

Massification in Anglophone African Higher Education

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Since the early 2000s, African universities have expanded enrollment rapidly in response to rising demand. Although access has improved, these gains often come with trade-offs in quality, relevance, and strategic direction. This paper argues that interpreting massification is complicated by the continent's persistently low gross enrollment ratios and that unbalanced program offerings reinforced by fee-paying models have constrained universities' developmental potential. Examples from Anglophone Africa illustrate the need to more deliberately align expansion with national priorities.

Anglophone Africa's gross enrollment ratios (GERs) remain among the lowest globally, often below 10 percent and in several countries below 5 percent. However, these persistently low participation rates in tertiary education should not be taken as evidence that the region is not experiencing massification. On the contrary, significant enrollment expansion has occurred. Rapid demographic growth offsets gains in enrollment across the region, meaning that high numbers rarely translate into significant GER increases. Ghana exemplifies this paradox: enrollments have grown substantially, but the GER remains around 18–20 percent. Kenya shows a similar pattern.

Massification in Anglophone Africa has been driven by rising youth populations, liberalized higher education policies, and pressure to widen access. This expansion has occurred at the institutional, rather than the sectoral, level in much of the region. Several universities (e.g., the University of Ghana, Makerere University, the University of Ibadan, the University of Nairobi, Kenyatta University, Ahmadu Bello University, and the University of Johannesburg) have doubled or even tripled enrollments since the early 2000s.

Program Imbalance and the Drift Toward Low-Cost Disciplines

This dominant focus on access has overshadowed systematic planning for program relevance. Massification has been largely “unbalanced” as a result, favoring fields that are cheaper to expand rather than those critical to national development. This imbalance is apparent in the disproportionate growth of fee-paying and low-cost programs in business, the social sciences, law, and the humanities.

The African Union's Continental Education Strategy for Africa 2016–2025 notes that “the enrollment landscape continues to be dominated by humanities and social sciences,” indicating a continent-wide structural move away from science and engineering fields. At institutions such as the University of

Lagos, the University of Nairobi, and Makerere University, thousands of applicants seek admission to business, humanities, and social science programs each year. Fee-paying streams reinforce this trend: because such programs require fewer laboratories, less equipment, and lower investment, they provide universities with dependable revenue. Parallel programs in Ghana, Nigeria, and Kenya have expanded substantially along these lines.

By contrast, engineering, medicine, the health sciences, and computer science remain capacity- and admissions-limited because of their higher resource requirements and accreditation constraints, even though student demand for these programs is high. For instance, the University of Ghana's School of Medicine and Dentistry admits fewer than 200 students annually, while social science faculties admit several thousands. In Nigeria, more than 40 percent of federal university enrollments are concentrated in the arts, management, and the social sciences, even as technical fields struggle to admit regular non-fee-paying students. Makerere University admits fewer than 300 medical students per year; the University of Cape Coast admits fewer than 150; and, at Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology in Ghana, demand for engineering programs far exceeds available spaces because of laboratory requirements and accreditation limits.

Heavy reliance on fee-paying students encourages universities to prioritize programs that are cheaper to run, regardless of strategic importance. Expansion remains slow in resource-intensive fields such as engineering, nursing, and medicine. Ghana, for example, trains only about 1,000 new medical doctors annually despite its acute health personnel deficit, while business-related programs admit more than 10,000 students nationwide. This trend impedes universities' ability to contribute effectively to national development. Additionally, massification has constrained research productivity. The pressure to teach large classes hinders faculty members' capacity to supervise graduate students or engage in meaningful research,

undermining aspirations to build research-intensive and globally competitive universities.

Mismatch with the Labor Market

The consequences are evident in the labor market. Many African countries face shortages of health professionals, engineers, and specialists in information and communications technology (ICT). Meanwhile, thousands of graduates from oversupplied disciplines remain either unemployed or underemployed. A 2022 survey in Kenya revealed that only about 30 percent of recent graduates secured work within a year, with most available openings concentrated in technical and health-related fields. This mismatch has diminished the perceived value of university education. Employers increasingly express concerns about graduates' skills and workplace readiness, and families question the return on investment when degrees fail to translate into employment. As a result, institutions risk being viewed as degree-producing factories rather than centers of innovation and critical scholarship. Weak governance structures exacerbate these issues. Academic planning is often reactive, driven by enrollment pressures rather than long-term labor market needs.

Governments across Africa are revisiting so-called manpower planning approaches in order to address program imbalance. Ethiopia's 70:30 policy, which allocates 70 percent of students to STEM fields, offers one example; Rwanda has pursued similar strategies. These approaches reflect renewed interest in aligning higher education systems with national development needs. However, past experiences caution against rigid models: postindependence manpower plans often failed because they

were top-down, inflexible, and disconnected from shifting economic realities. For modern manpower planning to succeed, it must be flexible, evidence-based, and supported by robust labor market data systems, conditions which are still under development in many countries.

Addressing Program Imbalance

For massification to contribute meaningfully to national development, expansion must be governed more strategically. Universities should rebalance program offerings by expanding STEM, health science, and technical fields; strengthening labor market alignment through tracer studies and employer partnerships; investing in faculty development, laboratories, ICT infrastructure, and postgraduate training; and diversifying funding beyond student fees.

Promising signs are emerging: South African universities are receiving targeted funding for STEM infrastructure; Ghana is strengthening its technical universities; and Kenya is piloting industry-linked curriculum reforms in ICT and engineering. These initiatives, although uneven, reflect a more coherent approach to expansion.

Massification has widened access. Without strategic planning and relevance, however, it risks undermining the mandate of African universities. Addressing program imbalance, strengthening resource-intensive fields, and grounding expansion in national development priorities are essential if universities are to remain credible engines of economic and social transformation.

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