

**Introduction of the different Higher Education Systems in Africa**  
**Talking Points**  
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**Commission**

1. African higher education faces unprecedented challenges. The demand for access is unstoppable, especially in Africa's traditionally low postsecondary attendance levels, and higher education is recognized as a critical force for modernization and development. This twenty-first century acknowledged as a knowledge era for higher education has a central role.
2. To generalize about a continent as extensive and diverse as Africa is complex. Nevertheless, there are some common elements and challenges. The continent is confronted with complex challenges in higher education, but we can remain hopeful. African universities face complicated circumstances concerning the continent's social, economic, and political problems. In addition, globalization and the road to future success can be challenging.
3. The African continent has fifty-five countries, with more than 1,300 institutions that fit the university definition. However, by international standards, Africa remains the least developed region in higher education, with the least enrollments. While a few African countries can claim comprehensive academic systems, many have just a few educational institutions and still need to establish the differentiated postsecondary procedures required for the digital age in this fourth industrial revolution.
4. With 48 countries and 1.2 billion people, Sub-Saharan Africa, one of the largest regions in the world, currently has a gross tertiary education enrollment ratio of 9.4%, well below the global average of 38%. Indeed, the rate varies significantly within the region. In Mauritius, for example, gross tertiary enrollment is 40%. In Cabo Verde, it is 23.6%. In Ghana and Togo, it is 15%. In Lesotho, it is 10%; in Niger, the ratio is 4.4%. Generally, 21% of government education expenditure in the region goes to tertiary education, while 27% is allocated to secondary education, with 43% to primary education.
5. Across Africa, about 9 million students participate in the higher education sector, 3% of all students enrolled in the region, and 4% of the total of tertiary education students enrolled globally.
6. There are varying functions and diversity in quality, orientation, financial support, and other factors evident in Africa. However, national circumstances and realities vary significantly, and we can generalize. However, understanding the broader themes that shaped the realities of tertiary education in Africa at the beginning of this twenty-first century is vital.
7. The harsh reality lies in the areas of inadequate financial resources that are combined with an unprecedented demand for access. We also have to cope with the legacy of colonialism and longstanding economic and social crises in many countries. Besides, we also had the HIV/AIDS challenges in parts of the continent, and now the COVID-19 and post-pandemic issues to tackle.
8. **Historically**, African higher education is quite ancient, with the first universities in Egypt and Timbuktu. Egypt's Al-Azhar is the oldest university in the world, founded as and still is the

principal seat of Islamic learning. Al-Azhar is currently the only major academic institution in the world organized according to its original Islamic model. All other universities in Africa have adopted the Western model of educational organization. While Africa can claim an ancient academic tradition, the fact is that traditional centers of higher learning in Africa have all but disappeared or been destroyed by colonialism. Today, the continent is dominated by academic institutions shaped by colonialism and organized according to the European model.

**9. Many European colonizers** – including Belgium, Britain, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Italy, Portugal, and Spain – have shaped Africa's development route. These colonial legacies affect contemporary African higher education. The most important of the colonial powers in Africa, Britain, and France have left the most significant lasting impact, not only in the organization of academia and the continuing links to the metropole but in the language of instruction and communication. Colonial higher education policy had some common elements. Among these are limited access, language, limited freedom, and limited curriculum.

**10. Funding and financing:** The central reality for all African higher education systems in this twenty-first century is the severe financial crisis. Academes everywhere, even in wealthy industrialized nations, face fiscal problems, but the magnitude of these problems is more remarkable in Africa than elsewhere.

11. The causes include:

- a. The pressures of expansion and "massification" have added large numbers of students to most African academic institutions and systems.
- b. The economic problems facing many African countries make it difficult, if not impossible, to provide increased funding for higher education.
- c. A changed fiscal climate was induced by multilateral lending agencies such as the World Bank and the IMF.
- d. The inability of students to afford the tuition rates necessary for financial stability and, in some cases, an inability to impose tuition fees due to political or other pressure,
- e. The misallocation and poor prioritization of available financial resources, including providing students with free or highly subsidized accommodation and food, are also important. Also, among other issues, maintaining a large and cumbersome non-academic personnel and infrastructure.

12. Due to varying financial circumstances, these elements are only sometimes present in some African countries. However, overall, funding issues loom very largely in any analysis of African higher education.

13. Almost all African universities suffer from the effects of scarce financial resources. Severe shortages of published materials of books and journals, the lack of essential resources for teaching, the absence of simple laboratory equipment and supplies (such as chemicals) to do research and teaching, and, in some countries, delays of salary payments for months are just some of the common problems faced by institutions across the continent.

14. **Governance:** Public higher education institutions predominate in Africa, and governmental involvement in university affairs is the norm. The current governance structure in most African universities reflects this legacy. Throughout much of Africa, the head of state holds the ultimate authority as the chancellor or president in appointing vice-chancellors and others down the administrative line; this is especially typical in Anglophone Africa.

