

**Abstract**

This article examines the differentiation and diversification processes in African higher education and their implications for further research and policy. These processes are perhaps among the most well established concepts to help understand social and organizational change in African higher education systems and institutions. Founded in social theory, they shed light onto mostly tacit, rather than institutional, social and policy practices by different African higher education stakeholders, while guiding change toward increased democratic governance.

# Differentiation and Diversification in Emerging African Higher Education

**Patrício V. Langa**

**W**ith a few exceptions—that of South Africa and of some North African countries—most newly independent African nations inherited a single national, or just a few higher education institutions (HEIs) from their former colonial masters in the 1960s and 1970s. In the aftermath of independence and the subsequent six decades, albeit at different speeds, higher education systems experienced unprecedented changes, particularly marked by the establishment of new HEIs.

## **Government-Steered Differentiation and Diversification**

Exercising their newly acquired political sovereignty, African governments were the main driving force behind the increase in the number of HEIs, based on policies to expand access and participation. This expansion was done with caution, due to limited resources.

These expanding policies envisioned higher education as playing an instrumental role in accelerating socioeconomic development through training manpower, mainly to operate the state apparatus and steer economic development through rapid industrial revolution—which, however, never took place. From being single-tier/monoinstitutional at independence, many higher education systems evolved to accommodate a constellation of different HEIs with some degree of (often) limited diversification in their courses and program offerings.

Between the 1960s and 1980s, national governments played a significant role in steering policies to maintain national universities and establish a new set of (a few) public HEIs, to cater to the national development agenda. Although not always explicit in their goals, the national policies of differentiation and diversification influenced what kind of HEIs could be established, including structures, governance bodies, study programs, and degree types.

Until the end of the 1980s, which could be considered the first period of politically sovereign African countries, these policies of differentiation and diversification followed the nationalist agenda of newly independent African nations.

In some cases, a massive exodus of academics almost brought the national (single) HEIs to closure. Hence, despite the need to broaden access and participation, establishing new HEIs was not an option. Only a few decades later, with an increase in numbers of high school graduates and the limited government capacity to attend to growing demand, was the pressure to expand access coupled with the need to differentiate and diversify higher education.

## **Financial Crises and Short-Lived Policy Sovereignty**

The financial downturn of the 1970s, a result of oil shortage in the West and price hikes, prevented significant expansion and almost led to the closure of the single (or the few) operating national HEIs, due to severe national budget deficits. The 1980s witnessed African states negotiating their adherence to corrective fiscal programs by the World Bank (WB) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), not only to salvage their collapsing economies, but also to prevent the closure of public HEIs.

As the policies driving differentiation and diversification in higher education had to be subjected to fiscal disciplinarian measures prescribed by the WB, the political sovereignty of African higher education governance was short lived. For most of the 1980s and the following three decades, the WB literally “called the shots,” becoming the key policy stakeholder steering differentiation and diversification in African higher education,

based on a free-market neoliberal ideology. Privatization, followed by marketization and commercialization, became the order of the day, in a process of commoditization of higher education—which generated some discontent.

According to the WB, higher education was on the one hand a luxury private good generating rates of social return that were too low to justify public investment. On the other hand, it generated relatively high returns to the direct beneficiaries, justifying cost sharing. In other words, public financing of private students in public institutions equated funding an elite with the public purse. Facing stiff resistance from vice-chancellors threatening to close public universities, the WB resorted to prescribing policies to restructure higher education toward a more market-driven logic of supply and demand.

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### In Search of a Policy Principle

Almost six decades into postcolonial African higher education, it is reasonable to ask: *Quo vadis*, differentiation and diversification? There is overwhelming evidence that African higher education systems have expanded, differentiated, and diversified. This change is demonstrated by the distinct types of HEIs that have progressively emerged in response to various national strategies to increase the number of educational programs providing diverse types of skills and knowledge to a wide range of students with divergent interests and abilities.

While this is true, there is also a striking absence of concerted national, regional, and even global policies to advise processes of internal and external, institutional, and systemic functional differentiation among HEIs in Africa. The predominant trend is based on branding strategies and *nominal* differentiation (based on naming), not on *functional* differentiation (with HEIs performing different functions within a coordinated and integrated system).

Current developments signal the advent of multiple forces introducing and driving differentiation and diversification in African higher education systems. Implicitly or explicitly, these forces steer differentiation and diversification to expand the range of choices available to various types of students, improve efficiency in the provision of education, and enhance the set of skills and competencies that are in high demand in the labor market.

To conclude, here are some trends driving differentiation and diversification (further research and policy are required for a more comprehensive list). To begin with, *international rankings* are driving some HEIs in Africa to find ways to distinguish themselves from the dominant trend of teaching-based and teaching-oriented practice, by finding a distinctive niche and profile. Despite all that can be said about their methodological flaws, rankings are drivers of differentiation.

Further, the *quest to attain a research-intensive status and profile* and the global discourse on research excellence initiatives are also driving differentiation and diversification through specific programs and actions of stakeholders, e.g., the WB-funded centers of excellence coordinated by the Association of African Universities, and the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD)'s Centres of Excellence for Africa's future program. Those centers, especially the public African flagship national universities, are all in search of research niches to distinguish themselves from the bulk of teaching-oriented and profit-driven private and public HEIs. The establishment of the African Research Universities Alliance (ARUA) is evidence of this trend.

*Competition for students* is also driving nominal—more than functional—differentiation, with private HEIs intensifying their marketing and branding strategies, including through making (not always accurate) claims of excellence. Not least, and though incipient, *internationalization*—the introduction of English in non-English-speaking African countries as a medium of instruction in some courses and programs to attract international students and funding, is another visible trend influencing the diversification of programs. Lastly, *national politics* are also a driving force of differentiation and diversification. Politicians make campaign promises to bring higher education to their communities, which often result in the establishment of new institutions—a far cry from a coordinated, integrated, and system-wide approach for equitable and sustainable provision of higher education. ▲

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