

THE CURRENT STATE AND FUTURE PROSPECTS OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN WEST AFRICA

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INTRODUCTION

Higher education plays a strategic role in the development of societies. In West Africa, universities and grandes écoles are at the heart of training the elite, generating knowledge and fostering innovation. However, they face structural, institutional and cyclical challenges that limit their full contribution to the region's economic and social development.

In the countries of the region, rapid growth in demand for higher education driven by demographic factors is placing a strain on infrastructure and human resources. Another challenge relates to the quality of education, which is often criticised for failing to meet the needs of the labour market and keep pace with changes in the global economy (digitalisation, entrepreneurship, etc.). Added to these issues are inequalities in access based on gender, as well as geographical and socio-economic disparities, which reinforce the exclusion of certain social groups. Social, political and security tensions, as well as insufficient funding, also affect the conditions for education, research and innovation development within universities.

Against a backdrop characterised by African countries' quest for structural transformation and economic sovereignty, it is crucial to reflect on the realities and prospects of higher education in West Africa.

This discussion provided an opportunity to analyse the main challenges currently facing higher education in the region, to identify existing opportunities and innovations for enhancing the quality, equity and relevance of education, to foster dialogue between academic stakeholders, public decision-makers, the private sector and civil society, and to propose avenues for reflection and recommendations for higher education policies that are more inclusive and better suited to global challenges.

GUEST PANELLISTS

- **Dr Tiefing Sissoko**, Lecturer and Researcher at the University of Arts and Humanities, Bamako, Mali;
- **Dr Moustapha Ndiaye**, Lecturer and Researcher, Director of the Centre for Innovation, Expertise and Development, Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Education, Cheikh Hamidou Kane Digital University (Un-CHK), Senegal;
- **Ms Sokhna Ndiaye**, Expert Member of the Conference des Grandes Écoles in France, Director General of the African Campus for Women's Leadership, Senegal.

Note: QUICKs are short documents produced following WATHI's virtual roundtable discussions. They outline the main findings and proposed courses of action, and are intended to inform public debate, collective action and policy decisions

KEY FINDINGS

- When assessing the higher education system in West Africa, several major challenges emerge; the first is demographic in nature. University student numbers are growing at an impressive annual rate of 10 to 15 per cent in West Africa. The region's young population is driving strong demand for access to higher education. This massification is a direct result of massive investment in primary and secondary education.
- The second challenge concerns funding. As developing nations, the countries in the region still allocate limited resources to higher education and training, often around 1 per cent according to some World Bank estimates. It should be noted, however, that the claim that only 1% of the total state budget is allocated to higher education represents a West African average, which masks significant disparities: some countries are severely under-investing, whilst others are striving to narrow this gap. Given the inability of governments to meet all needs, the diversification of funding sources remains insufficient in itself, despite some progress observed in certain countries. Furthermore, low investment in research constitutes a major challenge. Higher education is not limited to the training of students; it also relies on the production of knowledge.
- Another major challenge relates to infrastructure. The rapid increase in student numbers is placing a heavy strain on infrastructure and capacity. Despite the establishment of regional universities and higher education institutes, resources remain insufficient: tutorial sessions can accommodate up to 600 students in poorly equipped rooms, which are often subject to power cuts. This situation has a direct impact on the running of institutions, notably leading to longer academic years and disruptions to the delivery of courses.
- The issue of regional disparity also poses a significant challenge. Infrastructure and high-quality educational provision are predominantly concentrated in major cities, particularly capital cities. This leads to inequalities in access to university for people living in rural or remote areas, as well as for low-income households. In this context, the development of private higher education also introduces an interesting dynamic. Whereas public higher education remains largely focused on academic and generalist courses, the private sector often offers more vocationally oriented programmes, linked to the immediate needs of the labour market. However, the cost of accessing private higher education is high, which limits its accessibility for a large part of the population. It is also important to note that the private sector is not homogeneous. There is a wide variety of institutions, with highly variable standards of quality. In some cases, the rapid expansion of the private sector has taken place without sufficient oversight, which raises issues regarding the authorisation and accreditation of courses. Some institutions therefore operate without full official recognition, which may affect the quality of the qualifications awarded.
- Today, in several countries such as Senegal, Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire and Mali, it is evident that certain academic programmes have existed for several decades without any real development within the public higher education system. We thus find traditional programmes (sociology, anthropology, economics, education sciences, etc.) that have changed little, even though economic and social needs have evolved profoundly. In this context, marked by a relative stagnation in course content and a growing disconnect from socio-economic realities, several structural limitations of the system are becoming apparent. One of the key findings concerns the persistence of a reductionist approach that seeks to directly adapt courses to the immediate needs of the labour market. This logic is understandable but appears limited in contexts where economic and professional changes are rapid, rendering acquired skills quickly obsolete. It also reflects an insufficient consideration of the evolving dynamics of occupations and changes in the world of work. Furthermore, there is little involvement of stakeholders from the private sector in curriculum design, an imbalance between theoretical teaching and practical input, as well as still insufficient use of schemes promoting apprenticeships in real-life situations. It was found that presentations by professionals from the world of work generate much greater interest among students. Students in the lecture theatres were often more attentive and engaged during these presentations, which highlights the importance of increasing this type of contribution within the curriculum.

