsistence expenses for the full duration of a Higher Education degree course, that is either wholly or substantially taught on a university campus, rather than only administered online.

- Rates of return to Africa for study abroad programmes ranged from 25 to 45%.
- Data collection is limited across critical Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) such as inclusion statistics, application to place ratios, completion rates, jobs obtained, long term impacts, etc.
- **59%** of the region’s 20 to 24-year olds will hold a secondary education qualification by 2030, compared with just 42% now. This represents an extra **40 million** young people potentially prepared for Higher Education.

ESSA’s research provided evidence that scholarships for educating the youth in sub-Saharan Africa are on the rise. However, it was also indisputable that **several scholarship funders and providers are facing challenges to maximise the impact of their scholarships for young people from sub-Saharan Africa**. This problem needs to be addressed urgently if the world is to successfully achieve SDG4 and specifically SDG 4.B, by 2030

The Shared Scholarship Challenge

As a result of ESSA’s alarming findings about scholarships having less than the assumed or expected impact on the youth in sub-Saharan Africa, ESSA organised a consultation on 21st April 2020 that brought together 18 key organisations from across sub-Saharan Africa, Europe and North America who fund or provide scholarship for young Africans to study in Africa and all over the world. This influential group, which included representatives from DAAD (the German Academic Exchange Service), the Association of Commonwealth Universities, the Mastercard Foundation, the Moshal Scholarship Program and RUFORUM, highlighted the four most common challenges that the attendees agreed needed to be addressed urgently:

1. Inclusive access: are scholarships reaching marginalised groups?
2. Completion rates: are scholarships being delivered in such a way as to enable completion?
3. University engagement: what are effective ways of working between universities, scholarship providers and recipients?
4. Transition to employment: what is the best way to support graduates as they make the transition from education into work?

This paper therefore examines four of the challenges identified as a result of ESSA’s research findings and their follow-up consultation. It also discusses how different stakeholders could take collective action to address these challenges. The paper draws on the knowledge and experience of both ESSA and the Regional Universities Forum for Capacity Building in Agriculture ([RUFORUM](#)), which is a consortium of 129 African universities operating in 38 countries across Africa, and an experienced, innovative and creative provider of scholarships to young Africans.

Challenge 1. Inclusive access: are scholarships reaching marginalised groups?

“Education has the power to transform lives. It broadens people’s freedom of choice and action, empowering them to participate in the social and political lives of their societies and equipping them with the skills they need to develop their livelihoods. For the marginalized, education can be a route to greater social mobility and a way out of poverty. Forged in a society that restricted education on the basis of skin colour and discrimination, Nelson Mandela’s words powerfully capture the role of inclusive education in broadening opportunities and building inclusive societies.”⁴

⁴ Reaching the marginalized. *In* Education for All Global Monitoring Report 2010. <http://www.unesco.org/new/fileadmin/MULTIMEDIA/HQ/ED/GMR/pdf/gmr2010/gmr2010-ch3.pdf>

The quote above, which appeared in a UNESCO report written a decade ago, still holds true today. Sadly, marginalisation in education also remains a form of acute and persistent disadvantage rooted in underlying social inequalities, with groups such as refugees⁵, people with disabilities^{6,7} those living in rural areas and in some societies, women, having significantly reduced access to education. For marginalised groups, scholarships can be used to expand their access to education, despite their personal circumstances or the circumstances of their home regions or countries (e.g. for refugees).

Based on ESSA's research findings, an in-depth analysis of the practices of 20 of the top 50 scholarship providers shows that as demand for quality higher education across Africa surges, scholarships for sub-Saharan African students also look to be increasing. At least 10 of the top 50 providers and 30 smaller programmes have launched initiatives or expanded programming in the last five years. The German Academic Exchange Service increased scholarships to the region by 900 between 2014 and 2017. China increased its total scholarships to African students for 2019-22 to 50,000, up from 30,000 in the previous three years, hence 5,000 more scholarships per year. Nearly 30,000 new scholarships were also awarded to sub-Saharan Africa students in 2019, for entry in 2020. The UK government, Indian government, the World Bank, the Mastercard Foundation, and other smaller programmes are also pledging more scholarships for students in sub-Saharan Africa.

