

# Higher Education in Africa: A Complex but Hardly Researched Enterprise

Nelson Casimiro Zavale

It is a truism that higher education (HE) has become a complex enterprise. Almost everywhere, HE systems have increased and diversified, for example in number of institutional providers, academic programs, profiles of students, categories of academic and administrative staff, forms of administrative and governance structures, typologies of funding sources, and categories of social functions (e.g., education, research, outreach, innovation, entrepreneurship, and social mobility). This complexity justifies the need to regularly produce knowledge about the social phenomenon of HE.

HE systems in Africa are also increasingly complex. By the early 1970s, when most African countries gained independence, the number of higher education institutions (HEIs) was 94, enrolling about 200,000 students. This rather small HE landscape changed in the postcolonial period, particularly from the 1990s. While by the late 1980s, the number of HEIs had grown to 152, with about 542,700 students, by the mid-2010s, there were over 1,600 HEIs, with over 6 million students. Updated aggregate statistics from different sources (particularly statistics from ministries or national councils/commissions on HE) indicate that by 2020–2021, Africa had over 5,400 HEIs of different typologies (public vs. private, university vs. nonuniversity type).

This increase was particularly driven by the private HE sector. In the early 1990s, only 30 out of 150 HEIs were private. By the late 2010s, the number of private HEIs had increased dramatically. Estimates indicate that 60 to 75 percent of existing HEIs in Africa are private. By 2020–2021, about 4,100 HEIs out of 5,400, representing 76 percent, were private. Countries like Cameroon, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Ghana, Ivory Coast, Madagascar, Nigeria, Senegal, and Uganda each have more than 200 HEIs. For example, the Democratic Republic of Congo has more than 1,080 HEIs (55 percent private); Nigeria has over 500 HEIs (80 percent private); Cameroon has 270 HEIs (76 percent private). The increase and diversification of suppliers has resulted in an increase in numbers of students, from about 500,000 in the early 1990s to over 9 million by 2021. This represents an increase in gross enrollment ratio from about 2 percent in 1970 to about 10 percent in the late 2010s. Yet, Africa is still below the world's average of 38 percent (per region: about 70 percent in Western Europe, North America, and Oceania, about 50 percent in Latin America, and 30 percent in Asia), and it is the only world region without mass HE systems.

## Abstract

As elsewhere, higher education (HE) in Africa has become a complex enterprise, yet is hardly researched. This article presents the main findings of a systematic review of literature focusing on African HE and published from 1980 to 2019, and suggests that the transformation of African HE was not accompanied by an equivalent production of research focusing on it, which is crucial to make its features and developments intelligible and guide policy makers and practitioners.

This rapid expansion, from the late 1990s onward, occurred in a context of repositioning HE to make it relevant for low-income countries. In the early 1990s, the international development community regarded HE to be a luxury for low-income countries, particularly for Africa, because of its supposedly low rate of social return. Recall the advice that the World Bank gave to African vice-chancellors, during a meeting in Harare in 1986, of closing universities in Africa and sending students abroad. This position was reversed from the late 1990s onward. In a seminal work in 2000, the Task Force on Higher Education and Society, sponsored by the World Bank and UNESCO, published *Higher Education in Developing Countries: Peril and Promise*, in which HE was again legitimized as relevant to enable low-income countries to integrate in, or benefit from, the global knowledge-based economy.

Since then, several reports (e.g., *Constructing Knowledge Societies*, 2002; *Improving Tertiary Education in Sub-Saharan Africa: Things that Work*, 2004; *Higher Education and Economic Development in Africa*, 2006; *Accelerating Catch-up: Tertiary Education for Growth in Sub-Saharan Africa*, 2008) have been produced with similar arguments, i.e., that HE is again important for Africa. This turnaround revitalized higher education on the continent and accounted for its rapid expansion.

### **To What Extent Is the African Higher Education Enterprise Known through Research?**

Thus, despite lagging behind, African countries also house complex HE systems. In order to meet the double challenge of linking Africa to global science and addressing local socioeconomic problems, HE needs resources and better steering mechanisms. It also needs specific expertise and knowledge. Since colonial times and throughout the postcolonial period, research has been produced about African HE. However, this bulk of research has hardly been systematically examined. This contrasts with systematic analyses of the state of HE research at the global level, in Europe, and in Asia. A recent study, published in *Higher Education* (January 2022 edition), attempted to fill this gap by undertaking a systematic review of about 6,500 articles and books focusing on African HE and published from 1980 to 2019.

This study highlights three main findings. First, about 95 percent of the research was published from the 2000s onward, which shows a renewal of interest, particularly in contrast to the 1980s, when the neoliberal structural-adjustment programs and rate-of-return approach had a negative impact both on the development of African HE and on HE research.

Second, African HE research addresses four main topics. Thirty-six percent of publications focus on different aspects of teaching and learning. Next, about 25 percent focus on how HEIs are structurally transformed by factors such as access equity, globalization, and HE privatization. About 25 percent focus on internal organization and governance. Finally, about 13 percent focus on societal engagement. The dominance of teaching and learning is not surprising, given that most African HEIs are teaching oriented. This also indicates an increasing interest in examining the conditions under which teaching and learning occur in Africa. Likewise, the fact that societal engagement has remained in focus over the four decades from 1980 to 2019 suggests that narratives about the relevance of HE to Africa are yet to be resolved. Finally, the emergence of access equity, gender, governance as key themes suggests an interest in these concerns that often go along with the expansion of HE in Africa.

Third, most African countries have barely or never been researched. Ninety-two percent of publications target only nine countries: South Africa (41 percent), Nigeria (18 percent), Ghana, Uganda and Ethiopia, each with 3 percent; Kenya, Tanzania, and Zimbabwe, each accounting for 2 percent. Among the remaining 45 countries, 29 countries altogether account for 8 percent of publications and 16 have never been researched, except perhaps in continental or cross-regional studies.

Unsurprisingly, the most researched countries are also home to most HE authors. South Africa is home to 44 percent authors, Nigeria to 20 percent, and Ghana and Uganda to over 2 percent of authors. Twenty-two countries account for less than 2 percent of authors, and no author is affiliated to institutions from 20 African countries. South Africa is dominant as a research focus and as home to most scholars. Nigeria comes second, but Nigerian authors publish mostly in nonspecialized and nonindexed journals, and focus mostly on library sciences.

**Most African countries have barely or never been researched.**

*Nelson Casimiro Zavale is associate professor at Eduardo Mondlane University, Maputo, Mozambique, a former Humboldt Research Fellow at INCHER-University, Kassel, Germany, and a Fulbright Research Fellow at the University of California, Berkeley, US. Email: nelson.casimiro.zavale@gmail.com.*

In conclusion, except for South Africa, research on African HE is weak, although some communities are emerging, particularly in West, East, and Southern Africa. Given the social challenges of HE, this weakness in expertise should raise concerns. ▲