

tions necessary to address the variety of learning needs of a diverse student population. ■

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## Africa's Troika Conundrums: Expansion, Consolidation, and Un(der)employment?

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African higher education has recorded an impressive growth in the last decade. Currently, an estimated 14 million students study in higher learning institutions in the region with Egypt, Nigeria, South Africa, and Ethiopia enrolling the highest number of students. Over 500 public and 1,500 private universities operate in the region. Yet, still the enrollment rate, at around 6 percent, stands as the lowest in the world.

If expansion of access could be triumphantly described as African higher education success, the grim realities of its quality diminish this declaration. As enrollments in the system have grown exponentially, quality of teaching, learning, and research has suffered precipitously. Massive expansion has meant that class sizes ballooned, academics overloaded, resources declined, activities trimmed, and facilities deteriorated—creating a perfect storm for quality crisis.

The implications of massive growth are probably nowhere clearer than on the research landscape. Africa's figures on research productivity are depressingly low hovering at above 1 percent. Despite the impressive growth of the system, the region has little to show for its knowledge productivity—an agonizing reality in the knowledge era. Poor quality and knowledge productivity continue to depict the system—necessitating consolidating excellence, while pursuing expansion. Ameliorating the situation requires sustained commitment and meaningful resources to research and development.

As expansion is rapid and consolidation is staggering, a once reluctantly tolerated predicament of unemployment for university graduates has surfaced—with a vengeance. The continent is now awash with unemployed and underemployed graduates, in some cases prompting organized action. As Africa still counts its enrollment rates in

single digits—and still needs to catch up with the rest of the world—the massive unemployment of graduates has emerged as a serious national, regional, and international conundrum, following the Arab Spring allegedly sparked by unemployed graduates.

Higher education expansion is part of national development plans, though their implementations are increasingly tempered with narrow political whims. Thus, opening new public institutions are more influenced by political imperatives than relevance and appropriateness. Opening a university has become part of a political manifesto across the region, pursued both by incumbents as well as oppositions in the hope of scoring electoral votes. Such crass politics tend to undermine the possible differentiation of the system—putting more pressure on the delicate relationship between expansion and consolidation, quantity, and excellence. Egalitarian views of all public institutions in a country as equals are not only flawed, but also costly.

The triple conundrum of African higher education is as complex as it is forbidding—with no immediate relief in sight. Thus, meaningful system differentiation, expanding delivery modes, diversified financing, vigorous quality regimes, sound institutional autonomy, and “robust” curricula help address the confounding predicaments.

Sustained macroeconomic growth, attractive investment opportunities, declining internecine conflicts, more accountable and transparent governments and institutions—attributed to ever-growing African self-confidence and its global image—and most importantly the favorable higher education perceptions increase optimism in the outlook for higher education development in the continent. ■

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## Is the Decline of the Universities' Credibility Irreversible?

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As modern societies are moving toward knowledge societies, the hope is that universities will be the main benefactors of this trend. Some experts warned: universities will lose their monopolistic or oligopolistic role of knowledge production and utilization and keep only the single power of awarding degrees. In the mean time, even this power is