However, despite this positive trend for scholarships, and the fact that access to higher education for marginalised groups has increased, there are concerns that the inclusive development of award holders is often not prioritised and many programmes lack focus on impact for young people. The evidence obtained indicates that the number of scholarships available reached the equivalent of just 0.4% of the 8.1 million tertiary education students in sub-Saharan Africa. The data for inclusivity is however unreliable. This is because although 31% of all scholarships were assessed as inclusive (i.e. they offered full funding and met at least one developmental objective⁸), and 31 of the top 50 providers were classified as offering inclusive scholarships, this metric had not been measured appropriately by many donors. Apart from 'gender' of scholarship recipient (which ranged from 32% to 57% for females), most funders could not provide detailed information about scholars' backgrounds (e.g. rural? disabled?) and verifiable metrics. Some did not even have inclusion objectives. That resulted in the data collection being limited across critical KPIs such as inclusion statistics, application to place ratios, completion rates, jobs obtained, and long term impacts. This suggests that inclusion had often simply been stated as a desired outcome. That needs to change.

Using scholarships to fund under-represented and marginalised demographics such as **refugees** and the **disabled** can be a good way of bringing inclusion and diversity to university student bodies. However, university selection procedures and learning environments in sub-Saharan Africa are often poorly aligned to the needs of vulnerable students, hence putting those students at a disadvantage. In addition, discussions about scholarship programmes often tend to focus on how host universities

⁵ According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), "A refugee is someone who has been forced to flee his or her country because of persecution, war or violence. A refugee has a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, political opinion or membership in a particular social group. Most likely, they cannot return home or are afraid to do so."

⁶ The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) recognises that "disability is an evolving concept" and provided a good orientation of the term: "Persons with a disability include those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others".

⁷ Approximately 80 million persons, or almost 1 in 10 people on the continent of Africa experience some form of disability. WHO World Disability Report (2011):

https://www.who.int/disabilities/world_report/2011/report/en/.

⁸ (a) Access and empower young people from marginalised groups, (b) Prepare applicants for decent work, and (c) promote sub-Saharan African universities through programming involving long-term partnerships with institutions, including local education non-profit and non-government organisations.

benefit, and less on the experiences of students on the scholarships (Campbell and Neff 2020). Therefore, even if some marginalised groups can gain access to tertiary education opportunities and scholarships, will these achievements have positive impacts on their prospects for future employment and their lives? How will such impact be measured, monitored, and evaluated? There are currently more questions than answers.

Another inclusion concern is related to the approximately 60% of scholarship recipients who study outside sub-Saharan Africa. They often face application processes, selection procedures and learning environments that are challenging for sub-Saharan African applicants, and many of the existing programmes do not cater sufficiently to their needs.

Furthermore, it is very concerning that 59% of the region's 20 to 24-year olds will hold a secondary education qualification by 2030, compared with just 42% now. This represents an **extra 40 million young people** potentially prepared for tertiary education. However, is tertiary education prepared for them? It is imperative that the provision of scholarships continue to increase, quickly and dramatically, if the enormous demand for places and funding, particularly for the marginalised, are to be met. The situation is even more urgent, now, in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. In contrast, almost none of the 20% of the poorest or most disadvantaged young people currently attend post-secondary education. Therefore, how will they be able to access tertiary education?

The authors suggest that the provision of scholarships and measurement of their impact must be completely re-imagined, and trusted local organisations could be involved in nominating and recruiting some of the most marginalised young people, to address the issue of inclusion.

Challenge 2. Completion rates: are scholarships being delivered in such a way as to enable completion?

Regardless of their circumstance, all youth in sub-Saharan Africa deserve to enjoy their right to access and complete their education. Well-targeted scholarships can promote such equity in education and contribute to sustainable development. However, the impact of scholarships for young people can vary widely, based on several different factors, including the students' backgrounds/personal histories, source of funding, location of their studies, among others. Depending on the individual scholar and the factors they encounter during their studies, some scholarship holders may be unable to complete their education.

ESSA's scholarship study uncovered that all providers tracked programme completion rates, with the majority - including programmes operating at sub-Saharan African universities, scoring an 85% rate (i.e. about 15% drop out rate). However, in the absence of student background information, the high rates may have been a reflection of privileged backgrounds. In addition, the lack of information and knowhow concerning inclusion and integration of youth from some marginalised groups can make it difficult even for educational institutions that have a keen interest in addressing the challenge of completion/drop outs to do so effectively. Therefore, more information and data are needed concerning this metric, particularly for under-privileged sub-Saharan African scholarship recipients.

