

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

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. ■

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

not certain anymore, because trust in the validity of their assessments is challenged.

In recent years, an inflation of assessments occurred in academia: indicators, evaluations, reviews, rankings, ratings, and tests, etc. The credibility of these assessments is on the decline, because universities yield to pressures of bad evaluations rather than counteract collectively.

For example, irresponsible producers of rankings succeed by and large in dictating erratic criteria of world class universities. Moreover, they reinforce the view that the future of higher education and research depends on its elite, whereas mass higher education is residual.

Similarly, universities yield to the notion that academics should strive for visibility in peer-reviewed journals thus indicating their productivity. Again, they accept by and large that erratic lists of top journals are manipulated. Thereby, they reinforce the view that quality according to the internal views of academia is important and relevance can be ignored in the knowledge society.

There is an additional problem of a structural nature: can universities preserve trust as regards the key element of student assessment—i.e., the granting of degrees? Actually, the courses of study become more flexible. Some students acquire relevant competences prior to enrollment and get credits for prior learning. Moving from one university to another during the course of study, a highly appreciated tradition in Germany, gets more popular in various countries. Internships—i.e., periods of learning and experience outside higher education—often become mandatory. Opportunities increase to take individual courses at other universities—e.g., through Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs). Study periods abroad gain popularity. In sum, the proportion of study time spent at the degree-granting institution declines. As a consequence, single universities might lose their credibility. Their capability might be questioned of assessing properly the competences acquired at different locations. Subsequently, a need might be felt for organizations in charge of consulting and assessing students, which are independent from universities.

Institutions of higher education face a decline of status on the way toward the knowledge society, not only as a consequence of their shrinking share in the overall knowledge production and dissemination, but also because trust declines that academics and higher education institutions themselves assess the results of research, teaching, and learning properly. The multitude of evaluations, rankings, and indicators actually might be increasingly externally controlled, if the visible distortions cannot be counteracted by universities and academic profession. Moreover, the last resort of academic power—that of degree granting—might erode as well, if the changing context of teaching and learning does not lead to new ways of guidance and assessment ■

Will the Ranking Game Continue After a Decade?

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Approximately 15 years ago, when international university rankings were still in their infancy, only a limited number of experts expected the wide and significant impact world university rankings would have on universities, governments, and the public. Currently, ranking status is considered mandatory information when seeking university partnerships and collaborations. Even if a country does not have universities with top rankings, governments frequently refer to ranking positions when they award national scholarships or recruit new staff members. Will the ranking game still continue after 10 years? Yes, but probably in a very different form.

The ongoing phenomenon of universities and individuals seeking world-class environments for learning and researching will continue. Therefore, the number of universities striving to establish world-class status will increase further. For example, in 2014, the Japanese government began a 10-year project to support “Top Global Universities,” which aims to get 10 universities ranked within the top 100 in the world.

At the same time, the environments surrounding universities have changed dramatically since the introduction of the Internet. Almost all newly created knowledge now becomes immediately accessible from anywhere in the world. Language barriers still exist, but the automation of translation is nearly at the stage of practical use. Even analyses and writings, a core part of knowledge creation, are becoming automated. Audiovisual materials and cloud-based learning tools are already merging into daily teaching, learning, and researching. Detailed activities of researchers can be monitored with relation to what he or she publishes, what kind of literature is published, which citations are used, and the impact of specific work. This information is often reported to the authors and also to university managers.

The ranking methodologies have also changed frequently, which has occurred partly through the rapid increase in information concerning university activities and also through a significant increase in “rankers” with diversified backgrounds. The results of university rankings are also becoming diversified. For example, in 2014, only two Japanese universities were ranked in the top 100 *Times Higher Education* World University Rankings and Best Global Universities from *US News and World Report*, while three