

Higher Education in Africa
Crises, Reforms and Transformation

Working Paper Series

Author

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Introduction

According to its mission statement, and as stipulated in its objectives, the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA) aims to foster and to promote research and the production and dissemination of knowledge in a social space that guarantees freedom of thought throughout Africa. It seeks to 'strengthen the institutional basis of knowledge production in Africa by proactively engaging and supporting other research institutions and their networks of scholars within its programs of activities'. Furthermore, it is stated that 'as part of this goal, the Council actively also encourages cooperation and collaboration among African universities, research organisations and other training institutions'. Given these objectives, CODESRIA is directly concerned with the state of the learning and research institutions in Africa, especially the universities, and the prolonged crises that African higher education institutions have been facing.

Undertaking research is a necessary tool to analyse and understand the social, political, and economic implications of the crisis in the African higher education institutions, and the possible action for a positive and constructive transformation of these institutions. Some of the pressing issues at the beginning of the twenty-first century were already identified and debated by the first generation of African scholars at the time of the inception of CODESRIA. That is to say the current problems have developed over several decades. Their full-blown stage has hindered an enabling condition for the African institutions of higher learning, thus making it difficult to function to their capacity and to play their role in contributing to promote social progress through effective and quality teaching and relevant research.

In the book produced by the Association of African Universities entitled *Creating the African University: Emerging Issues of the 1970s* edited by Yesufu (1973), African scholars, many of whom studied in higher education institutions located in former colonial powers and generally in industrial countries, articulated relevant issues for African institutions of higher learning. They thoroughly

and critically examined the issues from various disciplinary, sub-regional, and national perspectives. They were only in the beginning of the second decade after the process of independence of African countries started. Thus, these scholars rigorously addressed these issues, although at the time with a lesser sense of urgency. Indeed, they were still enthused by the euphoria of independence and had confidence in the potential capacity of these new African higher education institutions to contribute to the actualisation of the development projects throughout the continent.

In their debates, these scholars addressed specific questions of the role of African universities in development. They also discussed issues of research, the making of an African academic community, the need to Africanise the curriculum and to break the dependency link to the universities of the former colonial powers, and to imagine a mechanism for offering continuing and extra-mural education.

Using a methodology of case studies, new universities of Central, East, North, South, and West Africa were analysed to problematise the issues of the day and to present the prospects and challenges ahead. Given the nature of the historical period, absent from the case studies, were the existing universities of the Republic of South Africa. The country was still under the apartheid system. There were also the yet-to-be created universities of the countries still engaged in decolonisation wars in the Portuguese colonies, especially in Angola and Mozambique, and also in Zimbabwe and Namibia. In general, however, African political regimes had already formulated differing strategies and policies to deal with the pressing human resource needs.

At this present stage of the beginning of the Third Millennium – characterised by its fast pace – as illustrated by rapid changes, and related to the information and communication technologies, and the accelerated globalisation process, the problems that emerged in the 1970s have become part of major crises. The crises in higher education institutions have been further exacerbated by the challenges of the economic crisis and the Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs) and their direct and negative impact. It is also important to note that the emphasis in the above-mentioned study of the 1970s (Yesufu 1973) was on the universities rather than higher education in general.

It is necessary to define key concepts related to higher education that can facilitate the understanding of the nature and magnitude of the multifaceted crises that are confronted by the African higher education sub-sector, the type and range of reforms, innovations, and transformation that have been undertaken toward constructive prospects. While the terms ‘higher education’ and ‘university’ are, in some contexts, interchangeably used, they do not necessarily

cover the same reality. The university is a subset of the higher education set. Higher education has a more holistic resonance as it encompasses all post-secondary institutions. For a comprehensive analysis of the crises of African higher education and explorations of possible solutions to these crises, it is necessary to define higher education and to introduce the different types and the nature of the higher education institutions. This book is concerned with higher education in Africa, although, given their special roles, universities are emphasised.

Universities have historically played and will continue to play the largest and most central role in higher education, covering the scope of higher learning and production of knowledge. With a few exceptions, such as the *grandes écoles* in the French tradition, universities have been considered more prestigious than other institutions of higher learning. There has been a tendency to treat the university learning experience as the one that truly deserves to be considered an education, even contrasting it with knowledge acquired in technical/vocational institutions labelled as training. Conceptually, training connotes the acquisition of technical skills geared toward performing specific tasks without necessarily an opportunity or requirement for the learner to acquire competence in critical thinking, broader knowledge and character to understanding the wider educational and societal contexts.