As an example, in the case of **refugees**, the UNHCR's Education Strategy for Refugee Inclusion⁹ highlights the urgent need for more research to be conducted to comprehensively map the scholarship situation for refugees in the organisation's regions of interest in Africa. It is essential that

⁹ Refugee Education 2030, A Strategy for Refugee Inclusion. By UNHCR (2019) <https://www.unhcr.org/publications/education/5d651da88d7/education-2030-strategy-refugee-education.html>.

these vulnerable youth receive equitable quality education that will support their university experience, including orientation, mentoring and pastoral and psychosocial support. Their education must also expand their knowledge, qualifications, study and life skills training and competencies, strengthen their resilience, and prepare them for participation in cohesive societies. However, without adequate support to harness these refugees' existing capacities and skills, many may be unable to complete their studies despite being awarded scholarships. Unfortunately, there is little or no data or evidence readily available regarding completion rates for refugee scholarship recipients in sub-Saharan Africa and the challenges/barriers they may face.

Similarly, the **disabled** need particular attention, given the systemic bottlenecks they often face in education and society that can inhibit them from fully achieving their educational ambitions. These bottlenecks include impairments, challenging physical environments, inaccessible transport, the unavailability of assistive devices and technologies, non-adapted means of communication, as well as unfair prejudice and stigma in society.

Furthermore, the goals of a scholarship programme can be important in determining how the scholarship is implemented. In a systematic literature review of 105 publications from 2010 to 2019 that were focused on international scholarships for students from the Global South, Campbell and Neff (2020) identified six primary, distinguishable and sometimes competing rationales/scholarship objectives that need untangling for awarding international scholarships. This is because they can directly affect the experience and impact of the scholarship on the recipients. One such objective is to empower scholarship winners to acquire knowledge and skills that can be transferred back to their home countries to support development challenges and bring change to their communities. However, factors such as a "weak economy, different economic system, or poor infrastructure" and existing local policies may not always make this feasible. This reality could make awardees feel disillusioned, or potentially consider themselves as failures during their studies. This may lead to non-completion of studies. Even when the students do complete their studies, ESSA's research revealed that for many scholarship providers, especially those offering scholarships for study outside sub-Saharan Africa, student return rates were 25% to 45% one year after graduation.

Other providers focus on diplomatic aims (such as the use of scholarships to build sympathy, trust, and solidarity with former colonies), as well as to internationalise universities. Some of these different funder objectives and motivations can align with or differ significantly from the motivations and expectations of the scholarship recipients. However, the scholars' may not always be consulted about their needs or be a priority for the decision-makers. This could have different impacts on the experiences of the scholars themselves - in some cases negatively, which could cause them to drop out of education. Having explored the complements and contradictions among the six rationales, the authors emphasised the need for scholarship providers to clarify programme goals and designs.

Challenge 3. University engagement: what are effective ways of working between universities, scholarship providers and recipients?

Given the existing challenges such as unequal access to many higher education institutions, the need for these institutions to make teaching and learning inclusive to all (irrespective of social and cultural backgrounds, social or ethnic identity, gender, religion, disability, financial status, etc.), differences identified in the visions, goals and objectives of scholarship programmes, and the fact that scholarship recipients have different priorities, the authors agree that it is time to have a collective discussion to bring about positive change for the youth in sub-Saharan Africa.

The sub-Saharan Africa scholarship recipients, universities, scholarship funders and providers (as well as the policymakers) both within and outside sub-Saharan Africa ideally need to collectively

deliberate and purposefully agree on co-creating adequately researched and supportive strategies, agile scholarships, policies, working models and tools that can ensure positive impact for these students. This is because to have inclusive scholarship provision, it is important that in addition to increasing the students' access to education and scholarships, their needs are taken into consideration when planning, designing, and implementing scholarship programmes in the educational institutions. Tailor-made initiatives could also be researched and designed or adopted for vulnerable individuals, to ensure that their education and scholarships provide support that is appropriate to their needs and priorities and invest in their individual capacities. As examples, universities and scholarship providers could consider providing pastoral support, engage with their awardees regarding their lived experiences, and try to understand whether/how the scholarships impact the students' lives during (and after) their education. This would help to determine whether these students are successfully engaging in institutional spaces and getting the best out of the opportunities available to them during their education. Such engagement could also highlight any social and cultural practices, institutional structures and other potential barriers in these universities that may negatively impact the students.

