



# Strengthening and Transforming Higher Education in Africa

## Introduction

Fifty years after most African countries attained independence, the issue of transformation of higher education is still a matter of serious concern requiring prioritization. Higher education in Africa still faces various challenges, including lack of resources, skills flight and consequent staff shortages, lack of institutional independence from the typically centralized state, and curricula that are ill-suited and unresponsive to local needs and expectations. The deterioration in quality of research and teaching has a number of social and economic consequences impacting negatively on development in Africa. These and other challenges were discussed at a recent dialogue convened by TrustAfrica, a pan-African foundation that works to secure the conditions for democratic governance and inclusive development. The dialogue, held at the University of Botswana, was the first in a series of policy conversations among key stakeholders on higher education transformation, focusing primarily on four countries: Ghana, Nigeria, Tanzania and Uganda.

Up until today, there has not been an effective response to the challenges. Instead, there has been a piecemeal policy approach to higher education that involves increasing the quantity of higher education institutions and students, a fragmented approach to curriculum development and uncoordinated efforts to address the problems across the continent.

This policy brief lays out challenges affecting tertiary education in Africa and recommends further policy studies, consultations and dialogues with a view to creating a sustainable policy framework on transforming higher education in Africa. The critical areas include:

- (i) The governance of universities across the continent and how the university system can be democratized in line with a stakeholder approach, thus moving it away from being state-centric;
- (ii) The multiple roles of universities in Africa, including the nexus between research and policy; as well as enhancing African ownership of higher education;
- (iii) Improving cross-country and cross-university collaboration and cooperation through exchange of resources, students and scholars among universities;
- (iv) Exploring and finding new and alternative ways of resourcing and financing universities; and
- (v) How to engage and harness the African Diaspora in strengthening and transforming higher education in Africa.

## Why the Focus on Higher Education?

In order to develop appropriate policies, this policy brief recommends commissioning five analytical studies on these critical areas.

Higher education plays a critical role in development, particularly in the global context in which knowledge-based innovations and products fetch high value on the market. Beyond economic benefits, higher education also offers scope for cultural and community development. Higher education institutions play various roles in local communities and at the national and international levels. Their roles include:

- Creation of knowledge, largely through research and technology transfer;
- Transfer of knowledge through teaching, professional training and continuing adult education; and
- Professional, cultural and community development.

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New products and services are produced through research and innovation, while in local communities higher education enhances cultural development. In Africa studies have shown that a wealth of traditional knowledge, long buried by the tide of colonialism, remains available for enhanced research efforts. The following quote is a pertinent illustration of the problem and potential:

*Although endowed with traditional knowledge and biodiversity that is useful for scientific research, for example, African universities have not maximised on it and instead universities from the developed countries have exploited the resources. The end products are packaged as the intellectual property of those universities and major pharmaceutical companies who then sell them to African communities at exorbitant prices. Properly harnessed and resourced, this knowledge and biodiversity can be extremely beneficial to Africa hence the need to enforce African ownership of the higher education agenda and promote research in conjunction with local communities (Magaisa 2006).*

There are also immediate benefits to local communities. Research in Europe has shown that towns, cities and regions with higher education institutions gain economic advantages from the concentration of students and staff who collectively sustain the local consumer industry, including the housing sector. They are potential employees for local businesses, volunteer in local charities and generally contribute to the community atmosphere and cultural life of a region. These are attendant benefits to the core of what higher education institutions are designed to perform as centers of intellectual development and excellence.

As key centers of training, research and innovation, higher education institutions are critical in the development framework, and African governments at both the pan-African and regional levels need to reconsider how best to gain maximum benefits from this sector.

## The Real Problem

The core problem is that higher education in Africa lags behind international standards in regards to quality of teaching and research output and its overall role in development. Consequently, as a resource for development, it is not appropriately designed for transformative changes.

Higher education in Africa has failed to sufficiently transform to meet the needs and expectations of the stakeholders — who include students, employers, the wider community, the private sector, civil society, local authorities and the state. Universities are failing to fulfill the multiple roles of knowledge generation, transfer and overall development.

In terms of policy, the problem is that the process of reforming higher education policy has been inconsistent, vacillating and characterized by stops and starts depending on shifts in the political and economic changes in individual countries. Given the many commonalities between higher education systems in the different African countries, it is disconcerting that there has not been a coherent, pan-African policy approach to challenges affecting higher education in Africa.

Against the background of globalization of the knowledge economy and the high-value products of the knowledge economy, Africa risks lagging behind further in the global economy unless there is significant transformation in higher education.

