SOME ISSUES WITH HIGHER EDUCATION IN AFRICA

LAWALLEY COLE

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, COALITION ON MEDIA AND EDUCATION FOR DEVELOPMENT AFRICA
FORUM (CAFOR), AFRICAN UNION COMMISSION

L.COLE@CAFOR.ORG

Abstract

This policy paper highlights several macro issues with African higher education, including inadequate funding, governance challenges, and a lack of access to digital infrastructure compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic. The paper also notes the historical and continuing impact of colonialism on Africa's education systems and women's challenges in accessing higher education. The author emphasizes the importance of investing in human capital and improving the quality of primary education to strengthen Africa's human resource base and advance economic development. The paper calls for a paradigm shift in education policy and practice, underscoring pragmatism over ideology and focusing on building the capacity for sustained development through training in science, engineering, medicine, and agriculture. The author also highlights the need to address gender inequalities in access to higher education and diversify institutional models to meet the demands of the digital age. Ultimately, the paper calls for a concerted effort to improve funding, governance, and quality across African higher education institutions, leveraging partnerships and innovations to expand access and promote excellence.

Introduction

During the past decade, almost all countries have launched significant efforts to ensure that all children will have an opportunity to complete primary education of acceptable quality. Concurrently, accelerating economic growth and social change are creating an urgent prerequisite to expand access to further learning to strengthen the human resource base on the continent. Sustained growth and development in Africa require rapid strengthening of the human capital base. Immediate priorities for this effort involve improvements in the quality of primary education, increases in primary completion rates, and expansion of access to secondary education.

According to the World Bank, GDP growth in Sub-Saharan Africa has accelerated to over 6.0 percent on average since 2002 (World Bank, 2019). This evolution is excellent, but Africa will need a significant increase in investment in physical and human capital over an extended period if this flow is to evolve into a virtuous spiral that stimulates even higher – and sustained – growth rates on the continent. African countries must acquire the capabilities to spawn new industries that create more productive jobs, have multiple linkages, and diversify exports. These capabilities will derive from investment in physical assets, such as infrastructure and production facilities, as well as institutions and human capital.

Human capital is the stepping stone to a viable and growth-promoting industrial system. Physical investment and institutions are essential complements; the former cannot be efficiently utilized or maintained where technical and managerial skills are lacking. We can only engineer or implement the latter when more human capital is needed. When utilized effectively, human capital can transform African countries' economies to increase efficiency and maximize the returns from limited physical capital (Iten, 2016). In addition, African countries can only cope with profound threats from disease, an expanding youthful and urbanizing population, and climate change through knowledge and informed judgment.

African governments and their partners need to understand better the issues of higher education and its contributions towards social and economic development on the continent, especially giving special attention to Africa's youth. The current trend is that Africa's young generations will live and work in changing, increasingly open societies driven by technology and ones that could contribute to global networks of production and trade. Africa's education systems must provide a much more significant proportion of our youths with an education that effectively prepares them for work and further education and training. African societies' labor markets increasingly demand advanced knowledge and skills that emphasize the lifelong ability to learn and acquire new skills (African Development Bank Group, 2016; the World Bank, 2019; UNESCO, 2018). This element calls for a diversification of existing systems or a paradigm shift to meet the realities and demands of today's world. There must necessarily be changes in financing and curricula. However, even more importantly, there should be a change in the mental models of schooling and governance that dominate African education policy and practice. In practice, ideol-

ogy rather than pragmatism has determined policy (Waghid, 2013). The paper looks at several macro challenges across the African higher education landscape.

The challenges African higher education faces
Resistance to change continues to be deeply rooted in the education community. In many countries, an education policy detached from a longer-term vision for national development remains the concern of professionals in the ministries of education and, in some cases, other cooperating partners (Sayed & Lingard, 2017). It is captive to the pursuit of short-term problem resolution. Development and capacity building should determine higher education policy on the continent, emphasizing training in the sciences, engineering, medicine, and agriculture for viable and sustained development (Ibid).

