

The Status of Higher Education in Africa

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**Being an invited contribution to the Panel Discussion in the Launch of
Weaving Success: Voices of Change in African Higher Education- A
project of the Partnership for Higher Education in Africa (PHEA) held
at the Institute of International Education, 809 United Nations Plaza,
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It is a great pleasure and honour for me to participate in this launch of such a wonderful project on behalf of the Association of African Universities (AAU), the voice of African Union, in matters of Higher Education in the Continent. I am sure the reviewer of the launch would do justice to the publication but for me I can only add that *Weaving Success* has in a nutshell told the success story of the investment and assistance in higher education in Africa as done over the years by Carnegie Corporation of New York, The Ford Foundation, The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, The Rockefeller Foundation, The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, and The Kresge Foundation. I must, through the humble but appreciative voice of AAU, on behalf of Africa, thank you all for supporting Africa. No economic, social, political and other development in Africa can truly eventuate without educational development. Education, and higher education in particular, is the fulcrum and pivot upon which all other developments rest and rotate around. In the words of Andrew Carnegie, 1887, **“Upon no foundation but that of popular education can a man erect the structure of an enduring civilization”** No better attestation to this can be found than what all of you have done for and in Africa, which is being showcased to the world today through the launch of the book. Africa will forever remain grateful for this support.

Developments in higher education in Africa continue to be as tremendous as they have been challenging for the continent, to various governments and all other stakeholders. However, the challenges have never been as profound as they now are in recent times. The catalysts for educational reform, which include massification, equity and social justice, inclusiveness, expansion, employability, globalisation, skills and competencies shortage, and national development have continued to multiply. At the same time within the continent, between countries and within countries, differences in areas such as demography, funding, physical infrastructure, levels of academic support, qualified academic staff, and local challenges have continued to increase rather steeply. This is not to mention the double-edged effect of brain drain which stands apart as an issue of major occurrence affecting higher education in Africa. All these are occurring in an environment which demands that higher education in Africa must focus on

global competitiveness while it strives to be locally relevant and centrally placed to contribute meaningfully to sustainable total development of the continent, countries and individuals.

The emerging global landscape being drawn by recent developments has shown very clearly that knowledge capability and capacity, rather than natural resources, is the greatest determinant of a country's entry into, and effective participation in, global competitiveness. It goes without saying, therefore, that higher education contributes significantly to the political, scientific, technological, economic, social and human development of any country. This is even more so for the developing countries of Africa, a continent of about One billion people characterised by the poorest countries in the world, with the world's highest illiteracy rates, lowest participation rates in higher education, huge capacity development needs, over 20million seeking employment annually with the youth constituting 60% of the unemployed, and a massive demand for tertiary education.

The immediate post-independent era in Africa saw higher education as a "public good" offering knowledge and social justice through fair access to knowledge resources, as well as offering a broad range of skills and capabilities through research to accelerate the continent's development (Sawyerr, 2004). The myriad of social and economic challenges that plagued Africa, beginning from the 1980s and the subsequent structural adjustment reforms undertaken by many African Governments led to the gross underfunding of higher education, which had hitherto been mainly supported from public funds. As the demand for higher education expanded significantly on the continent as a whole, many African higher education institutions have responded by admitting greater numbers of students each year. The students' population tripled from 2.7 million in 1991 to 9.3 million in 2006. A projection of the recent trends in individual countries suggests that the entire continent will have between 18 million and 20 million students by 2015 (World Bank, 2010).

All the above have contributed to altering the balance of power between the State and the university system in many ways. In the face of continuing dwindling government provisions of fund to universities and higher education system as a whole, a number of changes are taking place.

Partly as a result of globalization, an increasing number of private universities have been established in Africa to, among others, absorb the spill-over from the pool of fully qualified but unsuccessful applicants to the public institutions, and to offer a limited range of programmes which tend to be more market driven. From an estimated 7 private universities in 1960 to 27 in 1990, by 2006 this education service sub-sector had accounted for 22% of higher education students on the continent, a percentage close to levels observed in Europe (World Bank, 2010). Africa now has about 800 universities and over 1500 institutions of higher learning, in which the percentage of private universities is on a sharp increase especially in the past couple of years; the indication is that in 5 years Africa could have more for-profit private universities than those established by governments.

The contributions of private higher education institutions to the internationalization of higher education in Africa can be seen in the changing landscape of higher education provision. For

example, in Uganda, there are currently seven public and 27 private universities, while all the 40 universities in Somalia are privately owned (WIKIPEDIA 2012). Ethiopia has 22 public universities and over 30 private institutions, while South Africa has 21 public universities and 87 private universities (World Bank 2009). Ghana has six public and 42 private universities, while in Nigeria, there are 36 federal universities, 37 state universities, and 45 private universities (National Accreditation Board 2012; National Universities Commission 2012). The statistics clearly show that private providers contribute very significantly to higher education in Africa and by extension, to the internationalization of higher education in areas such as enhancing the international profile of the institution; strengthening research and knowledge production; and diversification of faculty and staff.