The key questions, therefore, center on ways to promote the strengthening and transformation of higher education — issues that are central to this policy brief. African higher education institutions face a variety of challenges, which include:

### ■ Excessive State Control

Across the majority of countries, the state still wields tight control over the higher education sector, including policy and institutions. The state plays the dominant role in defining the governance and resourcing of institutions as well as driving the policy agenda. Its actions are sometimes driven by external actors, such as multi-lateral financing institutions and international donors, and local demands tend to get lower priority for lack of economic power. The dominant role of the state has, among other things:

- Severely eroded academic freedom, leading to skills flight;
- Deterred greater investment in higher education by the private sector;
- Severely limited participation by other stakeholders, who include civil society and the private sector; and
- Meant the state is the major driver and influence in curriculum development, limiting its scope and failing to meet the needs and expectations of local communities, including the private sector

## ■ **Qualitative Decline**

Well-intentioned efforts to improve access to higher education have led to poor quality of service delivery in higher education institutions. Post-colonial governments tried to enhance access to higher education across race, gender, ethnicity and other indices by increasing the number of higher education institutions and student intake. However, this quantitative increase came at a high cost in terms of quality, mainly because:

- The increase in higher education institutions and students was not supported by a corresponding increase in research, teaching and administrative resources for the higher education sector;
- Academic staff are overworked, and their wages are not commensurate with their labor investment.
- Experienced and highly skilled staff left for greener pastures, eroding the quality of research and academic delivery.

## ■ **Lack of Resources**

Higher education has not received adequate support from the state, and there has not been significant investment by the private sector either — mainly because of the state's excessive control, which is a disincentive to investment.

In addition, in line with the dominant neo-liberal economic approaches, economic liberalization policies favored by sponsoring international financial institutions (notably the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank) which were introduced in most African countries in the post-Cold War period involved significant reductions in state spending on social services, including higher education. This led to under-funding of universities.

Additionally, due to the quantitative increases of students, the rate and scale of resource utilization without replenishment or investment was not sustainable. This led to erosion of research, teaching and administrative facilities. The result is that:

- Research output and quality of research in African universities has declined significantly due to lack of research time, funding and resources.

## ■ **Restrictive Governance Structures**

The reduction in state spending on higher education was not accompanied by decentralization of state control over universities and policy-making. Thus university governance structures have remained heavily controlled and influenced by government with little involvement of, or encouragement for, the involvement of other stakeholders such as the private sector and civil society. Attempts to change higher education after independence focused mainly on quantitative aspects but paid scant regard to qualitative aspects. The result was:

- Heavily centralized governance structures that have failed to adapt to changing times;
- Poor management of universities, resulting in corruption and serious inefficiencies; and
- Diminished investment in higher education and deteriorating quality of services.

## ■ **Stagnation and Narrowing of Curricula**

- African higher education has struggled to adapt to local needs and expectations. It still reflects an intrinsically colonial character whereby students were trained to serve the needs of the imperialist countries and settler communities who controlled the means of production. The system was designed to create graduates for the labor market rather than for entrepreneurship. The current neo-liberal approaches to policy-making have resulted in a continuation of this trend to the exclusion of other core areas of knowledge generation, such as the arts and humanities, which are not always seen as relevant to commercial needs of the market.
- Where the private sector has taken a greater role in higher education, there has been a narrowing of academic orientation towards business, science and technology, which meets the needs of the private sector market but negatively impacts on other key areas of knowledge generation and transfer such as social sciences, humanities and the arts. These fields have been devalued and under-resourced, despite the fact that they are core areas for the production of African knowledge and research.
- The continued state-centered approach to governance had led to the exclusion of other stakeholders in curriculum development, which means it has remained limited and unresponsive to the broader interests of the local context.

## ■ **Gender Inequalities and Marginalisation of Minorities**

Historically, participation in higher education in Africa was limited by barriers to entry against women and minorities. Although there have been efforts since independence to improve access across gender and ethnic minorities, political, economic and social factors continue to present significant hurdles for broader participation. Geographically, most higher education institutions are located in central cities and towns, limiting access to minorities who are often in remote and marginalized areas. Traditional norms and values that hinder the participation of women in education generally are more evident at higher levels of the education system and within certain faculties where the ratio of men to women remains high. It is therefore imperative to create policy strategies to broaden access and participation by women and minorities as part of the transformative agenda in higher education.

## What are the main issues for reform in higher education in Africa?

In light of the major problems affecting higher education in Africa, the following issues emerge as critical ones for transformative reform:

### ■ **State-Centred and Stakeholder Approaches**

- The dominant model across African countries gives the state the central role in higher education. This includes governance structures, defining the curricula, providing funding and setting the policy agenda. Recent studies by TrustAfrica have shown that in some African countries there have been advances in private sector involvement in setting up higher education institutions and driving research and teaching policies. However, this has also restricted focus to specific areas that are market-oriented, to the exclusion of non-market related areas of knowledge creation such as the arts and humanities. Where external donors are involved, the notion of consultancies has been more prevalent, as opposed to robust independent research. There is a need, therefore, to engage the higher education system in African countries to open up spaces for other stakeholders, including civil society, students and the community at large. Transformative actions require a shift from current trends to ensure an environment where the State and other actors take ownership of tertiary education policy.