At present, African higher education faces unprecedented challenges. The demand for access is unstoppable, especially in Africa's traditionally low post-secondary attendance levels, and higher education is recognized as a critical force for modernization and development. In the 21st century, there is a growing recognition that education and knowledge play a central role in society (Bidwell & Humphreys, 2020). This distinction is reflected in the increased importance placed on higher education to foster innovation, creativity, and economic growth (OECD, 2021). Geopolitical considerations and even the geoeconomic impact of the mobility of students, among others, are now also part of national and institutional policies (Császár et al., 2023). With the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic, which continues to accelerate the digital transformation of education, there is a greater need for individuals to possess advanced knowledge and skills to successfully navigate the changing landscape of work and learning (UNESCO, 2020).

The African continent has witnessed a remarkable growth in the number of tertiary institutions during the last fifty years following independence in individual states. According to UNESCO's Institute for Statistics, the number of tertiary institutions in Africa increased dramatically from 396 in 1970 to 1,820 in 2014. This gain is a significant growth of approximately 360% over 44 years (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2014), representing a significant expansion of the tertiary education system in the region over the past decades. Thirty years ago, universities in African countries were known for their high academic standards, equal to

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the best tertiary-level institutions in the developed world. However, the mid-1980s saw these institutions needing more support, adequate funding, weak governance, and a massive student body expansion, severely diminishing their teaching and learning capacities and deteriorating their physical facilities and infrastructure. This phenomenon was seen across all levels of education in Africa, and even the leading universities no longer engaged in much research. Moreover, research-based linkages with the business sector were meager in almost every country. This trend continues to date, and no country in Africa can convincingly claim to put its tertiary education on a sound financial and institutional footing for long-term development. Today, the World Bank's rankings show that no university from Sub-Saharan Africa falls within the top 200 universities in the world (World Bank, 2021).

Both Times Higher Education (THE) and QS World University Rankings provide global rankings of universities based on various criteria such as teaching, research, citations, industry income, and international outlook. Unfortunately, these rankings suggest that African universities are generally not highly ranked globally. According to THE World University Rankings 2021, nine universities in Africa made it to the top 1000 list, and the University of Cape Town is the highest-ranked African institution, coming in at 201-250. The QS World University Rankings 2021 is the same, as only 12 institutions in Africa made it to their top 500 list, and the University of Cape Town is still the highest-ranked African institution but is now ranked 220th globally. Although Africa still has a long way to go regarding catching up with the rest of the world in higher education, it is essential to note that some African institutions have progressed over the years. However, there are emerging signs of positive progress as some African universities are investing in research, international collaborations, and innovation. However, African universities generally rank lower than universities in other regions, with most African universities failing to make it into the top 500 of these rankings.

African universities generally rank lower on these global rankings than universities in other regions, indicating a lower level of research, academic quality, and educational resources in the continent. However, it is essential to note that these rankings have limitations and do not reflect all aspects of a university's strengths and weaknesses. Since independence in the 1960s, governments, and development partner institutions have emphasized primary and secondary education in-country development programs, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa. Tertiary education did not receive its due importance, and with neglect, even though many would have recognized that this was an added means to improve economic growth and mitigate poverty (*Iguh, 2015*). However, the past five decades have seen access to tertiary education expand unprecedentedly, with enrollment in higher education growing faster in sub-Saharan Africa than in any other region. Women have been the first to benefit in most parts of the world. UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS) figures indicate that while there were fewer than 200,000 tertiary students enrolled in the Africa region in 1970, this number soared to over 4.5 million in 2008 – a more than 20-fold increase. The gross enrolment ratio (GER) for tertiary education grew at an

average rate of 8.6% for each year between 1970 and 2008 – compared to a global average of 4.6% over the same period. This rate exceeded the population growth of the relevant age group across the region (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2010).

According to UNESCO data, the average gross enrolment ratio (GER) for tertiary education in Africa has increased from 3.1% in 1980 to 9.8% in 2018, with some variations across countries and regions. However, according to the UNESCO Institute for Statistics, the gross enrolment ratio for tertiary education in Africa has increased from 2.3% in 1980 to 9.4% in 2021.

This spectacle indicates a solid commitment to education and the importance placed on tertiary education in the region. It also suggests that there has been significant investment in educational infrastructure and policies to promote access to higher education. However, it is important to note that GER does not necessarily reflect the quality or relevance of tertiary education in the region, nor does it address issues of equity and access for disadvantaged groups. Therefore, while a high GER is a positive indicator, there may still be challenges and areas for improvement in the tertiary education system.

