Policy brief

Assuring Quality, Excellence and Relevance in African Universities

INTRODUCTION

Universities in Africa have suffered from sporadic support, resulting in uneven development and varying quality. In a global knowledge economy with rapid changes in innovation and technology and increasing demand of the labor market for skilled human resource, African leaders and stakeholders are putting in place policies, frameworks and mechanisms aimed at strengthening the continent's higher education and research space, with quality, excellence and relevance as priority areas of focus. Investing in universities in Africa is critical for developing an inclusive and diverse knowledge society that can advance research, innovation and creativity to accelerate Africa's development.

Quality in this brief refers to higher education's fitness to meet standards defined by quality assurance bodies and appropriate academic and professional bodies. In higher education, quality encompasses all functions and activities namely academic programs, human resource, students, teaching and learning, infrastructure and research and innovation as defined within the context of national cultural values and developmental goals and aspirations.

Relevance in this context refers to training graduates to think critically, continually update knowledge and skills and effectively use existing and emerging opportunities to innovate and create jobs in a rapidly changing global knowledge economy.

Excellence refers to development of world-class higher education systems that produces skilled graduates especially those with expertise in areas of high demand such as science technology and innovation.

CHALLENGES WITH ATTAINING QUALITY, RELEVANCE AND EXCELLENCE

Poor governance and management of institutions are key challenges facing quality in African universities, leading to poor retention capacities, such as unattractive terms and conditions of service and lack of career growth opportunities which in turn leads to attrition and consequently academic staff shortages. Lengthy matriculation and low graduation rates also discourage student enrollment. These challenges drive academic staff and potential students to seek career and education opportunities in other continents, resulting in brain drain.

Brain drain poses a great risk to Africa's socio-economic development because replacing professionals is a huge financial undertaking. Between 1990 and 2004, Africa lost about 20,000 professionals a year. In 2008 Sub-Saharan Africa had 223,000 students enrolled in higher education institutions outside their home countries.

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Financing is also a major challenge. A study conducted by the Southern Africa Development Community (SADC) in 2008 found that funding levels have not changed over the previous ten-year period and that there was little evidence of private sector support for higher education.

Massification due to unplanned and increased student enrollments and its attendant challenges of overstretched physical facilities, inadequate teaching and learning resources, reduced contact between teachers and students and hiring of less qualified staff, has also affected quality. Massification has led to emergence and expansion of satellite campuses and private providers of varying quality.

With regards to relevance, massification has led to the emergence of diversification of courses, some of which do not seem to have priority relevance to the needs of the job market or national, continental or the global economy. Lack of entrepreneurial skills training has
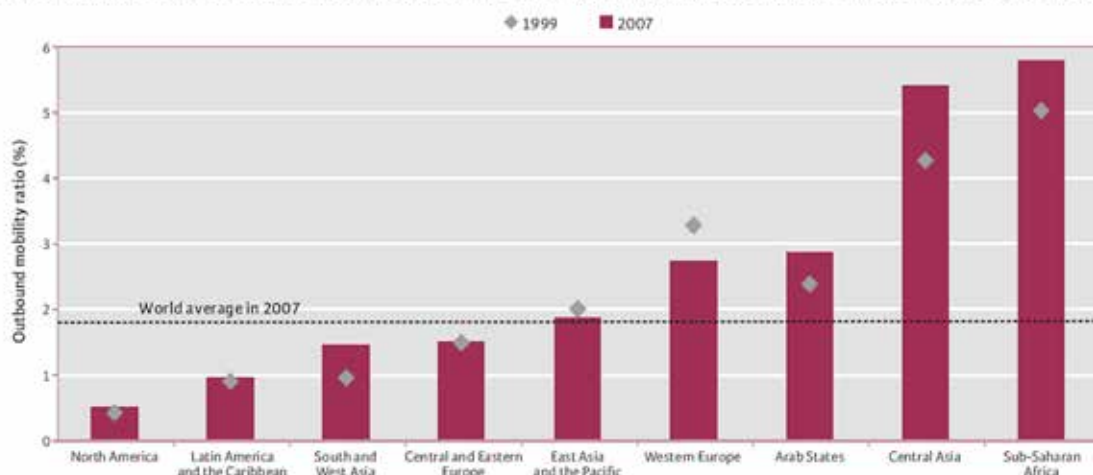
Ushirika wa Maendeleo ya Elimu Barani Afrika
الرابطة لأجل تطوير التربية في إفريقيا
Association for the Development of Education in Africa
Association pour le développement de l'éducation en Afrique
Associação para o Desenvolvimento da Educação em África

ADEA

Figure 1.

Source: P. Okebukola, Quality Assurance in Higher Education: The African Story of Achievements and Outstanding Needs, Global University Network for Innovation (GUNI)-Africa, CHEA-2012.

been identified as a major deficiency. These factors combined have led to an increase in graduate unemployment, indicative of a mismatch in quality and relevance of university education against the demands of the labor market.

