The Contribution of Higher Education and Economic Development in the Gambia

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It is essential to note that several countries, both African and non-African, have drawn considerable conclusions regarding the relationship between higher education and economic development in The Gambia, where education is the overarching theme that encompasses all the other sub-themes. The relationship has been proven to be a direct one in most countries; however, certain infrastructure needs must exist to achieve economic development. Funding was one of the key issues in African education systems that needed to be addressed, including specialized enrollment plans to encourage women's participation in education, especially at secondary education levels. This research has determined the key role that women play in creating an economically developed country by participating in sectors such as the agricultural industry. Moreover, the study of other countries helped develop more ideas on how The Gambia could maintain a higher level of education with the existing resources. Ethiopia, a country having a similar potential and economic environment to The Gambia, proved to be very useful as it draws a high correlation between higher education and economic development. Another significant finding in this research was the tourism sector, which is often neglected by poorer countries. However, with its unique resources, The Gambia can utilize them to its advantage, similarly to Northern Cyprus. Finally, the most significant negative impact of corruption is on a country's development process, making it extremely challenging to achieve economic growth.

Keywords: higher education, economic growth, economic development, private and public

INTRODUCTION

Education is an important factor in the economic development of all countries. According to Amaghionyeidiwe and Osinubi (2012), "countries that have increased their innovative capacities have invested heavily in science and engineering education, and also in promoting competition as the basis for innovation." This has been observed repeatedly in The Gambia and other newly industrialized countries where significant prior investments in human resources have been made. To develop an economy, higher education has become a necessity, provided that other factors are also in place, thus creating the infrastructure of a healthy, developing economy. This is particularly true in developing countries such as The Gambia, where education and economic development remain weak.

The African continent has long been perceived as a region of poverty and stagnation, but studying The Gambia's evolving educational and economic dynamics reveals a different narrative. This research examines whether higher education has a direct impact on economic development and whether The Gambia can utilize education as a catalyst for national growth and poverty reduction.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Definition of Higher Education

Higher education, or tertiary education, shapes how the future workforce approaches development complexities through responsible and critical thinking (Khorasgani, 2008). It enhances individual productivity and equips people with specialized knowledge for professional success (Penn Wharton, 2016).

Studies demonstrate that education improves both individual and societal well-being, leading to higher incomes, innovation, and better governance (Bloom, Canning, & Chan, 2006). While consumerism and professional training coexist within higher education, inefficiencies persist, necessitating a careful balance between business strategies and academic missions (Michael, 1997).

Higher Education and Economic Growth

Modern economies thrive on innovation and technology—both byproducts of educated populations (Kowalska & Bandula, 2017; Pinheiro & Pillay, 2016). Khorasgani (2008) and Kyophilavong et al. (2018) confirm that education at all levels—primary, secondary, and tertiary—fosters long-term growth. Education generates knowledge, which transforms into human capital and drives GDP (Gyimah-Brempong, Paddison, & Mitiku, 2006).

Some studies, however, suggest that higher education alone does not guarantee economic growth (Ahmad et al., 2017). Nonetheless, evidence overwhelmingly supports education as a foundation for innovation and competitiveness.

Microeconomic Approach

Higher education is costly for both students and institutions (Winston, 1999). Yet, Cortese (2003) emphasizes that this investment pays off through intergenerational gains in productivity and opportunity.

Harmon, Oosterbeek, and Walker (2003) view education as an investment in human capital, showing significant positive effects on income. Although these returns vary by ability and field, the long-term economic benefits of education justify the costs.

Higher Education Supports Development

Higher education develops human capital by preparing individuals for professional, civic, and economic participation (Oh, Blau, Han, & Kim, 2017). Bhasin (2014) and Spöttl (2013) find that tertiary institutions foster both technical and cognitive skills, while Bloom et al. (2006) link these gains to improved savings, investment, and national tax revenues.

Education enables individuals to access new technologies, propelling countries like The Gambia toward sustainable development.