Attempting to generalize about such a vast and multifaceted continent as Africa can take time and effort. Africa is a vast landmass home to diverse cultural practices and socioeconomic and political scenarios. Arguably, one of the most pressing problems facing Africa today is the state of higher education on the continent. African universities are grappling with a myriad of challenges stemming from social, economic, and political problems that are rife across the continent. These difficulties manifest in numerous ways: inadequate funding for research and development, low enrolment rates, limited infrastructure and resources, and difficulty retaining talented lecturers and scholars.

Moreover, globalization and the need for African higher education to remain competitive on the global stage add another layer of complexity to this challenge. Despite these challenges, there is reason for hope. African governments and other stakeholders are placing a considerable emphasis on education reform for sustainable economic growth. More resources are being allocated to improve infrastructure and resources, and efforts are being made to restructure university governance and seek successful partnerships with institutions in the West and elsewhere. At the same time, innovative teaching methods such as blended and interactive online learning are being deployed to enhance student engagement and success. Through such efforts, Africa can one day overcome its complex challenges in higher education and lead the way in global innovation and sustainable economic development.

Questions of enrollment and financing
The African continent is home to fifty-five countries, all of which have over 1,300 academic institutions. These institutions meet the criteria for defining a university, but compared to international standards, Africa needs to catch up in development in higher education. It has the lowest enrollment rates among all world regions. While certain countries in Africa have a comprehensive academic system with various

educational institutions, many still have only a few institutions. Additionally, they are yet to establish differentiated post-secondary procedures that are required to meet the demands of the digital age and the fourth industrial revolution. The state of higher education in Africa varies widely from country to country, depending on several factors such as economic development, social stability, and political governance. For instance, countries like South Africa and Egypt have a more developed higher education system than many African countries. The importance of higher education in Africa cannot be overstated. It is a crucial aspect of sustainable economic development and is essential for the continent to participate in the global economy successfully. High-quality educational institutions can provide the skilled workforce necessary for innovation and technological advancement, attracting foreign investments and boosting productivity.

Moreover, access to higher education is crucial in reducing poverty and inequality in Africa. According to a study by the World Bank, every additional year of higher education can increase a person's income by up to 20 percent (World Bank, 2019). Higher education also increases the accessibility of healthcare services, reduces crime rates, and promotes gender equality. In conclusion, although Africa has over 1,300 universities, it still needs to catch up in development in higher education. African countries must invest in educational systems to boost economic growth and reduce poverty and inequality.

According to UNESCO, the gross enrollment ratio for higher education in Sub-Saharan Africa was only 9% in 2018, compared to the global average of 38%. This figure shows that Africa has the lowest enrollment rates among all world regions. Indeed, the rate varies significantly within the region. In Mauritius, for example, gross tertiary enrollment is 40%. In Cape Verde, it is 23.6%. In Ghana and Togo, it is 15%. In Lesotho, it is 10%; in Niger, the ratio is 4.4%. Generally, 21% of government education expenditure in the region goes to tertiary education, while 27% is allocated to secondary education, with 43% to primary education (World Bank, 2018).

The World Bank estimates that over half of Africa's 1.2 billion people are under 25, creating a massive demand for quality higher education. However, only about 10% of African students are enrolled in higher education, the lowest rate in the world. The World Bank also highlights the importance of higher education in reducing poverty and increasing economic growth. According to their research, higher education can increase a person's income by up to 20% for every additional year of education. Similarly, UNESCO reports that higher education can contribute to economic growth by providing a skilled workforce and promoting innovation and technological advancement. Therefore, it is clear that despite having a significant number of universities, the African continent needs to improve its higher education system to meet international standards and cater to the needs of the digital age. This view will require investment in education infrastructure, curriculum development, quality assurance, and student support services. Only then can Africa unleash its full potential and fully participate in the global economy. Moreover, while a few African countries can claim comprehensive academic systems, many have just a

few educational institutions and still need to establish the differentiated post-secondary procedures required for the digital age in this fourth industrial revolution (Gardner & Jolley, 2019).