Furthermore, Africa, compared to other continents, engages in low levels of research input and therefore contributes low outputs. In order to achieve excellence, it is important for African Universities to conduct and participate in research nationally and globally and disseminate results to benefit innovation and development.

EFFORTS TO IMPROVE QUALITY, RELEVANCE AND EXCELLENCE

Africa's rapid economic growth and its push for more effective participation in the global knowledge economy is driving the continent's leaders and stakeholders to examine the quality of its higher education, with the view to strengthening existing quality assurance infrastructure and creating new ones. National commissions for higher education have been established in a number of countries and regional and continental quality assurance systems have been established or strengthened.

The LMD reform in francophone countries

One notable regional effort in quality assurance is the Licence-Master-Doctorate (LMD) reform in Francophone countries. Its aim is to develop joint mechanisms to promote quality, efficiency and performance in higher education and to ensure that degrees from its eight member countries the Francophone West African Economic and Monetary Union (UEMOA) are recognized internationally. The UEMOA Commission is providing support for the transition to the LMD system and for the establishment of a quality assurance mechanism.

Continental initiatives

At the continental level, the African Union Commission (AUC) is spearheading the development of the African Quality Rating Mechanism (AQRM) intended to provide a set of standards against which the performance of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) can be objectively measured and compared.

The AUC and partners, namely UNESCO and ADEA, are supporting the acceleration of efforts towards agreeing on mechanisms and structures for the harmonization of higher education degrees and qualifications through the Arusha Convention promulgated in 1981, which 21 countries have ratified.

The Association of African Universities (AAU) hosts the African Quality Assurance Network (AfriQAN) which provides capacity building support to national and continental quality assurance agencies and institutions.

These continental efforts also aim at facilitating identification and support to Centers of Excellence (COE) across Africa. The most recent development in COEs is the Pan African University (PAU), established to consolidate intellectual resources of already existing Africa's universities and research centers into regional knowledge hubs to address key developmental challenges of the continent in the fields of basic sciences, technology and innovation; life and earth science, water, energy and climate change; governance humanities and social sciences; and space sciences. PAU, which is a new generation of African universities, primarily aims to strengthen quality and standards of excellence through postgraduate training and research.

Africa is endowed with a number of known COEs with plans for expansion. Notable among these are the International Center for Insect Physiology and Ecology (ICIPE) in Kenya and the International Institute for Water and Environmental Engineering (2IE) in Burkina Faso. The task ahead is to strengthen capacities of such centers and partner them with HEIs continentally and internationally. The African Institute for Mathematical Sciences (AIMS) based in South Africa and the Regional Initiative for Science and Education (RISE) are leading such partnerships.

The World Bank is in the process of identifying and providing support to 19 Centers of Excellence (ACE) in West Africa with focus on the development of scientific and technological skills.

Sub-regional initiatives

At the sub-regional level a number of success stories aim at improving quality as catalysts for strengthening the African Higher Education and Research Space (AHERS) using different approaches.

The African and Malagasy Council for Higher Education (CAMES) approach is more centralized, whereby institutions are assessed directly. CAMES carries out evaluation and recognition of qualifications every two years, using input criteria such as entry requirements, curriculum content, the qualification of teaching staff, and the nature of the qualification awarded.

The Inter-University Council of East Africa (IUCEA) approach is more indirect, whereby it sets standards with stakeholders and implementation is left to national agencies.

The Economic Community of West Africa (ECOWAS) and the Southern African Development Community (SADC) have also developed protocols for quality assurance.

The African Union, in partnership with the European Union, is building capacity in the development of frameworks for assessing learning outcomes. As part of harmonizing efforts in higher education in Africa, the Tuning Africa Project, set up in 2011, will enhance the recognition of academic qualifications nationally, regionally, and continentally.

There are also ongoing efforts and initiatives to connect Africa to the global knowledge network for collaboration in addressing key challenges facing research and innovation. A number of countries have set up intellectual Diaspora initiatives to engage with their countries' intellectuals in the Diaspora who are in diverse academic, research, and business fields. Examples include the Association of Nigerian Physicians in the Americas (ANPA), the Malawian Initiative for National Development (MIND) and the Ethiopian Diaspora group based in North America, known as the Association for Higher Education and Development (AHEAD). The Network of African Science Academies (NASAC) has been formed as collaboration between the African Academy of Sciences (AAS) and eight African national science academies. The NASAC is expanding internationally, connecting with the European Science Foundation (ESF) and the International Council of Science (ICSU) to develop research for development.

KEY ACTIONS REQUIRED TO ASSURE QUALITY, RELEVANCE AND EXCELLENCE IN AFRICAN UNIVERSITIES

African universities are experiencing rapid development. It is therefore imperative to have strong, visible think tanks, at national, sub regional and continental levels, committed to developing and strengthening them. These think tanks should work in collaboration with governments, and with the various national, regional, and international organizations to develop appropriate policies, mechanisms and structures that streamline and strengthen current efforts towards ensuring quality, relevance and excellence in African universities.