- Another major challenge is the uptake of digital technology. Despite the rapid growth of technology and artificial intelligence on a global scale, higher education systems in West Africa still lag significantly behind in terms of access, equipment and the integration of digital technology into teaching practices. This lag is partly due to a lack of funding, but also to the fact that investments in digital technology are often perceived as long-term investments. Yet they are now essential. Modern economies rely increasingly on knowledge and intelligence, and no longer solely on natural resources. The societies that will succeed are those that invest heavily in human capital and skills, particularly digital skills.
- It is important to remember that inequalities, particularly gender inequalities, constitute a major challenge in higher education. Whilst primary school enrolment is virtually universal, the number of girls drops sharply by the end of secondary education, and falls even further at university. Some female students have to balance their studies with family responsibilities, prompting consideration of support measures, such as childcare schemes.
- One of the key findings concerns the conditions of doctoral training and the supervision of students. The shortage of senior academic staff and difficulties in accessing supervisors constitute significant obstacles to the quality of research and the progress of doctoral students. The issue of cooperation between African universities also warrants consideration. South-South collaborations remain insufficient, even though they could promote the sharing of knowledge and the development of robust academic networks across the continent. There is a lack of structure in academic mobility schemes and the harnessing of the diaspora, despite the fact that these offer opportunities to enhance the openness and quality of higher education systems.
- Finally, university governance appears to be a central issue among the challenges facing higher education in West Africa. Despite varied methods of appointing elected or appointed leaders and a degree of institutional autonomy, performance often falls short of expectations. This situation reveals shortcomings in terms of strategic vision and the management of university institutions.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Establish effective regulatory and quality assurance mechanisms for higher education to harmonise standards between public and private institutions, by strengthening the capacities of the national authorities responsible for oversight, ensuring the systematic accreditation of programmes and institutions based on clear standards, ensuring compliance with quality standards regarding teaching content, supervision and infrastructure, and establishing regular monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to oversee the development of the private sector in order to ensure equity, the credibility of qualifications and the confidence of employers.
- Establish structured and sustainable collaboration between universities, businesses and public authorities in order to improve the alignment of training with employment needs and the professional integration of young people, by creating frameworks for regular dialogue between higher education institutions, government departments and stakeholders in the, by involving businesses in the co-design of training programmes, by establishing regulatory frameworks with incentives to encourage their engagement, and by promoting applied research through partnerships geared towards the practical needs of the business community.
- Consolidate and expand participatory governance structures within universities, building on existing governing bodies and incorporating representatives from the private sector and the business community more systematically, alongside public sector stakeholders, civil society, NGOs, organisations specialising in the development of transferable skills, and the learners themselves.
- Promote the modernisation of teaching approaches in higher education in order to improve the quality of learning and relieve pressure on infrastructure, by integrating project-based learning more fully alongside lectures, encouraging teamwork on real-world issues, and developing cross-disciplinary

skills such as autonomy, creativity and problem-solving.

