

UNESCO-IESALC Futures of Higher Education project

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'African Higher Education in 2050'

Education in general and specifically higher education, has been a leveler for social inequality across Africa from the period of decolonization. At almost every level of education, access and enrolments have soared in the six decades of African independences, helping to attenuate spatial, gender and class divides, despite concerns about quality and relevance. Access to higher education, which has usually been public, has generated new knowledge, skills, and behaviors. It has improved production and productivity gaps in some sectors and broadened the distribution of resources and livelihood opportunities for wider segments of society. To some extent, higher education institutions in Africa has advanced the struggle for gender equality, even though the institutions themselves are highly gendered and often reproduce the gender structures and representations of their societies. The changing fortunes of higher education in several countries from the 1970s to the 1990s- a period that coincided with economic decline, militarization of societies and the pursuit of neo-liberal economic orthodoxy- derailed much of the initial promise and investments in public higher education as higher education came to be regarded as a luxury that the continent could not afford. The ensuing two decades saw some attempts at revitalization, coupled with corporatization of public universities and the creation of a market in higher education with the entry of several private universities, some of which had connections to the corporate world and religious groups.

At the beginning of the second decade of the C21st, the higher education landscape around Africa is much more diverse. Alongside many more private providers, there has been an expansion in public universities often in response to regional and other demands, and there have also been new delivery modes that have expanded systems. Still, higher education accounts for only about 5 percent of enrolments. Higher education systems are also not sufficiently differentiated and diversified, with several institutions, including many of the private providers, focused mainly on teaching. Research capacity and funding have also not grown at commensurate rates. Threats to academic freedom and the autonomy of academics and public institutions still exist as governments attempt to exert control over the functioning and decision-making powers of institutions. Despite several attempts at reform, the funding of higher

education remains a thorny issue in several national systems. Funding gaps increasingly become quality gaps and result in dual systems where relatively few students enrol in well-funded institutions at home or abroad and receive quality teaching and learning. A significant proportion of graduates have limited skills and are unable to find employment in the limited national job markets that exist due to the lack of structural transformation and industrialization of African economies. Educational inequality thus translates into socio-economic inequality and the promise and potential of higher education in Africa remains unfulfilled and limited, with higher education systems unprepared to deal with policy challenges and opportunities in learning systems and new landscapes of the future.

The UN's Agenda 2030 and its Sustainable Development Goals envision a substantive role for higher education in creating a more sustainable future, given its primary role as a knowledge producer. The High Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development held in New York in 2019 noted that none of the 17 SDGs can be achieved without the contribution of higher education and research to create the new knowledge and research to address global challenges and provide evidence for informed public policy; develop generations of new leaders and skilled professionals; and engage with stakeholders including governments, the private sector and civil society, to contribute towards local, national and global impact.

Africa's Agenda 2063, *The Africa We Want*, is even more explicit in tying the futures of Africa to developments in education and higher education. In its Call to Action in paragraph 72, Agenda 2063 calls for speed-up actions to eradicate poverty in the coming decades through 'enhanced investment in the productive capacities ..of our people, improving incomes, creating jobs, and providing basic necessities of life'; provid(ing) decent and affordable housing; catalys(ing) an education and skills revolution and actively promot(ing) science, technology, research and innovation, to build knowledge.., capabilities and skills for the African century.'

It calls for 'build(ing) and expand(ing) an African knowledge society through transformation and investments in universities, science, technology, research and innovation; ..through the harmonization of education standards and mutual recognition of academic and professional qualifications; establish(ing) an African Accreditation Agency to develop and monitor educational quality standards, with a view to expanding student and academic mobility across the continent; and strengthen(ing) the Pan African University, (to) build the Pan African Virtual

University, and elevate Africa's role in global research, technology development and transfer, innovation and knowledge production; and harness universities and their networks and other options to enable high quality university education.

The call to transform and industrialise economies--- through beneficiation and value addition of natural resources; modernisation of African agriculture and agro-businesses through scaled up value addition and productivity; acting with a sense of urgency on climate change and the environment and implement(ing)...the Programme on Climate Action in Africa, or connecting Africa through transport, energy, infrastructure and ICTs--- all depend on research and innovations that African HEIs must fast track and lead.

In its role as the generator of new knowledge, research, and innovations, it is higher education that should play the critical role in the call to '*support young people as drivers of Africa's renaissance*, through investment in their health, education and access to technology, opportunities and capital, and concerted strategies to combat youth unemployment and underemployment.' Similarly, higher education must take the lead to ensure 'gender parity in private and public institutions and remove all forms of gender discrimination in social, cultural, economic and political spheres.' In short, Agenda 2063's Aspiration 1 of 'A prosperous Africa based on inclusive growth and sustainable development' depends on the development of Africa's human capital as its most precious resource, with sustained investments from early childhood education through to higher education, science, technology and innovation, to underpin the transformation of the continent.

However, it does not appear that the envisaged role and place for education and higher education in Africa's Agenda 2063 has been domesticated in national systems of education or reflected in national planning and budgetary allocations. Many higher education institutions in Africa would be hard pressed to demonstrate how their institutional strategic plans align with the vision articulated in Agenda 2063, and national ministries of tertiary education may well fail in this regard as well. These policy inattentions risk making Agenda 2063 another pipe dream, shifting the goal posts even further into the future and derailing Africa's progress and future.

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic with its untold misery and massive disruptions to social and economic life globally appeared to have created temporary solidarities. The likelihood of deadlier pandemics and greater threats posed by climate change has spawned debate and global political and academic interest. The pandemic is forcing rethinking of many taken-for-granted assumptions and modes of operation at the same time as it has spawned an

industry in conspiracy theories and further attacks on knowledge and expertise. Virtual modes of doing business, of teaching and learning, and conducting civic and social life have been thrust upon us. While connectivity gaps and costs and fears of digital colonialism accentuate digital divides, much creativity, innovation and fight-backs are occurring, to ensure free and open software and internet re-decentralization, away from the control of Big Tech corporations.

In Africa, COVID-19 has exposed the state of national health systems and health research, scientific capacities, the neglect of research and existing global inequities in knowledge production, research and innovation. This should spur different kinds of internationalization and collaboration. It is barely 9 years to the end of the UN Agenda 2030. According to the Brookings Institution in 2020, some progress has been made, but several gaps remain. 18 out of 44 countries south of the Sahara will get less than halfway to the SDG targets by 2030. In relation to education, countries may meet targets on primary education if current efforts are sustained, but progress has fallen on net enrolment rate for lower secondary education. The target in relation to higher education of equal access for all women and men to affordable and quality technical, vocational and tertiary education, including university.. is not likely to be met in a single African country. The catalytic role of higher education on other goals is also not likely to be realized.

Higher education advocates and leaders from the public and private sectors in Africa must assume leadership roles to work towards the realization of the educational goals in Agenda 2063, albeit in more fleshed out and pragmatic forms, and embed them in national and regional development agendas. They must take into consideration new technological innovations including the growth of artificial intelligence and robotics and what these mean for learning systems, skill sets and employment for African youth to the year 2050 and beyond. What would it take African youth, female and male, to thrive in their educational institutions, now increasingly virtual, and to acquire meaningful skills to compete in an increasingly globalized world? How do educators prepare our young people to deal and contribute in this new world? What cultural and other resources can they equip students with to enable them to acquire the ethical and moral imperatives to guide their choices and actions as tolerant and thoughtful African and global citizens? And how can higher education institutions broaden the scope of acceptable knowledge and tap into alternative traditions of knowing and knowledge on the continent to overcome its dependencies and create the African knowledge society envisaged in the Agenda 2063?