### ■ **Decentralisation of Governance**

- The manner in which higher education institutions are governed has weakened the sector's development. Decision-making processes in higher education institutions are highly centralized and dominated by the state. This top-down approach to governance has limited participation of the various key stakeholders in universities — resulting at times in conflict, which derails the functioning of institutions through demonstrations and industrial action. The closure of institutions, for example, is a direct reflection of the non-participation of all stakeholders in decision-making processes, which fuels tensions. Clearly the governance structures of universities in Africa should be decentralized.
- This can be done by designing and building structures to ensure plurality of power in the university — enabling each stakeholder to act as a counterweight against the others so that there is greater accountability, better checks and balances, and the development of a collective agenda.

### ■ **Funding**

- The lack of funding for teaching, research and administration has been the biggest Achilles heel of higher education in Africa. Universities have traditionally relied on the state for funding. However, the onset of dominant neo-liberal policies severely reduced funding for universities and led to declines in teaching and research. Most affected has been research, without which quality has declined drastically in the last few decades.

- This has also caused flight of skills as experienced intellectuals found employment outside the continent or in the private sector. The entry of private institutions has also resulted in more teaching-oriented programs and less focus on long-term research — especially in the areas of social sciences, arts and humanities, leading to a decline in knowledge generation and transfer.
- Insufficient funding has also increased tensions between universities workers and administrators, as they compete for scarce resources.
- With the introduction of market policies, entry into private institutions is now being determined by students' ability to meet fee requirements. This has not only restricted access among students from low-income households, but also brought on a cultural change in the delivery of education. As one academic aptly put it, *"Universities are increasingly being transformed from sites of generating knowledge to kiosks for selling education wares"* (Dr. Oanda Ogachi, 2011).
- The lack of funding—and where available, the restricted character of funding—has diminished the role of universities as centers of research, learning and excellence.

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## ■ **Cross-Border Collaboration and Cooperation**

- African universities tend to look outward to European and American universities for research cooperation and collaboration. This is partly a legacy of the colonial education culture, in which formal links with universities were central to the development of colonial universities in Africa. However, since independence there has been insignificant co-operation and collaboration, including exchange of students and scholars, between African universities. Creating pan-African and regional approaches to research and teaching so that there is more collaboration between African universities is therefore fundamental. This can be achieved by:
  - creating more regional programs to enable the exchange of scholars and students, sharing academic materials and designing academic programs shared between universities;
  - strengthening distance education programs to expand access to larger numbers of people across geographical regions and retain quality;
  - resuscitating 'internationalization' within Africa in such a way that African universities attract scholars and students from other continents, in particular those in developing and emerging nations where scope for shared knowledge is greater and more relevant.

## ■ **'Africanisation' of Higher Education**

- The transformation of higher education is not simply a matter of structure, but also entails ensuring that education reflects African ownership and participation. During colonialism traditional African knowledge was marginalized, but this continued after independence with greater emphasis and value being placed on knowledge and ideas emerging from outside, especially from Western universities. The result is that knowledge taught and generated in African universities does not reflect local needs and expectations.
- Africanization does not necessarily mean excluding all other forms of knowledge. Rather, it calls for processes by which Africans have a greater role in designing curricula, generating knowledge and ensuring that the outputs of intellectual

endeavor are best tailored to meet the needs and expectations of the local context while remaining competitive internationally. It is about developing institutions primarily of and for the local African context.

## ■ **Gender Equality and Equity & Participation of Minorities**

- As stated above, higher education in Africa has historically tended to restrict access for ethnic minorities and women. The issue of access is therefore fundamental to enabling the dissemination of knowledge to—as well as the generation of knowledge from—all sectors of society. Gender and minority norms and values in society. It is also important to ensure that stakeholders from these communities have a voice.

## ■ **Research-Development Nexus**

- There was a fairly strong connection between research and policy in the early years of independence, as governments embarked on training and developing a competent civil service. But today the gap has widened, especially with reductions in state funding for research.
- Neo-liberal economic policies brought in from abroad and the use of technical expertise from outside the continent has marginalized African scholars and research. Many African academics have been reduced to carrying out consultancies, often driven by external donors. On the other hand, African policymakers rely more on external experts to the exclusion of local academics and intellectuals. This devaluation of African academics and research has led to stagnation in research outputs.
- The transformative agenda in higher education therefore needs to attend to the role of the African academic and researcher, with an orientation towards cultivating intellectuals and ensuring there is a nexus between research produced in universities and policymaking.