- Accelerate the integration of digital and educational technologies into training programmes to offer more flexible and inclusive learning methods, by developing distance and blended learning, deploying digital platforms and collaborative tools, and facilitating the use of professional software to reduce pressure on physical infrastructure whilst enhancing the learning experience.
- Examine accountability mechanisms by placing the issue of governance at the heart of discussions. University leaders, whether elected or appointed, should be subject to regular evaluations based on measurable outcomes. These evaluations could have implications for their future careers, thereby strengthening their commitment and accountability. In this regard, fully integrate student course evaluations as a lever for continuous improvement, enabling the assessment of content, teaching methods and areas for improvement.
- Strengthen professional development schemes for higher education lecturers by introducing continuing professional development focused on innovative teaching approaches and the transfer of cross-disciplinary and behavioural skills. In this context, support and roll out the initiatives already undertaken by certain universities involving the allocation of resources to continuing professional development for teachers, particularly in relation to the competence-based approach, flipped classrooms and remedial support schemes tailored to the diversity of student profiles.
- Reposition higher education as a strategic priority in public policy by increasing the involvement of finance ministries in the definition and allocation of resources, in order to rebalance budgets in favour of investment, particularly in research and infrastructure, and to provide long-term support for the development and performance of universities.
- Develop genuine work-study schemes. Internships, whilst useful, are often insufficient and still present numerous barriers to access for students. Conversely, work-study schemes would enable work experience to be integrated into the curriculum in a structured manner, by making a professional placement mandatory for part of the course. This would offer students practical experience, whilst allowing companies to train candidates suited to their needs.
- Develop active policies to retain and mobilise skills, by creating attractive conditions for the integration and career progression of graduates at the local level, by limiting factors contributing to the brain drain, and by establishing structured mechanisms for mobilising academic and professional diasporas (collaboration programmes, temporary assignments, joint supervision, expert networks), in order to sustainably strengthen the capacities of higher education systems and support the development of countries.
- Strengthen research and innovation policies by focusing academic work more closely on the practical challenges facing society, by promoting the development of interdisciplinary projects rooted in local realities, by establishing mechanisms to capitalise on research outcomes (technology transfer, business incubation, partnerships with local authorities), and by encouraging the involvement of socio-economic stakeholders in the funding and exploitation of scientific outputs, in order to increase the impact of universities on economic and social development.

QUOTES FROM PANELLISTS

“Research is still too often seen as a luxury by policy-makers, even though it is essential to economic and social development, particularly through innovation.” **Dr Moustapha Ndiaye, Director of the Innovation, Expertise and Development Division, Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Educational Sciences, Cheikh Hamidou Kane Digital University (Un-CHK)**

“Access to private higher education, which requires a much higher financial investment, has contributed to perpetuating social class divisions, which poses a real problem of equity.” **Dr Moustapha Ndiaye, Director**

of the Innovation, Expertise and Development Division, Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Education, Cheikh Hamidou Kane Digital University (Un-CHK)

“Higher education appears to be the poor relation of education and development aid policies. Yet there is an urgent need to rethink the quality and relevance of training programmes to the needs of our economies, as effective integration into the labour market cannot be guaranteed if courses have no connection with the realities of the job market.” **Dr Tiefing Sissoko, Lecturer and Researcher at the University of Arts and Humanities in Bamako**

“The number of female students drops dramatically between secondary school and university, and some have to attend classes with their children by their side, which shows that we need to devise measures to promote their access and success.” **Dr Tiefing Sissoko, Lecturer and Researcher at the University of Arts and Humanities in Bamako**

“The real driver of transformation in higher education lies not only in reforms, but in our ability to build lasting bridges between stakeholders and knowledge.” **Dr Tiefing Sissoko, Lecturer and Researcher at the University of Arts and Humanities in Bamako**

“Collaboration between businesses, universities and the government is essential to bridge the gap, because today there is a significant mismatch between the supply and demand for skills.” **Sokhna Ndiaye, expert member of the Conference des Grandes Écoles in France, Executive Director of the African Campus for Women’s Leadership in Senegal**

“Strategies can only be effective if they take into account changes in the workplace and are accompanied by monitoring, evaluations and market research.” **Sokhna Ndiaye, expert member of the Conference des Grandes Écoles in France, Director General of the African Campus for Women’s Leadership in Senegal**

“I don’t think university is a waste of time. You never waste your time by acquiring knowledge and developing your skills. Education remains a fundamental value, if only to learn, draw inspiration from one’s teachers and develop critical thinking.” **Sokhna Ndiaye, expert member of the Conference des Grandes Écoles in France, Director General of the African Campus for Women’s Leadership in Senegal**



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