The term 'higher education' is taken to embody all organized learning and training activities at the tertiary level. This includes conventional universities (i.e. those with conventional arts, humanities, and science faculties) as well as specialized universities (like institutions specializing in agriculture, engineering, science, and technology). The concept also includes conventional post-secondary institutions (like polytechniques, colleges of education, and '*grandes écoles*'). Under the umbrella of 'higher education' come all forms of professional institutions... Even this wide spectrum does not exhaust the possibilities of forms of higher education (UNESCO 1994:7).

Given the historical development of the current higher education institutions in Africa, the universities have been at the centre of the higher education crises. The determinants and manifestations of these crises are complex, as they reflect historical and global processes of African societies and countries. CODESRIA argues, in the background that articulates the rationale for this green book, that these crises of diverse dimensions and intensity that afflict African higher education have invariably been linked to the main issue of funding. There are two dimensions of funding that are relevant in analysing African higher education. First of all, the availability, scarcity and absence of financial resources for higher

education determine the capacity of institutions to function and fulfil their educational and societal missions.

The second important aspect is the sheer power that is vested in the allocation of financial resources for education, and in any other social institution that translates into full decision-making power and authority over all the aspects of the higher education bodies and their priorities.

The quantity, nature, and sources of the financial resources for African higher education institutions inevitably have major consequences on the learning and intellectual output, and the limitations of the production of knowledge and access to publications. Thus, the general economic crisis and the subsequent severe financial constraints faced by African institutions, learners, and academics have led to what has been referred to as 'the book famine' as the material intellectual base has been eroded, with decaying libraries, hence difficult intellectual production and low output.

The level of academic research in Africa... remains weak. In 1995, the region was responsible for just 5,839 published academic papers (South Asia produced 15,995 published papers, and Latin America and the Caribbean 14,426). Only the Middle and North Africa produced fewer papers than Sub-Saharan Africa, yet the former's total had doubled since 1981, while Sub-Saharan Africa's had risen by one third (Bloom, Canning, and Chan 2005:6).

The legitimacy of the comparisons made by these authors may be questionable because they failed to take into account demographic factors by using raw numbers rather than per capita intellectual production and also, at least from CODESRIA's standpoint, by including North Africa in the Middle East. However there is no doubt that African scholars have been functioning in non-enabling structural conditions that have consistently led to limited intellectual output.

The severe limitations of resources and their impact on teaching, research and learning conditions have contributed to lowering the level of staff and student motivation. They have negatively impacted on curriculum development, the governance of the university and university life, the principles and practice of academic freedom, the capacity to hire, retain, and renew the teaching staff. They have created environments where routines of bare minimum in performing the respective tasks have become the norm, and which often shut off innovative impulses.

The learning process for students is characterised by limited exposure to the programmes designed to complete a specific cycle. The African higher education institutions since the 1970s have been generally characterised by the decline in

the environment of learning. The national and sub-regional contexts of political instability and diminished state/governmental legitimacy have led to an overall shift in the structure of incentives in the wider economy and society, and higher education in general—and hence also the pursuit of advanced learning in particular. The list could be extended to reflect the different manifestations and indirect ramifications of immediate or long-term impact.

Education has different stakeholders, which on the domestic front include families and students of different social origins; states; teaching, administrative, and technical staff; policymakers from within and outside the education sector; public and private employers. Through their contributions to the funding of education in African countries, foreign powers have *de facto* and sometimes *de jure* also exercised the rights to participate in, or even to lead, the formulation of African domestic and national educational policies. These external powers in industrial countries in general, especially former colonial powers, and international institutions, lending agencies and foundations that have been playing determining roles in formulating and deciding African policies and directly or indirectly, have been setting priorities. For decades, the World Bank has been the most notorious example of these external agencies that profoundly influence African education policies in general and the consideration accorded to higher education through financial resource allocation.

Domestic and external responses to African educational crises have taken different forms and originated from various sources at different points in the evolution of these crises confronting African institutions of higher learning, especially universities. Perceptions or actual understanding of the nature of the problems and the types of solutions considered most appropriate, have also shifted over time among domestic and external players. The most contentious policies since the 1980s have been related to those that have been or have been perceived to be designed and/or promoted by the World Bank, supported by conservative academics including some Africanist experts located in the North. The reality or the perception of such policies geared to dismantling African universities led to the emergence of a spirit of resistance among students and teaching staff.

Issues related to the programmes of the universities, such target-groups as students and their affiliated social programmes and teaching staff and their salaries and working conditions, the top-down managerial and essentially undemocratic nature of the approaches used by the World Bank to reach the decision proposed or imposed, have contributed to increasing the tensions. The timing, phasing, and sequencing of the reform agendas have been at the heart of numerous contentions that have translated into passive resistance and protests

and strikes by staff and students. Prolonged closures of the universities, and the massive emigration of experienced and qualified staff in search of stability to carry out their teaching and research agendas, are all different manifestations of the crises.