15. In English-speaking countries, the chancellor-ship is an extended position. The vice-chancellor, equivalent to an American university president, has the executive power furnished by the board of directors, mainly composed of government-appointed members and students in some countries. The minister of education appoints the vice-chancellors with or without the approval of Parliament or even a chancellor.

16. The chain of administrative power starts with the vice-chancellor, then moves to deans/directors, and then department heads. Either the vice chancellor appoints deans or directors directly, or in some cases, government officials, boards of directors, or trustees appoint them. In many cases, fellow members elect the department heads. In a few countries, a short list of candidates for the highest positions is submitted to the government as a compromise between the university community and the government. In most cases, the professorial authority typical in Western industrialized nations is lacking in much of Africa. The academic profession has less power in the African context than it does in the West.

17. **Management issues:** African universities suffer from poor, inefficient, and highly bureaucratic management systems. Poorly trained and poorly qualified personnel; weak, ineffective, and out-of-date management and administrative infrastructures; and poorly remunerated staff are the norms throughout the many systems.

18. There have been **severe corruption charges** and embezzlement of funds in some African universities. Some blame the misappropriation of funds and poor prioritization as one of the factors for financial difficulties in the universities. As students continue living and studying under deplorable conditions in some of these countries, the top university administrators can be held accountable by the national Auditor General's office for mismanaging funds and having misplaced priorities. Even though mismanagement issues tend to be generally similar across nations and systems, it is essential to note that how the university is governed and the leadership is appointed often contributes to the magnitude and scope of the problems.

19. **Private higher education:** In many African countries, private institutions' provision of higher education is growing. Compared to other parts of the world, however, most African countries have needed to be faster to expand the private sector in higher education. Several factors have enhanced the trend toward private higher education. These include a burgeoning demand from students for access, the declining capacity of public universities, the retrenchment of public services, pressure by external agencies to cut public services, a growing emphasis on and need for a highly skilled labor force that targets the local market, and the beginning of interest by foreign providers. In terms of numbers, there are now more private institutions than public ones in some countries. However, private schools are smaller and specialize in specific fields, such as business administration. The number of private universities increased in Africa considerably between 1990

and 2014, from 300 to 1,000, while public universities increased from 100 to 500 during the same period.

**20. Governments do not financially support private institutions in most African countries.** In some instances, however, private institutions receive direct financial support from governments. In Liberia, for instance, the state provides subsidies to private and church-operated postsecondary institutions. It also provides financial aid to students attending these institutions to cover the cost of tuition and textbooks. In Togo, private institutions that offer short-period technician degrees are subsidized by the state in the same way as other institutions are. In Mozambique, scholarships are also made available to private higher education students to help them pay their tuition fees.

21. Private for-profit higher learning institutions quickly provide high-demand and relatively low-cost, skill-based courses. These institutions are free from the obligations constraining other public institutions whose responsibilities span wider and broader national objectives. Private institutions also serve as an immediate safety net in addressing the overwhelming need for higher learning in the continent, whose overall enrollment rate in higher education institutions is meager.

22. In Ghana, some private institutions have yet to be able to pay staff salaries for March and April this year due to 50 percent-unpaid student fees. The pandemic may have forced some private universities to lay off employees. The University of Technology and Arts of Byumba (UTAB) suspended about 40 staff members in Rwanda. There is a strong signal that some private universities may eventually close due to a revenue shortage. This phenomenon can affect the quality of higher education in the region in the long term, eventually influencing economic development.

**23. Potential Solutions and Mitigation Measures:** With a huge disparity in access to digital infrastructure, most students in the region cannot continue their learning. While the COVID-19 crisis presents an opportunity for African universities to explore the potential of introducing technology-based platforms for learning, most of them still need to be equipped with such platforms within their learning management systems. The lockdown situation further prevented them from investigating the best options for e-learning to implement for their students.

**24. Needs assessment:** In the short or medium term, it is crucial to assess the preexisting capacity of the universities to deliver continued teaching and learning via remote and online learning platforms and the proportion of students and faculty that can access these while off-campus. In addition, it would be essential to understand the readiness of the faculty members to deliver online content, and this knowledge will ensure excellent connectivity and flexibility for continued learning.

**25. Africa still has a robust public perception that public institutions are academically better than private institutions** – even when a few private institutions hire the best academic staff and maintain new and up-to-date instruments, equipment, and facilities. It is plausible that this prevalent attitude emanates from the rigorous selection process prior to enrollment and fierce competition for admission in limited yet "free" public universities. As student enrollment escalates across the continent, the entrance requirements for the limited spaces in public institutions have become increasingly rigorous so that those admitted students are the nation's best. In general,

private institutions primarily enroll those students who cannot make it to public institutions – for numerous reasons – which continues to affect the general perceptions of private institutions as secondary to public institutions.

26. Whereas the emergence of **private higher education as a business enterprise** is a growing phenomenon, many issues plague its development, including legal status, quality assurance, and service cost. The status of many private postsecondary institutions in Africa is shady, and many operate without licenses, commensurate resources, or appropriate infrastructure. The quality of service by many is also shoddy, even at a few institutions with better equipment, newer buildings, and better facilities than the major universities in their country.