Proposed actions to be carried out by various bodies to improve the quality, relevance and excellence of African universities are the following:

Actions to be carried out at the institutional level

‣ Establish a continuous improvement process for program and institutional accreditation, involving a broad group of stakeholders.

‣ Improve the quality and quantity of research by increasing funding, providing adequate and modern research facilities and infrastructure, and rewarding research excellence.

‣ Establish partnerships with exemplary public and private universities to share good practices on providing quality education.

Actions to be carried out by national quality assurance agencies

‣ Collaborate with other national quality assurance agencies within and outside Africa by establishing partnerships and developing Memoranda of Understanding for capacity building and resource-sharing.

‣ Ensure effective use of ICT in quality assurance and accreditation processes. Technology, such as video conferencing, can be used to deliver results or conduct meetings, thus saving time and financial resources.

‣ Mobilize African diaspora in quality assurance and accreditation so that they can infuse their overseas experiences into local practice and help with setting up of minimum standards in curriculum development and research.

▸ Establish minimum set of standards for online providers and accreditation of online courses. African QA agencies can borrow from successful practices in other regions such as North America.

Actions to be carried out by National governments

▸ Establish a tested and self-certified National Qualification Framework (NQF) developed by competent public authorities in collaboration with a diverse range of stakeholders.

▸ Improve investment in universities, especially providing adequate financial resources to improve teaching, learning, research, and staff working conditions.

▸ Engage the support of development partners in the strengthening of QA through capacity building activities and pushing the agenda of quality in universities.

▸ Improve quality at the basic and secondary education levels in order to improve the input into universities.

▸ Focus attention on national rankings to provide basis for transparency and enhance quality in universities.

▸ Enhance participation of women in quality assurance and accreditation process. Provide greater visibility for participation of women as members of accreditation panels, staff of national QA agencies, head of HEIs, and head of national QA agencies.

Actions to be carried out by regional bodies

▸ Develop a Regional Qualifications Framework (RQF) to facilitate processes for credits accumulation and recognition of qualifications across borders.

▸ Strength centers of excellence to improve research capacity and share in the global scientific outputs. The Pan African University (PAU) is an example of such endeavor.

▸ Encourage regional collaboration to facilitate capacity-building support to less developed universities in areas such as peer review for accreditation.

Actions to be carried out by continental bodies

▸ Share good research practices, for instance through the African Higher Education and Research Space being proposed by ADEA and AU.

▸ Strengthen AfriQAN through provision of sufficient funding resources by African countries.

▸ Accelerate ratify and signing the Arusha Convention in all AU Member States in order to complete national and regional efforts of creating effective systems of quality assurance, accreditation, and recognition of certifications.

▸ Create a Continental Qualifications Framework (CQF) from consultations with a wide range of stakeholders. The CQF should be led by a continental body committed to development of higher education such as the AAU.

▸ Develop a unified qualifications network such as the Licence-Master-Doctorate (LMD) being implemented in Francophone countries.

▸ Develop an African Credit Accumulation and Transfer System (ACTS).

▸ Consolidate under-performing institutions within the continent into central hubs for more effective knowledge production and innovation.

Actions to be carried out by development partners

▸ Support the transfer of technical assistance on quality assurance experience from other regions of the world to African universities and national quality assurance agencies.

▸ Facilitate partnerships between African universities and high performing universities around the globe.

▸ Provide targeted funding such as funding for quality improvement, funding for sub regional and national higher educational bodies to develop their efforts in quality assurance.

The author

Lucy A. Wakiaga, EdD

Is an education consultant with Edconsult. Her areas of research include quality and evaluation of educational leadership preparation programs in higher education institutions.

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Association for the Development of Education in Africa (ADEA)

ADEA was created in 1988. Since its founding it has grown from a donor-driven platform for coordinating development aid to a Pan-African Organization working closely with the Africa Union and hosted within the African Development Bank.

ADEA represents a partnership between African ministries of education and development partners. It is also a Forum for policy dialogue bringing together a vibrant network of African Ministries of Education, bilateral and multilateral development agencies, researchers and stakeholders from Africa and around the world.

Collectively the network aspires to the vision of high quality education and training. Programs focus on supporting education systems to develop the critical knowledge and skills needed for Africa's accelerated and sustainable development.

In 2013, the African Union's Heads of State endorsed the Strategic Policy Framework developed by ADEA to guide the transformation of African education and training systems.

ADEA programs are implemented by the ADEA Secretariat, which is based within the AfDB, and by its Working Groups, Task Forces and Inter-Country Quality nodes, which address specific education and training themes and challenges.

Members include 15 bilateral and multilateral development agencies and 18 Ministries of Education.

For more information go to the ADEA web site at www.adeanet.org