The hidden or open policy of downgrading the universities through diminished financial allocation, thus leading to dismantling them, was one among many other possible solutions envisaged by some external stakeholders and carried out by internal decision-makers. Various solutions targeting specific categories among the stakeholders or domains of the universities were proposed and even adopted and implemented at different periods. These solutions have been based on reforms that have been designed to change the entire university or higher education subsystem. Other types of changes, especially innovations, have focussed on specific levels, such as the institutions or academic units, or specific and critical areas, including formulation of the institutional mission and role, finance, relevance and quality of curriculum, governance, staff development, access and equity, student life, and formal linkage with the socio-cultural and business communities.

The scarcity of resources and its numerous social constraints tends to leave little time for the innovative impulse to be stimulated. Academics have to struggle to secure the means of living, as salaries lose their buying power, are irregularly paid, or are actually cut down, and cannot carry out their duties in a routine manner. The high student-to-teacher ratios tend to exacerbate their problem.

At the same time, in the most extreme cases of deprivation, as when the state has collapsed or in the contexts where armed conflicts have impeded any normal functioning, coping strategies have been devised by the universities and their staff and students. These strategies have had direct implications for the past practices, future development, and the philosophical underpinnings of higher education in Africa. When analysing the factors and experiences of constructive transformation, the lessons from these practices that, in their varieties and complexities, have been invented out of desperation, offer possible sources of inspiration and learning to be harnessed and emulated.

In formulating research topics on the crises, reforms, and transformation of African higher education, it is important to raise a few critical questions related to the different aspects including the following ones: How can one integrate the innovative and positive practices that emerged out of various situations of extreme constraints? How can they be used as an impetus for renewed reflections on the philosophical basis for creating and sustaining functioning higher education in Africa in normal contexts? What are the challenges and opportunities associated with the sustained high demand of higher education, which has led

to what some observers have referred to as 'massification'? What lessons about what it takes to sustain the conditions necessary for building a credible academic community, the prospects for the emergence of a distinctly African knowledge system, and sustaining the university as a public good? How to factor in the emergence of private universities and non-governmental research centres? What role can Information and communication technologies (ICTs) play in facilitating knowledge transmission without leaning toward the 'marketisation' of higher education? What kind of higher education ought to be fostered in the context of globalisation to resist the disorienting impact of the external origins of external forces defining the direction? These are some of the guiding questions in this Green Book. The issues CODESRIA identified as critical areas that it hopes to address through its research programme on higher education are:

- Rereading the History of African Higher Education Systems;
- Shifting /Competing Perspectives on the Philosophical Foundations of Higher Education in Africa;
- Shifting/Competing Perspectives on the Role of the University in National Development;
- The University as a Public Good;
- Continuity and Change in the Relations between the State and the University in Africa;
- The Origins, Nature, and Dimensions of the Crises of the Higher Education System and their Policy Consequences;
- Shifting Perceptions of the Crises of the Higher Education System and their Policy Consequences;
- Coping Strategies Evolved by Universities and University Communities to Manage the Crises;
- Trends in Curriculum Development and the Administration of Exams;
- Continuity and Change in Campus Life: Violence, Secret Cults, and Militias;
- Trends in the Revival of International Exchange Programmes;
- The African Academic Diaspora and the African University;
- Issues in the Governance of the African Higher Education System;
- The Changing Nature of Student–Staff Relations;

- Gender, Generational, and Disciplinary Issues in the Composition and Re-composition of the African Academy;
- The Content and Direction of Competing Proposals for Reform in the Higher Education System;
- University Autonomy and the Challenges of Financing Higher Education;
- The Rise of the Private University in Africa;
- Opportunities, Problems, and Prospects of the African Knowledge System(s); and
- Competing and Alternative Strategies for Overcoming the Problems of the Higher Education System.

As it was rightly pointed out in CODESRIA's background document on the terms of reference, this suggested list of issues to be tackled in future research is not exhaustive. Indeed, lingering and major issues such as the language factor in the higher education equation remain important. Emerging critical areas that need to be taken into account in any higher education research programme also include the accelerating new trend of globalisation and its specific implications for research and control over the world's natural resources and cultural wealth; the new information and communication technologies (ICTs) and their impact on distance learning and what has been referred to as the information age. The question of lifelong learning whereby those who voluntarily or by force interrupt their studies can resume them at different stages of their personal and professional lives, is equally important. There are ramifications for individual decision-making processes, demand, and opportunities for further learning related to jobs or general improvement of knowledge acquisition.