## Proposals for Transformation

In view of these challenges, policy limitations and the issues identified above—and cognizant of the notion that transformation is a process—the following proposals require attention:

### 1. Democratisation of Governance

- 1.1 Centralized systems of governance need to be transformed through democratization of power within and outside universities. This will involve identifying key stakeholders inside and outside the university. Instead of the current state-centered approach—or the alternative, where the private sector is dominant in some institutions—Africa needs a more inclusive framework wherein civil society, the local community, students, education interest groups all have roles to play.
- 1.2 This would enable the fulfillment of two key principles of good governance, namely accountability and transparency. Not only would it ensure greater participation and ownership of higher education policy, but it would also arguably enhance efficiency and reduce areas of or even potential for conflict.

### 2. Resource Mobilisation and Financing

- 2.1 Insufficient funding is a major handicap, so policy initiatives must focus on innovative means of sourcing financing in order for universities to support research, teaching and administration. Some of the various options worthy of exploration include:
  - 2.1.1 Developing private-public partnerships for private sector investment in research and teaching.
  - 2.1.2 Creating partnerships between universities in and across African countries and between universities and other stakeholders, such as the private sector, the community, civil society, the donor community, foreign universities and researchers.
  - 2.1.3 Harnessing and pooling resources to fund dedicated research funding bodies whose jurisdiction cuts across country boundaries and from which support is based on excellence and priority focus on issues critical to African development.
  - 2.1.4 Dialogue on development of African philanthropy and community initiatives to reduce dependency on the foreign donor community.
  - 2.1.5 Breaking down walls between universities and countries to combine and share resources within Africa, including exchange of academic materials, scholars and students – creating pan-African or regional centers of research and excellence.
  - 2.1.6 Harnessing resources in the African Diaspora community—including scholars and the private sector—for research sharing, materials exchange and utilization of technology for teaching and sharing knowledge.

### 3. Enhancing Access

- 3.1 Transformation of higher education involves changing the culture and norms in higher education institutions and through that process, in society as a whole. This

includes improving access for marginalized groups such as women and minority groups. It requires policies that eliminate social, political, economic and geographical barriers of entry. Innovative use of techniques for education delivery such as distance learning through new technology would help to reduce these barriers. Higher education policy must ensure that gender and minority studies are central to university learning and are not just add-ons to the status quo.

3.2 To be effective, increasing access to higher education across gender and other indices of marginalization should be supported by resource mobilization strategies so that quality of research and teaching are not compromised.

#### **4. Re-orienting research and teaching toward Africa-related issues**

4.1 The transformation of higher education involves both visible and invisible means of 'decolonizing' knowledge creation, transfer and dissemination. In this way, research and teaching can speak to issues of local concern and make use of traditional African knowledge otherwise eclipsed by new forms of knowledge introduced to Africa during the colonial era. Achieving this will require:

4.1.1 Community engagement through research and teaching, including greater cooperation between civil society and the academic community.

4.1.2 Redesigning curricula to suit local conditions, ensuring the use of local research, traditional knowledge and Africanist or African-oriented theories to inform teaching in addition to western scholarship.

4.1.3 Essentially, it is about recognition that Africa has within its history a vast store of knowledge developed over centuries. Although this knowledge was suppressed or overlooked during the colonial era, it remains resilient and relevant.

4.2 It will advance robust Africa-oriented research and enable participation by stakeholders in research and development. This critical link between universities and their role in overall policy development should be rebuilt through the development of social contracts where researchers, communities and policy makers mobilize and work together.

## Recommendation

### *Commissioning Analytical Studies For Policy Development*

In the overall analysis, this policy brief recommends further policy studies, consultations and dialogues with a view to developing policies on transforming higher education in Africa. Critical areas for this study are:

- (vi) The governance of universities across the continent and how it can be democratized in line with a stakeholder approach and moving away from a state-centered perspective;
- (vii) The multiple roles of universities in Africa, including the nexus between research and policy and enhancing African ownership of higher education.
- (viii) Improving cross-country and cross-university collaboration and cooperation through exchanges of resources, students and scholars between universities.

- (ix) Exploring and finding new and alternative ways to resource and finance universities.
- (x) How to engage and harness the African Diaspora in strengthening and transforming higher education in Africa.

All five studies will involve broad and in-depth consultations with key stakeholders, including but not limited to: governments officials, Parliamentary committee(s) relevant to higher education (education, appropriation and finance committees), university management, a representative sample of academics and researchers, the private sector, overseas institutions from which best practice in these areas can be studied, a representative sample of the African Diaspora, particularly those in the academic sector.

In keeping with the Grounded Theory Approach to research, the studies need to ensure that the findings reflect the lived realities of the higher education institutions and stakeholders in the local context of the continent, including the legal environment in which higher education institutions operate.

When the studies are complete, it will be necessary to focus on policy development by translating the findings into policy statements. The process outlined in Appendix A (attached) requires the allocation of substantial time and resources, including financing and access to technical expertise.

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