

CHALLENGES FACING HIGHER EDUCATION IN SENEGAL: A LOOK AT THE NATIONAL AGENDA FOR THE TRANSFORMATION OF HIGHER EDUCATION, RESEARCH AND INNOVATION

February 4th, 2026

INTRODUCTION

On Wednesday 4 February 2026, the West African Citizens' Think Tank, WATHI, organised, with the support of the Irish Embassy in Senegal, a public conference in partnership with the Laboratory of Social Studies at the Institut Fondamental d'Afrique Noire (IFAN) of Cheikh Anta Diop University on the theme: "The Challenges of Higher Education in Senegal: A Look at the National Agenda for the Transformation of Higher Education, Research and Innovation." This initiative comes at a time of profound change within Senegal's education system. Indeed, in July 2025, the President of the Republic, Bassirou Diomaye Faye, officially launched the National Agenda for the Transformation of Higher Education, Research and Innovation, thereby signalling a commitment to overhauling the higher education sector. This new agenda aims to break with models inherited from the past, which are deemed unsuited to contemporary developments in Senegal. The objective is therefore to promote higher education that is consistent with national priorities, capable of training students who can meet the country's specific needs.

In recent years, Senegalese universities have been facing a structural crisis characterised by a shortage of teaching and research staff, overcrowded student numbers that exceed the universities' capacity, failure to adhere to the academic calendar, overlapping academic years, as well as demands relating to grants and students' social and study conditions. This crisis is fuelling a tense social climate, leading to unrest and protests that are paralysing campuses. In addition to these crises that plague university life, the Senegalese education system appears stagnant, no longer meeting the needs of the labour market due to a mismatch between training and employment, which contributes to rising youth unemployment, a source of social frustration.

In light of these challenges, this public conference provides a forum for dialogue and collective reflection, enabling a critical examination of Senegal's National Agenda for the Transformation of Higher Education, Research and Innovation, identifying the obstacles to its implementation and formulating concrete recommendations for a successful reform.

GUEST PANELLISTS

- **Dr Nouhou Diaby**, Technical Adviser, Representative of the Ministry of Higher Education, Research and Innovation of Senegal;
- **Dr Abdourahmane Kane**, Academic Director of BEM Management School, a private higher education institution;
- **Prof. Yankhoba Seydi**, Director of Research at Cheikh Anta Diop University, Dakar;
- **Ms Khady Sow**, President of the Political Science Students' Association at Cheikh Anta Diop University, Dakar;
- **Mr Rivo Ratsimandresy**, Co-founder and CEO of the Senegalese Entrepreneurs Forum.

Note: QUICKs are short documents produced following WATHI's virtual roundtable discussions. They set out the main findings and recommendations for action, and are intended to inform public debate, collective action and policy decisions.

KEY FINDINGS

- The National Agenda for the Transformation of Higher Education, Research and Innovation, launched in July 2025, marks a departure from previous higher education reforms. Unlike earlier initiatives, this new agenda is aligned with the national reference framework, Vision Senegal 2050. Its aim is to bring about a genuine transformation of the university. Thus, it is no longer simply a matter of redefining objectives, but of clarifying the purpose and impact, by fully integrating research and innovation into national priorities.
- In previous reforms, research played a marginal role. Today, the aim is to make it a key driver of job creation and the development of key sectors. This shift reflects the transition from a university with a primarily social focus to one geared towards impact (real impact on the economy, local areas, public policy, etc.). From now on, universities will be assessed on their actual impact, particularly in terms of innovation, scientific output and graduate employability. This shift is accompanied by a strengthening of governance, with the introduction of performance indicators, academic and scientific evaluations, as well as performance contracts between the State and universities, with the ultimate aim of truly strengthening human capital.
- Higher education continues to face numerous academic, pedagogical, social and structural obstacles. The rapid increase in student numbers has taken place without a sufficient financial foundation, whilst the teaching staff is ageing. From the students' perspective, the obstacles are also manifold: overcrowded lecture theatres, social insecurity, inadequate infrastructure and inequalities in access to digital resources. Despite some progress, not all students enjoy ideal learning conditions, which widens the gaps.
- Students are not very involved in decision-making processes and are usually content simply to be informed. The National Agenda for the Transformation of Higher Education, Research and Innovation is largely unknown to students. Students view this Agenda as just another reform, hence the need for greater efforts to raise awareness.
- The challenges posed by digital technology and artificial intelligence are clear. According to the speakers, when it comes to AI, the issue is no longer simply one of integrating AI into the university, but of integrating the university into a world dominated by AI. The changes are such that tasks previously taking several years can now be completed in a matter of minutes. AI is now capable of producing dissertations and theses, which calls into question the value of academic research as it is currently conceived. In light of this, the university must be fundamentally rethought, with a focus on tutorial support, critical thinking and mastery of tools, as it is illusory to seek to pit the teacher against AI rather than seeking to understand it and use it effectively.
- For private universities, the main challenge remains research. Whilst public universities tend to focus more on basic research, private institutions tend to focus on applied research. Collaborations exist between public and private universities, particularly in the development and establishment of joint doctoral schools. However, the partnership remains insufficiently structured and needs to be strengthened.
- Furthermore, Senegal's higher education system is facing a shortage of A-level graduates. The country has around 290,000 students (in both private and public higher education), which is below the threshold required to support genuine development. There is also an ageing teaching staff with no real recruitment policy in place to address this.