27. **The quality of education** at many private postsecondary institutions has also been an issue of some concern. Many multinational businesses across the world provide educational services today that are driven by profit motives. Multinational companies and a few foreign-based universities have established satellite campuses in countries with a big market for higher education. These transplanted institutions are often criticized for lack of accountability or social responsibility and potentially threatening and eroding the cultural fabric of a nation.

28. **Private higher education is a growing trend in much of Africa** and is being propelled by various forces. The forces behind this private diversification and expansion are both internal and external. A thorough examination of the diversification process of private institutions must consider national and international economic, political, and educational realities.

29. **Gender:** Gender imbalance is expected in the continent's educational institutions. Cultural, sociological, economic, psychological, historical, and political factors foster these inequalities. While some efforts are now underway to rectify gender imbalances, much remains to be done across all educational sectors. The gender imbalance in higher education is acute in all African countries and most disciplines. Various efforts and initiatives have been made to increase the participation of female students in postsecondary institutions.

30. **Research:** By all measures, African research and publishing activities are in critical condition. The general research state in Africa is abysmal, and its research infrastructure is inadequate. These are characterized by the following:

- a. Scarcity of laboratory equipment, chemicals, and other scientific paraphernalia;
- b. A small number of high-level experts; poor and dilapidated libraries;
- c. Alarming low and declining salaries of academic and research staff; a massive brain drain out of the academic institutions;
- d. The "expansion" of undergraduate education; poor oversight of research applicability; and
- e. Declining, nonexistent, and unreliable sources of research funds remain significant hurdles to developing research capacity across the continent.

31. Most African countries have practically no funds allocated to research in the university budgets, and there are fewer expenditures on research and development (R&D). Ghana, for example, has shown a declining trend from around 0.7 percent of the gross domestic product

(GDP) in the mid-1970s to 0.1–0.2 percent of the GDP in 1983–1987, and this trend continues and worsens in most of sub-Saharan Africa.

32. **Academic Freedom:** Most African governments are intolerant of dissent, criticism, nonconformity, and the free expression of controversial, new, or unconventional ideas. There have been severe violations of freedom of speech and expression by security forces, opposition groups, and militant groups in Algeria that have silenced scholars and citizens. In Kenya and many other African countries, unwarranted government interference and abuses of academic freedom have eroded the autonomy and quality of higher learning institutions.

33. In such an environment, the academic community is often careful not to overtly offend those in power, contributing to the perpetuation of a culture of self-censorship. In some cases, those who courageously speak frankly and express their views often face dictators capable of using terror, kidnapping, imprisonment, expulsion, torture, and even death to silence dissident voices.

34. **The brain drain and the issue of capacity building:** One of the most severe challenges facing many African countries is the departure of their best scholars and scientists from our universities. The flow away from domestic academe takes a form of internal mobility (locally) and regional and overseas migration. The term "brain drain" is frequently used to describe the movement of high-level experts from developing countries to industrialized nations. Much of the literature reflects this particular phenomenon – and we frequently observe its immediate severe and future consequences for the continent – within the context of capacity-building issues. In much of the literature on academic mobility, we read about the brain drain of academics in the context of migration overseas. The classification and the terms we use here reflect that idea of brain drain, as we know the extent to which this movement of high-level expertise gravely affects the continent.

35. **Language of instruction:** More than half a dozen languages are currently used in African higher education. These include Afrikaans, Arabic, English, French, Italian, Portuguese, and Spanish. Only Arabic and, arguably, Afrikaans is language indigenous to Africa. Overall, Arabic, English, French, and Portuguese remain the major international languages of instruction at African higher learning institutions. At a time when globalization has become such a powerful force, the dominant position of European languages has become even more accentuated and evident. English has become particularly powerful, even dominating other major European languages. The predominance of English is fueled by, among other things, the Internet and globalization.

36. To conclude, we may commend a few of our universities in Africa, such as the **Universities of Cape Town and Alexandra, as well as some other institutions of higher learning in South Africa**, for some **remarkable successes** in recent times. However, the general picture is that about forty years ago, several universities in African countries could be considered elitist with high academic standards equal to the best tertiary-level institutions in the developing world. However, since the mid-1980s, neglect, inadequate funding, weak governance, and a massive expansion of the student body have resulted in these institutions experiencing a severe diminution of their teaching and learning capacities and deterioration of their physical facilities and infrastructure. In addition, the quality of graduates at all levels has declined, and even the leading universities no longer engage in much research. Moreover, research-based linkages with the business sector are meager in almost every country. In general, this trend continues, and no country in Africa can

convincingly claim to put its tertiary education on a sound financial and institutional footing for long-term development. Unlike forty years ago, no university from Sub-Saharan Africa is today represented in the ranks of the top 200 universities in the world, according to the World Bank.