The proliferation of private higher education institutions in Africa has, *inter alia*, created some challenges that need to be addressed (see for example, Sawyerr 2004). These challenges include:

- i. shortage of resources, infrastructure, and funds;
- ii. their over reliance on part-time faculty from the public institutions with implications both for the quality of delivery at the private universities and for effective performance in the public institutions;
- iii. the concentration of for-profits private institutions on directly marketable courses and programmes, thereby out-competing the public institutions in respect of a category of high-paying courses and programmes that the latter could use to augment their income earning capacity; and
- iv. the absence of research in private higher education as a necessary part of the higher education enterprise.

In national systems where the public universities are already weak and vulnerable, these negative features could have an exaggerated distortionary effect (Sawyerr, 2004). These are indicative of the attention being required in the higher education sector of modern day Africa.

Faced with the huge unmet demand in higher education, governments' inability to properly fund higher education amidst the opening up of the terrain of higher education, Africa is faced with students seeking admissions in institutions with varying and many with questionable quality profile. Stakeholders including businesses will increasingly demand for better and relevant curricula, state-of-the-art infrastructure and graduates better prepared for the job markets. Students will look elsewhere, including overseas institutions, for higher education with all the trappings and attractions of brain drain and an education which might not make them fit into the local development in Africa. In addition, the social and economic dimension of providing education for all and laying solid foundation for sustainable development will face serious threat.

Needless to say that all the above would have significant impact on universities' local and international agendas, including their responsiveness to the demand of delivering quality higher education to Africa. As African universities struggle to become notable players in the global arena, they must grapple with a number of salient issues which include the need to rethink what higher education means to Africa in the 21st century, address issues of balance between enrolment and quality of education, reassess the place of private universities and comparability,

consider the shift from and tension between existing model of fixed campus environment and emerging concept of ODL, vigorously embark upon curriculum change and review key skills to be acquired in undergraduate studies, and properly situate postgraduate and research studies.

With limited human and other essential resources and differing levels of development and infrastructure, the way forward for African higher education is collaboration and working within a continental framework. Africa's answer to higher education in the foreseeable future must be properly grounded in the effective implementation of the 2006 Plan of Action for the Second Decade of Education for Africa which has been endorsed by the African Union. It spells out the ingredients for effective, relevant, efficient and revitalised higher education for Africa in a bid to make it globally competitive. These include:

- Encouraging greater mobility of academics, researchers, staff and students; and the recognition of qualifications from and by the different regions of Africa through the harmonization of degree structures. These could be achieved under the umbrella of the Regional Convention on the recognition of academic qualifications in African states, commonly known as the Arusha Convention which was developed 1981.
- Establishing an African Higher Education and Research Space that will pay serious attention to institutional and national Quality Assurance systems and promote high level relevant research and postgraduate training tailored towards solving the daily problems which plague African communities.
- Adopting and adapting Open and Distance Learning as instructional delivery mechanisms in Sub-Saharan Africa as has been done in other continents of the world if Africa is to significantly raise its tertiary education enrolment ratio from the current 6% (achieved through the face-to-face mode) to at least 50% within the next 5 years.
- Using Information and Communication Technologies effectively for instructional delivery, professional communication, to develop, produce, acquire and distribute knowledge, skills and competencies across the continent as fast as they are available.
 - Building human resource base that will seek newer and effective ways to combat diseases, reduce energy costs and address climate change;
 - Creating centres of excellence within each region of the continent to develop robust postgraduate studies and develop strong research base with global competitive advantage; and
 - Seeking opportunities for collaboration and partnership on equal and mutually beneficial platforms with the international world including universities in other continents, development partners, organisation and agencies genuinely interested in higher education in Africa.

All the above call for renewed vigour in pursuing the objectives of higher education in Africa. The future for African higher education appears really bright but however means lots of

challenges for the African Union, The Association of African Universities (AAU), for the university communities in Africa and for our partners also. I need not preach to the converted but I am sure you would appreciate if I again say, like Oliver Twist, that Africa needs more from you. You have assisted us to get off the ground after the terrible down trend in higher education following the 1988 World Bank report. Higher education in Africa now needs to consolidate and be counted amongst the global community as building an excellent system. This is where the continued and sustained assistance by your Foundations would be very well cherished. It would help to assure the world of your continued commitment to ‘doing real and permanent good in this world for another century’ (Carnegie Foundation, 2011).

Thank you very much.

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