

EDUCATION

Make education reforms sustainable

Education Cabinet Secretary Fred Matiang'i has received a lot of accolades for the good work he is doing in the sector.

The praises are deserved, looking at his achievements in the short stint he has served at the ministry. He has inspired hope that the myriad challenges that the education sector is grappling with can be addressed with focus, ingenuity, determination and resilience.

The cheating in the national examinations was a problem that was proving to be intractable, defying every solution. However, it is as good as behind us. The wise thing to do now is institutionalise and entrench these gains, so that when there are changes in personnel at the ministry these fundamental achievements will not be reversed.

It is also quite encouraging that the CS's spotlight has shifted to institutions of higher learning. This move is critical because an education system can only be sound if all its components, right from kindergarten to university, are in good health. We have to ensure that the management at every level is up to speed. We also have to ensure that quality is kept



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as high as possible and sufficient resources are available.

No country has attained economic prosperity without putting quality education at the centre of its transformative vision. The changes that we are therefore witnessing are key in the realisation of Vision 2030, which is Kenya's economic blueprint.

Ending cheating in exams goes a long way in stepping up the quality of our education. Why? The abili-

ties of students are gauged appropriately and universities as well as colleges will admit students to courses that are in tandem with their strengths and talents. The end result is graduates who will excel in their respective areas of expertise.

There have been concerns that many students who sat the Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education (KCSE) exam last year will not join university because the number of those who attained the minimum entry grade has gone down sharply. These fears are misplaced.

Students who scored below C+, the minimum entry mean grade for university, should not feel that the academic door has been slammed in their face. They still have ample opportunities and pathways to achieve their academic dream. There are a number of colleges and institutions where they can pursue their studies.

We have witnessed people who start at certificate level and scale the academic ladder to the highest level possible through sheer hard work. Some of them are now professors who are highly regarded in their fields for their fundamental contributions.

Some are scholars teaching

at the university. Prof Karega Mutahi, for instance, was a P1 teacher; now he is one of Kenya's reputable scholars.

Perhaps what colleges and other institutions of higher learning ought to do urgently is ensure proper mechanisms for student progression.

It is important that a student who begins at certificate level should have a clear pathway to the highest academic level possible. Institutions should also collaborate, especially in developing joint quality standards, so that students seamlessly transfer grades between colleges or from college to university.

Climb the ladder

Such a conducive environment will enable a student who scores a D in KCSE to climb the ladder by dint of hard work.

Our education system should be designed in a way that nurtures and builds dreams, not destroy them. It should give a second chance to students who do not perform well in KCSE. Instructively, our education system has been criticised as being too exam-oriented and does not impart the prerequisite practical skills for the dynamic world of work.

These criticisms are not farfetched as we have seen students who fail national exams go on to become top entrepreneurs or excel in sports, art and other fields. If therefore behooves experts to find ways to holistically improve the quality of education and extend its scope so that every talent and ability is taken into account.

For these significant changes to be realised, however, we need all players to act in concert. There are various areas in the education sector that are crying for attention. Before the arrival of the indefatigable Dr Matiang'i, some of these challenges looked intimidating and insurmountable. Now we know that they can be dealt with, thanks to the CS's inspiration and leadership.

As he focuses on stemming the rot in institutions of higher learning, educationists have to really weigh in and do their bit. We need to discuss how we can make education affordable and inclusive. This way, we will make education the equaliser that it is meant to be.

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EXAMS

Why the past KCSE results were 'skewed'

There is an analogy doing the rounds in social media comparing the 2016 and 2015 KCSE examination scores with two maize cobs — one full of grains and the other with scattered grains — to represent the number of straight As (141 in 2016 and 2,686 in 2015).

Did the students who sat KCSE in 2016 fail, compared to 2015? No, the two groups scored equally.

As a PhD candidate in educational technology, I can state that the results will fulfil their purpose — placement in tertiary institutions. The scores rank the candidates from the highest to the lowest, with the best joining the most intellectually demanding courses under the public university placement scheme.

The analogy of the cobs is misleading: Both the 2015 and 2016 candidates covered the same syllabus over four years. In the eyes of an expert, the score for 2015 and before violated the assumptions of normal distribution. It was negatively skewed. Why?

Either the 2015 test was too simple or confounders influenced the results. The negative skewness in 2015 was caused by an unexplained confounder, or noise, that was put under control in 2016. How long will that last?

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