Across Africa, about 9 million students participate in the higher education sector, 3% of all students enrolled in the region, and 4% of the total tertiary education students enrolled globally. There are varying functions and diversity in quality, orientation, financial support, and other factors evident in Africa. Understanding the broader themes that shaped the realities of tertiary education in Africa at the beginning of this twenty-first century is vital. The harsh reality lies in inadequate financial resources and an unprecedented demand for access. We also have to cope with the legacy of colonialism and longstanding economic and social crises in many countries. Besides, we also had the HIV/AIDS challenges in parts of the continent, and now the COVID-19 and post-pandemic issues to tackle.

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Historically, African higher education is quite ancient, with the first universities in Morocco, Egypt, and Timbuktu. The University of Al Quaraouiyine, located in Fez, Morocco, is the oldest in the world, according to UNESCO and the Guinness World Records (UNESCO, 2021). It was founded in 859 CE and later recognized as a university in the 13th century. Egypt's Al-Azhar is also one of the oldest universities in the world, founded as and still is the principal seat of Islamic learning (Ikelegbe, 2013). Al-Azhar is currently the only major academic institution in the world organized according to its original Islamic model. All other African universities have adopted the Western model of educational organization. While Africa can claim an ancient academic tradition, the fact is that traditional centers of higher learning in Africa have all but disappeared or been destroyed by colonialism. Today, academic institutions shaped by colonialism and organized according to the different European models dominate the continent.

Many European colonizers, including Belgium, Britain, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Italy, Portugal, and Spain – have shaped Africa's development paths. These colonial legacies affect contemporary African higher education, too. The most important colonial powers in Africa, Britain, and France have left the most significant lasting impact, not only in the organization of academia and the continuing links to the metropole but in the language of instruction and communication. Colonial higher education policy had some common elements. Among these are limited access, language, limited freedom, and limited curriculum *(Ibe, 2018)*.

African higher education systems continue to face financial challenges, which have only been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. In a report released in May 2021, UNESCO revealed that the pandemic had caused significant disruptions to

higher education systems in Africa, resulting in a decline in funding and enrollment (UNESCO, 2021). This decline in funding has resulted in many universities needing help to fulfill their mandate fully, with many institutions unable to afford essential resources such as laboratory equipment, textbooks, and technology required for teaching. Another significant factor contributing to the funding crisis in African universities is the prioritization of funding by governments. Many African countries prioritize other areas, such as defense spending or infrastructure development, at the expense of education (UNESCO, 2018). This prioritization often results in inadequate funding for higher education, leading to a lack of essential resources and low morale among academics and staff.

Additionally, the role of international lending institutions such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) has been heavily criticized for placing too much emphasis on austerity measures. Instead of investing in higher education, these institutions recommend cutting spending on education to reduce government deficits (Koseoglu et al., 2016). This approach has further undermined the ability of African universities to cater to the needs of their students and faculty adequately. In conclusion, African higher education systems continue to face significant financial challenges, undermining their ability to provide quality education to a growing number of students. There is a need for African governments and international lending institutions to prioritize education funding and invest in essential resources required for teaching and learning.

Public and private higher education
Most African higher education institutions are publicly owned, and governmental involvement in university affairs is common. This phenomenon has resulted in a governance structure that often reflects this legacy. The head of state is usually the ultimate authority in appointing individuals down the administrative line, with the chancellor or president as the head of the university system in many English-speaking countries. The board of directors mainly comprises government-appointed members, with the minister of education appointing vice-chancellors. The chain of administrative power starts with the vice-chancellor, moves to deans or directors, and then department heads (Oniang'o & Sakwa, 2020).

The academic profession has less power in Africa than in Western industrialized nations, and professorial authority often needs to be improved. However, innovations and policies that reduce the state's role in higher education have led to a rise in African higher education institutions. Despite this, many universities still need better and less bureaucratic management systems, with lesser poorly qualified personnel and poorly remunerated staff as the norm. There have also been severe corruption charges and embezzlement of funds in some African universities. The mismanagement of funds and misplaced priorities have contributed to financial difficulties and deplorable student living and studying conditions (Mugenda, 2019).

The mismanagement issue tends to be generally similar across nations and systems, but the governance structure and leadership appointment methods often

contribute to the magnitude and scope of the issues. Nonetheless, there have been efforts to improve African university governance and management systems, with lessons learned from processes in other parts of the world (Mugenda, 2019). These innovations and harmonization of policies across the continent aim to address the inefficiencies and weaknesses of the current systems.

