



The Giant Challenge of Higher Education in Africa

By Paul Tiyambe Zeleza



Over the past two decades African higher education has undergone profound changes. In the 1960s and 1970s, universities on the continent were few in number, small in scale, and elitist institutions with the limited mandate of producing cadres for the Africanization or indigenization of the newly independent state apparatuses. In the 1980s and 1990s, during the heyday of structural adjustment programs, they were regarded as costly irrelevances at best, or bastions of political unrest at worst. Now, they are seen as essential for the creation of knowledge economies and societies, indispensable for human capital development, and turning Africa's unprecedented youth bulge into a demographic dividend rather than a Malthusian nightmare.

Yet, the continent's higher education sector is plagued by huge capacity deficits and challenges that threaten its survival, sustainability and contribution to the continent's historic and humanistic project for democratic and development transformation. Since the late 1990s I've been immersed in research on African universities and knowledge production on Africa. I've published several books and numerous articles and given dozens of conference presentations on these subjects. The books include two edited volumes on African Universities in the Twenty-First Century (2004) and another two volumes on The Study of Africa (2008). Among the presentations, the most significant might be [the Framing Paper](#) I was commissioned to write for the 1st African Higher Education Summit held in Dakar, Senegal in March 2015.

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My reflections have also been immensely enriched by my work in university administration since 1994, and most recently as Vice-Chancellor of an African university, and member of several higher education governing boards including the Administrative Board of the International Association of Universities and as Chair of the Advisory Council of the Carnegie African Diaspora Fellowship Program that provides fellowships for African born academics in Canada and the United States to work with universities in six African countries.

From these scholarly, administrative, and governance vantage points, I've distilled six key capacity challenges facing African higher education: institutional supply, resources, faculty, research, outputs, and leadership. Overcoming these challenges, and creating quality education, is essential for the sector's contribution to the creation of globally competitive, inclusive, integrated, innovative, successful and sustainable democratic developmental states and societies envisioned in the African Union's Agenda 2063, the United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals, and numerous National Visions.

Institutional Supply: In 1944, the entire African continent had 31 universities (out of 3,703 degree granting higher education institutions worldwide). The number rose to 170 in 1969, 446 in 1989 and 1,639 in 2015 (out of 18,808 worldwide). Even more spectacular has been the growth in enrollments, which rose from 0.74 million in 1969 to 12.2 million in 2015. Despite the massive expansion, Africa's enrollment ratio remained low at 12.08% in 2013 compared to a world average of 32.9%, and 68% for Europe, 61.5% for North America, and 51.8% for South America and 28.9% for Asia.

Thus, Africa needs more universities. But expanding the supply of educational institutions must be matched by investments in physical and technological infrastructures without which the slide to declining quality will continue. It must also be accompanied by improving access, equity, and affordability, especially for marginalized communities and women. Worldwide gender parity in tertiary education was achieved by 2000 and stood at 1.10 in 2013. Africa remains the only region where gender parity has yet to be attained. Its gender parity index was 0.85 in 2013.

Resource Deficits: As in much of the world, higher education in Africa is increasingly privatized as evident in terms of the explosion of private universities, the growing privatization of public institutions, and emergence of the for-profit institutions. Worldwide the proportion of private universities grew from 40.6% in 1969 to 57.5% in 2015. In Africa, the number of private universities grew from 35 in 1969 to 972 in 2015. Clearly, the majority of African universities are now private.

The growth of private higher education institutions is in part a result of escalating student demand and incapacity of public institutions to meet it. It also signifies declining state support. Increasingly, higher education has come to be viewed as a private rather than as a public good. As in many parts of the world, African universities have increasingly become neo-liberal institutions characterized by what I call the 5Cs: corporatisation of management, consumerisation of students, casualisation of faculty, commercialisation of learning, and commodification of knowledge.

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Governments and governing boards pressure universities to cultivate new revenue streams including 'cost sharing,' marketing institutional services, and fundraising. Yet, few African universities have developed adequate fundraising capacity—typically they employ a couple of people or so when similar institutions elsewhere employ scores and even hundreds. Also, we live in cultures where philanthropy is often confined to supporting relatives or religious organizations not for institution building. [The endowment fund of the University of Cape Town](#), Africa's top ranked university, is valued at R3 billion (about \$224 million). This is less than the \$347 million endowment of Spelman College, the renowned African American women's college that enrolls about 2,000 students.

