

# Promoting trade in education services: dampen ambitions, but step changes are needed

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It is unlikely that Botswana will become a global education hub in the near future.

However, it can try to improve the balance on trade in education services and regard the provision of education services as an import substitution strategy. It can also attempt to improve the relevance of its education sector to the development of other service sectors such as financial or tourism services. It can also move quickly to build up education expertise in niche areas such as nurse education, and use successful examples from other sectors (e.g. accountancy sector).

Botswana aims to build an innovative economy for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Tertiary education plays a vital role in this by ensuring an adequate set of skills for the economy's needs. Trade in education services plays a unique role in Botswana: exports of services are low, but imports of subsidised education services are very high.

There has been little strategic direction towards the tertiary education sector. A recent document brings this out. *Towards a Knowledge Society: A Proposal for a Tertiary Education Policy for Botswana* (TEC, October 2006) suggested that the tertiary education system is fragmented, with no clear oversight, has many small institutions failing to reap economies of scale, faces a proliferation of private institutions offering poor quality programmes at high costs, and there are concern about the relevance and quality of tertiary education programmes.

Botswana will not be able to fully withstand competition from countries such as South Africa. However, Botswana could aspire to become a regional hub for education in a limited number of subjects, and obvious candidates include education and training related to nursing, HIV/AIDS research, financial services, tourism and wetlands. It will also need to be open to foreign tertiary education institutes either through subsidiaries or in the form of partnerships with well-known business schools and universities and their (foreign) staff, e.g. by using EPA agreements with the EU. Dubai, Singapore and now Mauritius have been reforming their tertiary education sector to become more open, attracting foreign institutions and foreign students.

Becoming an education services hub does not happen overnight when the economic fundamentals are lacking (although when economic fundamentals are right a few changes in the law and mode of attracting foreign schools can make a big difference, as in Singapore and Dubai). But filling a skills gap as part of an import substitution strategy is not impossible either. For instance, the Botswana Accountancy College (BAC), a private sector college subsidised by the Government of Botswana and Debswana, was founded in 1996 when the country had only four registered Botswana accountants. Now, there are 400. All of the qualifications that BAC provides are internationally recognised. This example shows that a public-private partnership can build up a tertiary education college from scratch and fill an important skills gap.

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