Private institutions' provision of higher education is growing in many African countries. However, African countries have been slower to expand the private sector in higher education than other regions. Several factors have contributed to the trend towards private higher education, including increasing demand for access from students, the declining capacity of public universities, and external pressure to cut public services. In addition, private schools are smaller and specialize in specific fields such as business administration, leading to more private institutions than public ones in some countries. In the past thirty years, Africa has continued to see a rapid increase in the number of private universities. As of 2019, there were over 1,500 private universities in Africa, a significant jump from just 300 in 1990 (Ernst & Young Africa, 2019). This growth has been attributed to various factors, including rising demand for tertiary education, increasing investment from both domestic and foreign sources, and a greater acceptance of private education as a viable alternative to public institutions.

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Meanwhile, the number of public universities in Africa has also grown steadily, with over 600 operating across the continent (Ibid Africa, 2019). However, issues such as poor infrastructure, limited funding, and political instability remain significant challenges for African private and public universities. The trend towards the growth of private universities in Africa will likely continue in the coming years, with factors such as demand for higher education, increasing population and urbanization, and government policies and funding affecting the growth of both private and public universities.

Governments in most African countries do not provide financial support to private institutions, as they find it extremely difficult to secure adequate funding for tertiary education. Furthermore, public spending on higher education is disproportionately high in many sub-Saharan African countries, as public resources are highly concentrated among relatively few students. Many students from sub-Saharan Africa pursue tertiary education abroad, as they represent 7.5% of the total number of mobile students worldwide. However, private institutions in some countries receive direct financial support from governments (Ibeh et al., 2016). The specific African countries that provide direct financial support to private institutions for higher education may vary, but some examples are 1. Ghana: The government provides financial support to private universities through the Ghana Education Trust Fund. 2. Kenya: The government provides funds to private universities through the Higher Education Loans Board. 3. South Africa: The government provides private universities subsidies based on criteria such as student enrolment numbers and academic performance. 4. Uganda: The government funds private universities through the Private Universities' Development and Support Project. 5. Rwanda: The government financially supports private universities through the Higher Education Council. 6. Tanzania: The government provides a percentage of funding to private universities through the Tanzania Commission for Universities.

However, it is generally essential to note that government policies on funding for private institutions vary across African countries. Some countries may provide financial support to private institutions for various reasons, such as improving education quality, increasing access to education, or boosting the economy. Other countries may not provide financial support to private institutions due to limited financial resources or a preference for public institutions.

Private institutions provide high-demand and relatively low-cost, skill-based courses, which serve as an immediate safety net in addressing the need for higher education in the continent, where enrollment rates in higher education institutions are meager. Nonetheless, private institutions are prone to financial difficulties, too. The pandemic has forced some private universities to lay off employees or suspend staff members, signaling that some private universities may eventually close due to a revenue shortage. This phenomenon can affect the quality of higher education in the long term, thus impacting economic development.

With a huge disparity in access to digital infrastructure, most students in the region need help to continue their learning. While the COVID-19 crisis presented an opportunity for African universities to explore the potential of introducing technology-based platforms for learning, most of them still need to be equipped with such platforms within their learning management systems. The lockdown situation further prevented them from investigating the best options for e-learning to implement for their students.

In the short or medium term, it is crucial to assess the pre-existing capacity of the universities to deliver continued teaching and learning via remote and online learning platforms and the proportion of students and faculty that can access these while

off-campus. In addition, it would be essential to understand the readiness of the faculty members to deliver online content, and this knowledge will ensure excellent connectivity and flexibility for continued learning.

In Africa, there is a widespread belief that public institutions offer superior academics to private institutions, despite some private institutions having top-notch academic staff and modern equipment and facilities. This perception may be due to the rigorous selection process and tough competition for limited spaces in public universities. As student enrollment increases across the continent, entrance requirements have become increasingly stringent, ensuring that those admitted are the best students in the country. On the other hand, private institutions mainly enroll students who could not gain admission to public institutions for various reasons, perpetuating their reputation as inferior. Despite this, private higher education is a rising trend in Africa, driven by internal and external factors. However, several challenges hinder the growth of private institutions, such as unclear legal status, poor quality control, and high service costs. Traditional public tertiary institutions need help maintaining educational quality and financial sustainability while expanding their enrolments. Private universities, technical institutes, non-residential community colleges, and distance learning programs could offer viable alternatives for continued enrolment growth until public institutions have improved their quality, research capabilities, and graduate programs.