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In Search of Faculty: The rapid growth in the number of universities has outstripped the supply of faculty. While in several parts of the Global North such as the United States, there are more people with terminal degrees than there are academic jobs, across Africa there is a severe shortage of qualified faculty. In Kenya, for example, according to data from the Commission for University Education, in 2018 there were 18,005 faculty in the country's 74 universities and colleges, but only 34% had doctoral degrees. This is equivalent to the number of faculty at any three of the large universities in the US.

The severe shortages of faculty result in universities relying on adjuncts, that is faculty with permanent appointments in one institution who teach in multiple institutions. (In the USA four-fifths of faculty re now adjunct because of academic labor oversupply and financially beleaguered universities' efforts to cut costs by reducing the ranks of permanent faculty). The predictable result is limited engagement between faculty and students, which leads to declining quality of teaching and learning. In many countries the casualisation of academic labor reflects the erosion of middle class incomes for academic professionals. Compounding the declining status of academics is the progressive shift towards more top-down institutional governance, in which the edicts of managerialism are increasingly undermining academic autonomy and freedom.

Research Underperformance: Africa's positioning in global research leaves a lot to be desired. In 2013, the continent only accounted for 1.3% of global Research & Development (R&D). Africa's R&D expenditure as a share of GDP was 0.5% compared to a world average of 1.7%, and 2.7% for North America. Africa's share of world researchers was 2.3%, compared to 42.8% for Asia. As for researchers per a million inhabitants, Africa had 169, compared to 786 in Asia and 4,034 for North America. In 2014, Africa claimed 2.1% of world scholarly publications, compared to 33.1% for Asia, and 32.9% for Europe.

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But Africa enjoys one dubious distinction. In 2014, 64.6% of publications by African authors were with international authors, compared to 26.1% for Asia. In nearly 30 African countries authors published more than 90% of their articles in collaboration with other countries, especially the United States, France and the United Kingdom. Clearly, African academic knowledge systems, like our economies, suffer from limited regional integration and high levels of external dependency.

Within the continent itself, South Africa, Nigeria, and Egypt dominate and many countries are negligible in the production of knowledge. The vast majority of the continent's universities cannot be

considered research universities and contribute very little to knowledge production which is one of the key functions of the university. Research productivity is essential for higher education to contribute to sustainable development and in the global competition for talented students, top faculty, scarce resources, and reputational capital. Not surprisingly, most African universities do not feature in international rankings, whatever one may think of the validity of such rankings.

Quality of Outputs: The growing massification of higher education across Africa, while desirable, has not been accompanied by rising quality of outputs because of the capacity deficits noted above. Besides research knowledge, a critical output of universities is of course its graduates. As the costs and competitiveness among higher education institutions increase, demands have grown for accountability from all the affected constituencies, for universities to prove their value in the quality of their graduates. An important measure is the employability of graduates. The media is full of stories of graduate underemployment and unemployment. The growing mismatch between the quality of graduates and needs of employers and Africa's 'rising' economies has become a source of apprehension.

Concerns and pressures over the quality of outputs from universities have led to the development of national quality assurance and regulatory regimes. Gone are the days when universities were largely left alone as arbiters of their own standards. In some countries quality assurance was initially targeted at private institutions on the faulty assumption that all was well with the public institutions. In addition to regional quality assurance agencies, such as the African Quality Assurance Network, the number of national quality assurance agencies across the continent grew from 9 in 1990 to 21 in 2012 to 32 in 2015.

Nevertheless, questions remain on the extent to which the proliferation of quality assurance systems has led to improvements in the quality of higher education. In many African countries, regulatory agencies adopt authoritarian and accusatory practices instead of interactive, collaborative and iterative processes. They tend to be too interventionist, prescriptive, and pursue outdated notions of quality education. For example, in some systems there is inordinate emphasis on the nature of examinations rather than on continuous assessments and acquisition of competency based and lifelong learning skills. Some even decree faculty promotion standards and qualifications of members of governance bodies.

Governance and Leadership: I noted in the Dakar Summit Framing Paper that "the challenges facing African higher education institutions require sophisticated management and effective governance systems... Clearly, there is need to recruit and train higher education administrators who are smart leaders, skilled managers, successful fund raisers, and savvy public figures."

The Dakar Summit Declaration and Plan of Action itself identified the "Promotion of institutional autonomy and academic freedom" as a core principle. Unfortunately, the infectious and insidious authoritarian culture of the postcolonial one-party state persists in many institutions and higher education systems in which regulatory agencies, governing boards, and management seek to rule by decree and directives. Yet, shared governance is central to the success of higher education institutions. It entails institutional leadership at all levels that puts a premium on what I call the 3Cs of effective academic leadership: (collaboration, communication, and creativity), in pursuit of the 3Es (excellence, engagement, and efficiency), and based on the 3Ts (transparency, trust, and trends in higher education).