In connection with the question of gender and equality of educational opportunity, issues related to single-sex institutions, with the new all-women universities – beside Sudan which was the only exception for a long time – deserve focus. Issues relevant to socially marginalised groups – ranging from people who are physically challenged to populations with non-mainstream lifestyles like nomads who stretch across national borders throughout the continent – constitute real challenges that need to be analysed. The point being made is that there are many relevant aspects of higher education that are not fully covered by the above list.

Instead of analysing, for the Green Book, the above issues under individual subheadings, my approach is to rather address them within a comprehensive analysis of the current state of African higher education and the perspectives

and possibilities for a research agenda that will call for various topics to address all these dimensions. Indeed, conceived as state of the art, this Green Book seeks to present, in historical perspective, African higher education as a social institution that reflects its socio-historical and global dynamics. It is important to explain that the use of a historical approach and the presentation of specific historical facts are not for the sake of reciting history. History, especially as it relates indigenous African experiences, is not meant to be a glorification of descriptive history. In the search for relevant change, the message given by using a historical approach and analysis is to make a statement that a phenomenon that came into existence historically can go out of existence or can be altered. History is, in essence, social. The historical perspective aims to provide refined literacy about the process of the African higher education's journey and critically rethinking the possibilities for introducing and carrying out planned change in the higher education system.

The state, prospects, and challenges of higher education institutions in Africa, conceived as a microcosm of the broader society, reflect those of the situation of global society at specific historical moments. As Sall (2002) rightly points out:

... the fortunes of the universities have been very closely linked to those of the state, and as the latter went through its phases of developmentalism, structural adjustment, and post-adjustment, the universities also went through the same experiences, and their position in the order of public priorities changed accordingly. However, despite the waning and now waxing of attention to the universities, recent research has shown that universities were always present as key sites of public concern and debate in most sub-Saharan African countries.

It is worth emphasising the fact that while there is widespread common knowledge of the colonial inheritance of current African institutions, this understanding does not suggest sufficient grasp of the nature of the process of the transfer, which makes the task of undertaking change monumental. A cross-sectional analysis of current institutions without sufficient sensitivity to the nature of the systems African countries have been emulating and the failure to critically examine the depth of the impact of the legacy can hinder the search for appropriate solutions. Thus, it is important to recall the roots of European education systems and the process and agents of their transfer to Africa, as a refined understanding of the past is necessary to fully appreciate the present, and adequately plan for the future. The arguments in this book are presented under eight major headings, including this introduction and an extensive bibliography.

The first chapter, following this introduction, problematises the concept and various types of higher education. Given the European origins of contemporary African education systems, the European historical process that produced their institutions of higher learning is examined. The various types of higher education in African history, including those of indigenous and external roots, are presented. For the contemporary context, the typology of higher education institutions and the articulated social mission of post-colonial higher education are addressed.

The second chapter discusses the colonial and neo-colonial origins and contexts in which contemporary African higher education institutions have evolved. It examines, using the dependency framework, the mutually reinforcing continued processes of cultural imperialism exercised from former colonial powers and their proxies of international organisations, and African perpetuation of cultural colonisation 'by choice' from within.

The third chapter examines the educational crises by locating them within the general economic and global societal crises. The specific implications and manifestations of these crises for African higher education, especially the universities, are analysed. This chapter also analyses the aggressive policies that were formulated in the context of structural adjustment programmes (SAPs) by international financial institutions and that were implemented by African official policymakers, and which constituted a hindrance to the realisation of the idea of the university as an institution for national development.

The fourth chapter discusses the African awakening and the early wave of post-colonial internally driven reforms that aimed to tackle the problem of the colonial legacy. The new types of reforms, recent innovations, and transformation are then analysed. Unlike the first wave of reform, many aspects of these new changes are related to the increased involvement and complexity of major external actors. In addition to the former colonial powers, other industrial countries in bilateral or multilateral frameworks and various types of international organisations, (the most prominent being the World Bank) have had increased participation in the key decisions affecting African higher education.

The fifth chapter critically examines the new challenges within the global and local objective conditions. The sixth chapter examines the structural change, transformation, and localisation of higher education as a public good and the prospects for a rooted, African-centred, and invigorated, higher education that can facilitate social progress in Africa in the twenty-first century and beyond. This section also identifies relevant areas for reflection as possible research trails for CODESRIA's future programmes and networks on higher education in Africa.

Introduction

The conclusion summarises the main arguments. It points to possible research trails and topics for the full understanding of the dynamics of the local and global forces and the challenges and opportunities for the development of autonomous and holistic African higher education institutions with the universities as key sites for the production of relevant knowledge which is critical for African agendas of social progress.

Finally, the bibliography aims to inform about the existing sources and to help identify the gaps to be filled through future research.