The quality of education at many private post-secondary institutions has also been an issue of some concern. Many multinational businesses across the world provide educational services today that are driven by profit motives. Multinational companies and a few foreign-based universities have established satellite campuses in countries with a big market for higher education. These transplanted institutions are often criticized for the lack of accountability or social responsibility and potentially threatening and eroding the cultural fabric of a nation.

The female question in higher education
Contrary to global trends, women still need access to tertiary education in sub-Saharan Africa. Recent figures from the UIS state that the tertiary GER in sub-Saharan Africa for women is 4.8%, compared to 7.3% for men. Nevertheless, the region made significant progress toward gender parity in the 1990s (UIS, 2019)**.** Women in sub-Saharan Africa continue to face significant barriers to tertiary education in countries with the lowest levels of national wealth. UIS figures also show that those countries with a GDP per capita of less than US$1,000 have relatively low gender parity indexes (GPIs), ranging from 0.31 to 0.51. In light of the overall level of participation in tertiary education, gender equality is essential. Countries must address gender inequalities as they seek to broaden access to higher education for all students, regardless of sex (UIS, 2020)**.**

Gender imbalance will continue in the continent's educational institutions. Cultural, sociological, economic, psychological, historical, and political factors foster these inequalities. While some efforts are now underway to rectify gender

imbalances, much remains to be done across all educational sectors. The gender imbalance in higher education is acute in all African countries and most disciplines. Various efforts and initiatives have been made to increase the participation of female students in post-secondary institutions. The following initiatives can be cited here:1. The African Development Bank has launched a program called "Affirmative Finance Action for Women in Africa," which offers financial assistance to female students pursuing tertiary education. 2. The African Women in Leadership Organization (AWLO) is a non-profit organization that empowers and promotes women leaders across various sectors, including education. 3. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has launched several initiatives to address the gender imbalance in education, including the "Gender Equality in Education: Training Toolkit," which offers educational materials to educators to promote gender-sensitive teaching practices. 4. The African Union Commission has also launched several initiatives to promote gender equality in higher education, including establishing a center of excellence in gender and leadership in Nairobi, Kenya. 5. The Mastercard Foundation Scholars Program is a scholarship program that provides financial assistance to young African women to pursue higher education in partnership with various universities across the continent. 6. The African Women's Development Fund (AWDF) is a feminist grant-making organization that supports organizations working towards gender equality and women's empowerment, including initiatives focused on promoting access to education for young women. 7. The United Nations Development Program (UNDP) has launched a program called "Empower Women," which offers training, mentorship, and financial support to women entrepreneurs and young women to achieve their educational and professional goals. 8. The African Network for Women in Infrastructure (ANWIn) is a platform that supports women's participation in the infrastructure sector, including programs aimed at encouraging young girls to pursue careers in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM).

The research and publishing landscape
Africa's research and publishing landscape remains challenging, with various factors hindering the development of research capacity on the continent. Inadequate research infrastructure, a shortage of highly qualified experts, poor library facilities, and declining salaries for academic staff are among the critical challenges faced by African researchers today. Additionally, the expansion of undergraduate education has not been accompanied by sufficient funding opportunities, while oversight of research applicability needs to be stronger. Recent reports indicate that African countries allocate only a tiny fraction of their budgets to research and development (R&D). This results in a significant gap between the gross enrolment ratio (GER) for secondary and tertiary education in sub-Saharan Africa. According to the World Bank, the region's GER for upper secondary education is five times higher than that of tertiary education (World Bank, 2019). This phenomenon implies that despite the growing demand for higher education in Africa, the tertiary system needs more

resources to absorb the increasing number of students eligible for higher education. There is a need for policies targeted at expanding the tertiary education system and increasing funding for R&D to close this gap and boost research capacity in Africa. Efforts to build a more robust research infrastructure, improve library facilities, and retain highly qualified experts within academic institutions are also important. For instance, some initiatives have been developed to support African research capacity building, such as the African Union's Science, Technology, and Innovation Strategy for Africa (STISA, 2024) and the African Academy of Sciences Grand Challenges Africa.

