

Is teacher trainee allowances debate driven by partisan politics or policy imperatives?

Prince Hamid Armah, PhD | 6th June 2016

Few weeks ago, myjoyonline.com reported that “more than four-hundred qualified applicants have been turned down by the Tamale College of Education due to lack of infrastructure”. Interestingly, applicants were previously refused admission into the Colleges of Education (CoEs) due to the quota system- but now they are being turned away due to infrastructure. For instance, in 2013, prior to scrapping the trainee allowance, Tamale Training College admitted 288 students comprising 160 males and 128 females. Today, they are able to admit 529; with 400 more unable to gain admission. In supporting the scrapping of the trainee allowance, VIAM Africa, an education and social policy think tank, argued that lack of access should be on the basis of infrastructure but not on an unfair quota system that does not even take account of the number of teachers needed annually in the country. The allowances had rather created a perverse set of incentives for applicants and an artificial ceiling on student intake.

Whilst VIAM Africa was of the considered opinion that the policy decision to abolish allowances for teacher trainees needs to be maintained, opponents of the policy largely argued that removal of the allowances would lower enrolment into the CoE since it would increase the cost of education for applicants. The current reports of widespread enrolment at the CoEs, thus, vindicate VIAM Africa’s position that scrapping the trainee allowance would not impede college access as the critics of the policy, especially the New Patriotic Party (NPP), wanted us to believe. The NPP, Ghana’s largest opposition party, in particular, has promised to restore the policy if it regains power in 2016, arguing that scrapping the allowance “makes education a preserve of the rich”. The implication is that students who attend the CoEs are from poor socioeconomic background for which reason scrapping the allowances will disadvantage them, and favour people who can afford to pay.

However, empirical evidence to support or deny such a claim remains sparse. Rather, the evidence appears to point towards an expanded access to CoEs across the country, even though at an increased cost to the students. So, what is accounting for this phenomenon? To answer this question requires Government to find out who are benefiting more from the expanded access including the replaced student loan scheme. Are the beneficiary students of the scrapped teacher allowances policy and replaced student loan scheme from disadvantaged backgrounds or from seemingly affluent backgrounds? Secondly, what are the socio-economic backgrounds of the people gaining admission into the CoE as well as those accessing the student loan scheme? Answering this research question could facilitate the formulation of pro-poor intervention programmes targeted at people who genuinely need financial support. An empirical research with secondary data from the National Council for Tertiary Education, the CoEs and the Student Loan Trust could help answer the above question and provide better evidence in identifying people from low-income homes who genuinely need additional financial support. To the extent that, wholesale education financing

policy (such as teacher trainee allowances) does not take account of need-based assessment of beneficiaries and raises equity and social justice issues, no government including a future NPP government should encourage it. By this argument, I am suggesting to the government and all relevant stakeholders that restoring teacher trainee allowances is unsustainable and unfair to people who genuinely need it. Generally, I support the notion of providing financial support for people to be trained as teachers and that any such arrangement must not be automatic but must be applied for under laid down criteria. For instance, government could provide grants for teacher trainees from low-income backgrounds, who are disabled or have children.

At present, we are at the point where rising enrolment should compel authorities to deal more comprehensively with infrastructural deficit issues. And this is where VIAM Africa would continue to ask government to set up a fund specifically for the money being saved from scrapping the allowances and encourage the CoEs to submit proposals for specific infrastructure projects they (the CoEs) deem necessary. In doing so, not only are we undertaking need-base assessments of infrastructural requirements at the various CoEs, but we are also developing their capacity to identify, develop and manage funded projects within the context of their new status as tertiary institutions. My previous call on government to invest the accrued GHS282 million saved from scrapping the teacher trainee allowances into the education sector, particularly at the CoEs was informed by the foregoing perspective. However, the responses from the government on this call appears to lack clarity on the specific projects that the money will be (or has been) used for. President John Mahama pontificates that “government will be able to plough back the Ghc282 million that would have been paid to teacher trainees in expanding education so that we can employ more teachers”. On the other hand, the Deputy Minister for Education, Samuel Okudzeto Ablakwa claims that the money that would have been spent on paying teacher trainee allowances has been invested in “massive infrastructures” in the CoEs across the country, resulting in increased enrolment in training colleges by 63.8 percent. But the data available suggest that the increase in enrolment at the CoEs is not entirely attributable to any investment in infrastructure; it is because the colleges were previously operating beyond their full capacity (estimated at 40% according to the Government). For instance, official figures quoted by President Mahama and the Minister for Education, Professor Jane Opoku-Agyemang seem to suggest that by merely removing the quota system, there has been a significant increase in enrolment at the CoE from 9,000 students in 2013 to 15,000 students in the 2014 academic year (60% increase). In addition, merely saying that the savings made from scrapping the allowance regime has been invested in “massive infrastructure” without given specifics is not enough. It makes it difficult for us to track, in specific terms, what infrastructure would the government have provided if the allowance was not scrapped.

In conclusion, whilst the discourse around opposing the scrapping of the trainee allowances tends to point toward emotional arguments with limited substance, the government appears not to demonstrate transparency, and accountability about what exactly it has used the monies accrued from the scrapped policy for.

The writer is an Education Consultant and the Executive Director of VIAM Africa Centre for Education & Social Policy