- Despite the progress outlined in the National Transformation Agenda, particularly in the areas of research and digital technology, the issue of sovereignty remains central. The curricula and requirements of the African and Malagasy Council for Higher Education (CAMES), which prioritise publication in Western international journals, contrast with the original mission to strengthen the African roots of research, raising questions about intellectual and scientific autonomy.
- The issue of research funding also illustrates this problem of sovereignty. Although research is produced locally, funding comes mainly from external donors, reducing local researchers to mere executors. The reliance on external resources reflects underfunding, leading to low scientific output despite a significant number of academic researchers, revealing an imbalance between human resources and scientific results.
- One manifestation of the lack of resources is the absence of fully operational national laboratories, which limits the capacity to generate, analyse and utilise data locally. Whilst the political will is expressed in speeches, there remains an urgent need to find concrete mechanisms to make university research funding self-sustaining.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Promote technical and vocational education by steering more students towards these pathways from the end of lower secondary school and the A-levels onwards, in particular by expanding vocational sixth-form colleges, in order to relieve pressure on universities and better meet the needs of the labour market.
- Reform curricula to strengthen the vocational focus of training programmes, particularly in STEM subjects (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics), by incorporating more practical skills, work placements and work-study schemes, in partnership with private companies.
- Streamline doctoral schools, notably by merging certain structures, in order to improve their efficiency, transparency and ability to attract funding.
- Involve students more closely in decision-making processes and raise awareness of the National Agenda for the Transformation of Higher Education in order to strengthen its ownership, understanding and support among the student community.

QUOTES FROM THE PANELLISTS

“This agenda aims for a genuine breakthrough; it is not merely a shift in objectives, but rather a real change, a transformation. The aim was to align the national education agenda with the country’s national agenda, in order to ensure consistency with research, funding, and innovation.” **Dr Nouhou Diaby, Technical Adviser, Representative of the Ministry of Higher Education, Research and Innovation.**

“In the old programmes, research was marginal. With this new agenda, we want to make research a key driver in job creation and other important sectors such as agriculture.” **Dr Nouhou Diaby, Technical Adviser, Representative of the Ministry of Higher Education, Research and Innovation.**

“The main challenge facing private universities is research. In reality, public universities tend to focus more on basic research, whereas private institutions focus on applied research,” **Dr Abdourahmane Kane, Academic Director at BEM School Management, a private higher education institution.**

“Academically speaking, courses remain too theoretical, with insufficient practical training and a real lack of interdisciplinarity, which limits graduates’ employability.” **Dr Abdourahmane Kane, Academic Director, BEM School Management, a private higher education institution.**

“Looking at the National Agenda for the Transformation of Higher Education, we have worked on research, digital technology, and other major themes within the agenda. But one issue remains crucial, and that is sovereignty,” **Prof. Yankhoba Seydi, Director of Research at the Cheikh Anta Diop University of Dakar.**

“Without sustainable and strategic funding for higher education and research, any ambition for transformation remains limited,” **Professor Yankhoba Seydi, Director of Research at Cheikh Anta Diop University in Dakar.**

“Students face digital, social, infrastructural and material barriers. Overcrowded lecture theatres and precarious social conditions create an inadequate learning environment for students,” **Ms Khady Sow, President of the Political Science Students’ Association at Cheikh Anta Diop University in Dakar.**

“Students are often informed about reforms, but are rarely involved in the decision-making process, which creates a sense of being sidelined,” **Ms Khady Sow, President of the Political Science Students’ Association at Cheikh Anta Diop University in Dakar.**

“The demographic issue is not sufficiently taken into account by public policy, even though it has a direct impact on youth employment,” **Mr Rivo Ratsimandresy, Co-founder and CEO of the Senegal Entrepreneurs’ Forum.**

“It is inconceivable that a university like Cheikh Anta Diop should be paralysed by recurring strikes. This situation reveals the university’s transformation into a veritable political volcano, especially as the teaching time lost during the strikes is never made up,” **Mr Rivo Ratsimandresy, Co-founder and CEO of the Senegal Entrepreneurs’ Forum.**



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