Furthermore, the students' experiences should go beyond the narrow outcome of attaining a higher education qualification. Universities and other relevant stakeholders should take proactive steps towards establishing mechanisms for supporting graduate supervision and mentorship, including using digital feedback platforms. They should also equip the youth with transferable skills such as adaptability, self-awareness, critical thinking, collaboration, decision making and ethical action, and more (Egeru et al., 2016). The stakeholders could also use collaborative learning, capacity development, innovation and evidence to foster the conditions, partnerships and approaches that could lead to the youth being able to learn, thrive and develop their full potential to pursue further studies, find meaningful jobs, and/or engage in entrepreneurial activities after they graduate.

Challenge 4. Transition to employment: what is the best way to support graduates as they make the transition from education into work?

ESSA's scholarship study also uncovered that there is limited support for sub-Saharan Africa scholarship holders to find jobs after completing their studies. Providers operating in South Africa generally had good information and above 90% success rates. Very little information was available outside South Africa, apart from RUFORUM, who offer postgraduate scholarships to students from rural communities in sub-Saharan Africa to study agriculture at local universities. Because RUFORUM connects the graduates with agricultural opportunities in the students' own communities, 75% of the graduates are currently able to find decent work in the formal sector or become entrepreneurs.

Clearly, more needs to be done by scholarship and education providers to track sub-Saharan African scholarship graduates' pathways as they transition from education to work. They could organise career talks for graduates and help them to network and form communities of practice – all of which are important aspects of preparation for employment that are not routinely covered through the conventional curriculum (Egeru et al., 2016).

The providers could then identify any challenges, find creative and innovative ways of improving the alumni's employment outcomes where needed (e.g. through enabling workplace preparation, refining planning and modelling), as well as measure, and report on the impact of scholarships on the employability and employment status of these students. This quest for information and a tailor-made approach may again be particularly relevant for scholarship recipients from marginalised groups.

What Next? A Collective Action on Scholarships

Understanding the differing rationales of scholarship programmes is essential, as that would facilitate the creation of tailored policy recommendations and solutions to pertinent issues such as access, inclusion, etc., that align with a scholarship programme's mandate. Understanding the different mandates will also enable strategic engagement with varying scholarship programmes, to ensure best impact for young people's education and skills development, to enable them to find decent employment.

Having identified and discussed the serious challenges faced by scholarships seekers and holders from sub-Saharan Africa, participants at the scholarships consultative meeting organised by ESSA on 21st April 2020 expressed interest in joining forces on a shared agenda to tackle the challenges and increase the impact of their scholarships for their recipients. These scholarship funders and providers were keen to share their own lessons and incorporate the lessons of others into their scholarship programming. A **Collective Action on Scholarships** initiative was therefore agreed and launched, to effect change. The initiative will:

1. Establish consensus on where action needs to be taken to increase the return on investment in scholarships.
2. Translate best practices into actionable advice that will help other providers up the learning curve.
3. Agree on KPIs which allow the coalition to establish benchmarks, set goals and track progress.
4. Build a sector-wide community for learning and improving, and a collective voice that will raise the profile of scholarships as a tool for development.

ESSA proposes to support this process through a lean coordinating secretariat (if funding can be obtained for this), to:

- Convene sub-groups that will address specific challenge areas
- Coordinate and facilitate the research and practice development determined by each sub-group
- Be the Information Hub: share sub-group findings, lessons, recommendations, action plans, and liaise between sub-groups
- Facilitate scheduling, delivery of monitoring and evaluation and documentation; and,
- Build an online directory of providers and continue to grow the network.

These [KPIs](#), once tried and tested, could form the basis of a new global indicator for scholarships which will focus on outcomes for young people. However, the authors would welcome discussions during the conference regarding other potential solutions to these scholarship challenges that the coalition could take into consideration in the various sub-group discussions. Suggestions for sources of funding to support the work of the Collective Action would also be well received.

Conclusion

The authors hope that by reviewing the quantitative and qualitative evidence about the current situation for scholarships in Sub-Saharan Africa, the various stakeholders could collectively devise appropriate strategies and solutions to better coordinate, expand and highlight the provision of scholarships for young people in sub-Saharan Africa and all over the world. They could also develop and agree standards/KPIs, monitor progress and impact, and share information - including through making use of technology. Furthermore, African governments could ensure that they include scholarships for students – particularly those from marginalised groups, in their goals and action plans. All these approaches should help to ensure increased inclusion and impact of such

scholarships for the youth in sub-Saharan Africa. Such actions will enable progress for achieving SDG 4.B and have positive impact for millions of youth with respect to their education and employment.

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