Revitalizing African Higher Education: The challenges and opportunities facing African higher education institutions are evident from the analysis above. Clearly, there is need to expand enrollments without sacrificing academic quality; increase and improve funding and financial management; raise the volume and value of research productivity; strengthen the educational

quality and employability of university graduates; develop effective and collaborative regulatory cultures of quality assessment and improvement; and enhance the quality of institutional leadership and governance.

A grand compact on African higher education must be forged by all the key constituencies, principally, governments, the private sector, civil society, and the universities themselves. This requires commitment to what I call the 4As, 4Cs, 4Is, and 4Rs of higher education revitalisation. The 4As refer to availability (of institutions), access (to institutions), affordability (in institutions), and accountability (by institutions). The 4Cs include comprehensiveness (provision of education that develops the whole person), curiosity (cultivation of lifelong learning), community (fostering civic values), and capabilities (developing subject and technical competencies, liberal arts literacies, and soft skills).

The 4Is entail inclusion (valuing institutional diversity); innovation (cultivating creative and entrepreneurial mindsets); integration (building cohesive teaching, learning and research communities); impact (fostering inclusive cultures of institutional assessment). The 4Rs refer to relevance (of knowledges produced, disseminated, and consumed to economy, society, and the times); retention (ensuring student, faculty and staff development and success); research (unwavering commitment to knowledge production and evidence based decision making); and rigor (in all activities to ensure academic excellence, operational excellence and service excellence).

Governments have a special fiscal responsibility in the revitalisation of African higher education as an engine of growth, development, and transformation. Massive investments in the sector are required. The universities cannot generate these resources all by themselves. The continent's elites, many of who are products of Africa's universities during the golden years, have a special role to play. The [ranks of high net worth individuals across the continent](#) are skyrocketing; they increased by 19% between 2006 and 2016 reaching 145,000 with combined wealth of \$800 billion, and are expected to rise by 36% and reach 198,000 by 2026.

How many of them invest in the African higher education sector as do their counterparts in the Global North? The great private Ivy League and flagship public universities of the USA with their massive endowments were built by philanthropic and public support. Harvard's \$37.1 billion is more than half of Kenya's GDP and higher than the GDP of 39 African countries. Lest we forget, the oldest US universities were built in colonial and postcolonial times when it would have been easier for American elites to invest in sending their children to the more established and prestigious, at the time, British and other European universities. Many of our elites take enormous pride in sending their children to overseas universities, even mediocre ones, shunning local universities for their apparent low quality, notwithstanding the fact that many of them are products of these very institutions.

It is also critical to promote, in the words of the Dakar Summit's Declaration, "diversification, differentiation, and harmonization of higher education systems at the national, institutional and continental/regional levels and assure the quality of educational provision against locally, regionally, and internationally agreed benchmarks of excellence." The Dakar Summit urged African governments and regional economic communities "to develop deliberate policies that designate some universities as research universities that drive the higher education sector to meet national development objectives.... These research universities will produce the relevant knowledge and skilled labour capacity the continent's key institutions - governance, trade, defense, agriculture, health, finance and energy - need to succeed."

The good news is that higher education around the world, not just in Africa, is in a state

of crisis, transition, or disruption—choose your term—which opens opportunities for African educators to reinvent higher education systems that befit their needs, contexts, and the unforgiving and unpredictable demands of the 21st century.

The articulation and harmonization of higher education systems goes beyond national borders. It is imperative for Africa to promote international academic mobility for students, academic staff, academic credits, and qualifications within the continent. This entails strengthening and implementing existing regional conventions. Also in need of strengthening and operationalization are protocols for the mutual recognition of academic and professional qualifications. A critical element of this process is the need to develop an African credit transfer system.

I believe the six capacity challenges identified in this essay can be overcome. The good news is that higher education around the world, not just in Africa, is in a state of crisis, transition, or disruption—choose your term—which opens opportunities for African educators to reinvent higher education systems that befit their needs, contexts, and the unforgiving and unpredictable demands of the 21st century. Let us summon our creative energies and renew our commitments as part of the collective effort to finally realize Kwame Nkrumah's vision, expressed prematurely at the height of decolonization that the 20th century would be Africa's, and make this century one that is truly ours.

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