Income Growth

Higher education improves employment opportunities and income potential (Penn Wharton, 2016). Bashir, Herath, and Gebremedhin (2012) confirm that education and income growth are mutually reinforcing. However, Jamison et al. (2007) emphasize that the quality—not just the quantity—of education determines its economic impact.

Creating New Technology

Innovation is essential for competitiveness. Firms led by managers with scientific education invest more in research and development (Scherer & Huh, 1992). Similarly, Piva and Vivarelli (2009) note that skilled workers enhance innovation capacity, linking education directly to technological progress.

Enlightened and Proactive Leaders

Leadership education fosters foresight and adaptability. Wu and Wang (2011) describe proactive leaders as those who initiate change, while Rhee and Sigler (2010) demonstrate that leadership-focused programs cultivate essential skills such as reflection, communication, and collaboration—crucial for driving progress in developing economies.

Expanding Choices

Higher education expands individuals' capacity for decision-making, critical thinking, and informed choice (Salovey, 2018). Educated citizens enjoy greater employment mobility, financial freedom, and civic engagement (Harmon, 2003).

Increasing Relevant Skills

Higher education must be aligned with the needs of the workforce. The European Commission (2016) emphasizes the importance of teaching transferable skills, including critical thinking, teamwork, and problem-solving. Sharma (2013) and Oliveri & Markle (2017) advocate reforming curricula to include participatory learning and reflective practice.

Cajiao and Burke (2016) demonstrate that student-centered approaches improve workplace preparedness, confirming the link between higher education and employability.

Public and Private Benefits of Higher Education

Murray (2009) identifies six public benefits of higher education, including improved civic participation, increased tolerance, enhanced health, and reduced crime rates. Privately, Perna (2003) and Isopahkala-Bouret (2017) demonstrate that degree holders earn more, experience higher job satisfaction, and exhibit lifelong learning behaviors.

Building an Effective and Efficient Higher Education System

Effective higher education requires quality, adaptability, and fiscal responsibility (Daggett, 2014). Doherty (2008) and Gordon & Owen (2009) emphasize the importance of quality assurance, while Singh (2003) highlights the potential of blended learning to expand access and reduce costs.

Prerequisites to Economic Development

Economic development involves social inclusion, innovation, and education. Grinberga and Mazure (2017) note that collaboration between academia, government, and business is essential for sustainable growth. Higher education fuels innovation by equipping citizens to solve national challenges.

Regional Development and Higher Education

Regional development depends on education-driven innovation. Pinheiro (2016) suggests integrating higher education into local research and development (R&D) networks. By leveraging universities and technical colleges, The Gambia can stimulate growth in microenterprises and the tourism sector.

FIGURE 1
HEED MODEL – HIGHER EDUCATION AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT FRAMEWORK

Note. Developed by Banutu-Gomez & Banutu-Gomez (2025).

TABLE 1
GENDER DISPARITY IN LITERACY IN THE GAMBIA (2024)

Gender	Literacy Rate (%)	Enrollment Ratio (%)	Notes
Male	71	65	Consistent literacy improvement since 2015
Female	55	48	Barriers include early marriage and rural access issues
National Average	63	57	Overall progress with the ongoing gender gap
Urban	74	69	Stronger infrastructure and access
Rural	49	42	Need for targeted policy intervention

Note. Data adapted from The Gambia Ministry of Basic and Secondary Education (2024).

CONCLUSION

The interdependence between higher education and economic development is undeniable. In The Gambia, tertiary education empowers citizens, fosters innovation, and drives inclusive growth. Through sustained investment, quality assurance, and visionary leadership, The Gambia can transform higher education into the engine of its economic renaissance.

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Author Contributions

Michael Ba Banutu-Gomez: Conceptualization, Methodology, Formal Analysis, Writing – Original Draft, Supervision.

Ramatoulie Whan Banutu-Gomez: Literature Review, Data Curation, Editing, Visualization (Figure 1).

Declarations

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