A more knowledge-intensive approach to development is emerging as an attractive option for many African countries. Despite social and political demands for expanding public tertiary enrolments, there is a need to balance the need to increase the relevance of education and research by encouraging the production of applied research capabilities that promote competitive industries. Rapid increases in enrolment in the recent

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past have undermined the contribution of tertiary education to growth. Therefore, African countries must consider innovative ways to build tertiary education systems equal to global economic challenges. Neglecting tertiary education could jeopardize Africa's longer-term growth prospects and progress toward the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Academic freedom

Most African governments are intolerant of dissent, criticism, nonconformity, and freely expressing controversial, new, or unconventional ideas. There have been severe violations of freedom of speech and expression by security forces, opposition groups, and militant groups in some African countries that have silenced scholars and citizens. In many African countries, unwarranted government interference and abuses of academic freedom have eroded the autonomy and quality of higher learning institutions.

In such an environment, the academic community is often careful not to overtly offend those in power, contributing to perpetuating a culture of self-censorship. In some cases, those who courageously speak frankly and express their views often

face dictators capable of using terror, kidnapping, imprisonment, expulsion, torture, and even death to silence dissident voices.

The brain drain
The brain drain remains one of the most severe challenges facing many African countries. The migration of high-level scholars and scientists from its universities takes the form of internal mobility and regional and overseas migration. According to the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa and the International Organization for Migration, an estimated 27,000 skilled Africans left the continent for industrialized countries between 1960 and 1975. During the period 1975 to 1984, the figure rose to 40,000. Since 1990, at least 20,000 qualified people, including skilled professionals, scientists, academics, and researchers, have left Africa annually. This migration of high-level expertise considerably influences the continent's capacity-building initiatives (James, 2019).

The stock of human capital with secondary- and tertiary-level skills in Africa is comparably small, and the quality is highly variable. Mortality from infectious diseases and the emigration of many of the most talented individuals hinder skill accumulation in some countries. Increasing investment in human capital is crucial for African countries to achieve sustainable economic performance, generate adequate employment for expanding populations, and narrow the economic gap between Africa and other regions. Internationally mobile students from sub-Saharan Africa have diverse destinations, with about two-thirds, or 65.1%, of mobile students from the region studying in North America and Western Europe. (Mars & Ward, 2018)

The language issue
More than half a dozen languages are currently used in African higher education. These include Afrikaans, Arabic, English, French, Italian, Portuguese, and Spanish. Only Arabic and Afrikaans are languages indigenous to Africa. Overall, Arabic, English, French, and Portuguese remain the major international languages of instruction at African higher learning institutions. At a time when globalization has been such a powerful force, the dominant position of European languages has become even more accentuated and evident. English has become particularly powerful, even dominating other major European languages. Among other things, the Internet and globalization fuel the predominance of English.

Conclusion
In conclusion, the Continental Education Strategy for Africa (CESA) 2016–2025 is a crucial initiative by the African Union to revitalize higher education and promote development-oriented research, community outreach, and teaching. The strategy recognizes the importance of gender considerations, academic freedom, institutional autonomy, and public accountability in creating strong and vibrant institutions to meet the tertiary education needs of African countries. However, to achieve these goals, stakeholders must create a shared vision and a constituency for transforming

and investing in higher education, harness disparate efforts and initiatives, and spur innovation in African higher education. African countries must also address inadequate funding, weak governance, and declining academic standards to put their tertiary education on a sound financial and institutional footing for long-term development.

Quality is critical for revitalizing higher learning in Africa, not just in terms of academic standards but also in providing innovative forms of collaboration and promoting the mobility of graduates and academics across the continent. While some institutions like the University of Cape Town: https://www.uct.ac.za/ and the University of Alexandria: http://www.alexu.edu.eg/ both in South Africa have shown remarkable successes, the overall trend of inadequate funding, weak governance, and declining academic standards continues, resulting in a severe diminution of teaching and learning capacities and deterioration of physical facilities and infrastructure. Consequently, stakeholders must prioritize revamping the tertiary education sector to promote national cohesion, economic development, and better living standards for Africans to achieve the CESA's goals. ✳

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