

IMPROVING ESSENTIAL HEALTH SERVICES IN LOW AND MIDDLE-INCOME COUNTRIES BY LOCAL CAPACITY BUILDING THROUGH FACILITATING MEDICAL VOCATIONAL TRAINING: A GLOBAL RESPONSIBILITY?

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Importance of tertiary education

Education is a fundamental resource and a valuable investment for individuals and communities. In most countries, education is considered a basic human right. In the last few centuries, education has expanded greatly across the world and global school life expectancy continues to increase.¹ Although the world is more educated than ever, low and middle-income countries (LMIC) are far behind (FIGURE 1).¹

Education reduces poverty by stimulating economic growth and increases the chance of a healthy life.² Ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education, a sustainable development goal (SDG), is one of the most important investments that a country can make for the population and for the future.^{3,4} Although the return on investments in tertiary education is the highest in the entire education system, less than 10% of the population in low income countries is enrolled in tertiary education (FIGURE 1).^{5,6}

It is no surprise that ‘improving the health and well-being of all world citizens’ is another vital SDG.⁴ According to the World Health Organization at least half of the world’s population still lacks access to basic healthcare and many people are still pushed into extreme poverty due to their health expenditures.⁷ An important contributing factor is the

shortage of healthcare workers (HCW), especially in LMIC.^{8,9}

Both tertiary education and basic healthcare remain out of reach of the most marginalized people in the world. Improving the accessibility of medical vocational training can tackle both challenges at the same time, which can be done most sustainably by supporting local infrastructures.¹⁰

Health systems in low resource settings already struggle to provide basic healthcare in non-pandemic times. The current COVID-19 pandemic shows the world more than ever that investments for weak health systems in LMIC are warranted. The health sector is in desperate need of (wo) manpower in LMIC. Is it a global responsibility to solve the discrepancy between the high motivation of many adolescents and their low chances to become a HCW?

Paul Kwofie - Medical student from Ghana

In 2017, Paul Kwofie and Lilian van Uhm (FIGURE 2) met in the the Egyam Children’s Home in Ghana, where Lilian volunteered as a social worker. They became close friends and it became clear to Lilian that Paul was a really hardworking and serious young man with only one dream: to become a doctor. Paul had this dream since he was in primary school and saw many seriously ill peo-

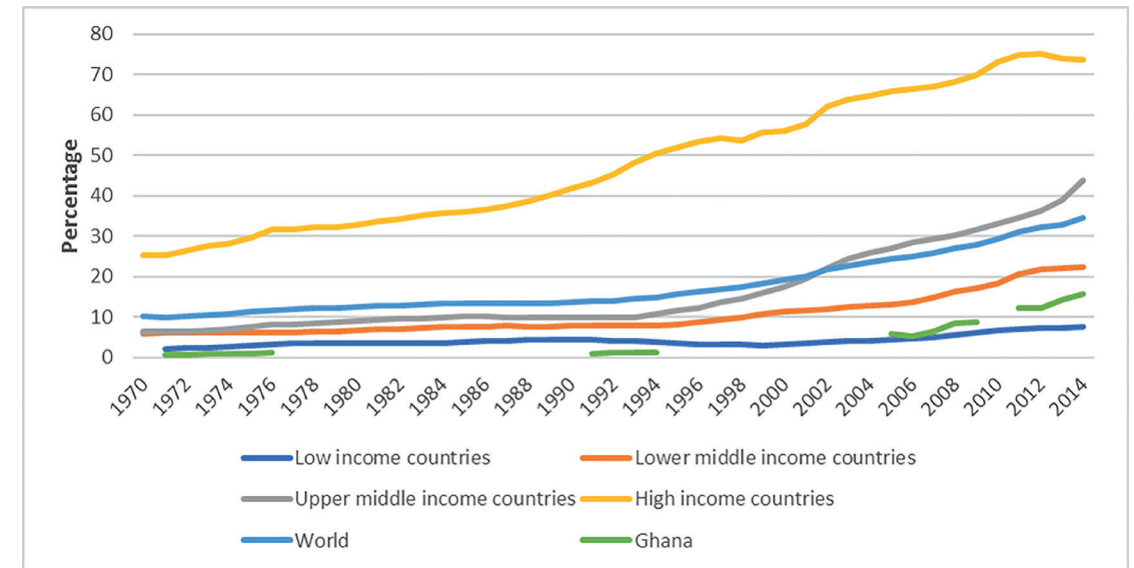


FIGURE 1 Overview of total enrollment in tertiary education, regardless of age, over time in the world; low, lower middle, upper middle, and high-income countries; and Ghana from 1970 – 2014.

Note. Data retrieved from UNESCO Institute for Statistics.[1] Total enrollment in tertiary education in the world visualized as well as categorized for four different income levels. In addition, Ghana (Country of Paul Kwofie) is visualized which had some missing data for some years.

ple in his village. He witnessed (too) many deaths due to curable diseases, and wanted to help reduce these preventable numbers.

Paul completed high school with good results, giving him access to medicine studies. However, neither he nor his orphanage could afford the tuition fee. Lilian was very keen to help Paul, as she believes it is a real pity to see talented young people like Paul who cannot attend tertiary education due to financial issues and will therefore not be able to contribute to the development of their country. Lilian had heard about the iSTEPup foundation and introduced Paul to them. The board of the iSTEPup foundation carefully went through his application and decided to offer him a scholarship. Both Paul and Lilian were very grateful for this opportunity. Paul is now in his third year of medicine and achieves good results at the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology.

Through his personal webpage, Paul and his iSTEPup buddy Lilian update his study costs, results and progress for transparency purposes (<https://www.i-step-up.com/what-we-do/students/paul-kwofie/?lang=en>). After finishing his medi-

cine study in 2022-2023, Paul intends to work in his home country, Ghana, for as long as possible.

Scholarships for medical vocational training

iSTEPup* was founded in 2018 by three Dutch



FIGURE 2 Paul Kwofie [l] & Lilian van Uhm [r]

medical doctors to improve accessibility of medical vocational training in LMIC. Candidates with insufficient financial means can apply for a scholarship to follow medical vocational training to become a nurse, midwife, doctor or pharmacist. In a transparent and sustainable manner, iSTEPup facilitates local capacity building in basic health-care through an existing educational infrastructure which supports local economy and self-reliance.

**International Sustainable Tertiary Education Programme*

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