



The Fifth African Higher Education Week and RUFORUM Biennial Conference 2016

Building a High Quality Higher Education System in Africa: What Game Changers?

Plenary Session at the Fifth African Higher Education Week and RUFORUM Biennial Conference

Concept Note

Background & Introduction

“Talk-shops about world-class research universities or even centres of excellence alone will not accelerate economic growth in Africa without a sustainable investment and political support for the reinforcement of a system of world-class training and research in universities in support of accelerated socio- economic growth in Africa”

The Higher Education sector in Africa has expanded greatly in the past few decades, growing to over five million participants from just below 70,000 at the end of the 1970’s. Demand for access to higher education continues to grow fueled by expanded universal primary and secondary education systems and fast increasing populations. Reports from the World Bank indicate that there are expected to be over 11 million new entrants, annually, to the job market in Africa over the next few years, underscoring the large number of youth in Africa and the enormity of the challenge. Close to half a billion Africans (50%) are less than 24 years of age. As the availability of employment opportunities in the public sector continues to shrink, the new entrants to the job market will have to rely increasingly on finding employment opportunities in the non-public sectors, including non-governmental, and civil society organizations but most importantly within the private sector. Graduates will not only have to have stronger perception and knowledge of the contexts in which they work but will need to have entrepreneurial and strong communication and networking skills in addition to technical skills. Graduate will need to be job creators rather than searching for scarce employment job opportunities. This presents an evolution from the traditional type of graduate that universities were set up to train around the time of independence. There

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is a need to create and adopt new ways of teaching and learning in higher education, research and innovation in the agricultural and related sciences that would lead to graduates with the necessary mix of scientific knowledge, managerial skills and societal adaptability to operate in a changing environment. Such graduates need to be able to shape their own futures and to generate and circulate new science-based knowledge with greater socio-economic and development relevance and impact.

Introduction

The quality of higher education systems has thus, overall been called into question. Higher education institutions face a myriad of challenges that limit their ability to strengthen the quality of their programs. A number of these arose from the long period of neglect in the 1990s and early 2000s that arose from a refocusing of government policy from higher education to primary and secondary educations systems in Africa that were driven by the World Bank. The now famous Policy Paper by Psacharapoulos (1986) recommended focus away from higher education based on his finding that revealing greater returns to primary and secondary schooling vs higher education. More recent studies have now shown that the opposite is truer: that returns to education were shown to increase with years of schooling, and greater returns were found, as might be expected, in Sub-Saharan Africa, as this region is coming from a very low level. Higher Education sector challenges today include inadequate staffing, particularly at PhD level. As the sector expanded, there was no parallel investment in human resources and infrastructure development within higher education institutions. The resulting conundrum, means that more highly qualified staff are first required to support the escalation of PhD training at African universities and yet the scaffolding for PhD training is not available in many institutions. Strengthening higher education and training in Africa, particularly at postgraduate level would provide the staffing to support the concentration of talent at African ‘centers of excellence’, including through reversal of brain drain, and further strengthening quality of local faculty. Amidst these challenges, there have been various efforts to strengthen higher education quality including the establishment of centers of leadership and centers of excellence in the region.

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The Regional Universities Forum for Capacity in Agriculture (RUFORUM) was established by African Vice Chancellors in 2004 to respond to these challenges, within the agricultural and related sectors. The Vice Chancellors recognized that they could benefit more from collaboration rather than from working alone and competing in strengthening postgraduate training at African universities. RUFORUM was set up with mission to *'strengthen the capacities of Universities to foster innovations responsive to the demands of smallholder farmers and value chains through the training of high quality researchers, the output of impact-oriented research, and the maintenance of collaborative working relations among researchers, farmers, market actors, national agricultural research and advocacy institutions, and governments'*. Its expected strategic results are:

1. Masters and doctoral programs responsive to stakeholder needs and national/regional development goals.
2. Shared research and education/training facilities and capacities rationalised for enhanced economies of scale and scope.
3. Innovative education/training research and outreach activities supported by adaptive management structures in universities contributing to policy and development practice.
4. Operational capacity and approaches for innovative, quality and impact-oriented agricultural R4D mainstreamed in universities.
5. Increased participation and voices of women in education/training, research and production and marketing of knowledge;
6. Increased use of technology to support effective, decentralised learning and sharing of knowledge.
7. A dynamic regional platform for policy advocacy, lobbying, coordination, and resource mobilization for improved education/ training, research and outreach by universities.

As part of its operations, RUFORUM has initiated various activities to strengthen university quality, including the establishment of 'centers of leadership' for thematic areas to support the implementation of the STISA,

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CAADP and national visions. The regional programs are built around RUFORUM networking operandi. RUFORUM has established 10 regional PhD programs including in plant breeding and biotechnology; dryland resource management, soil and water management, aquaculture and fisheries, agricultural rural innovations, food science and nutrition among others. The programs benefit from skills and expertise from across the region and train for the continent by opening mechanism for mobility of staff and students through the RUFORUM umbrella.

In addition to RUFORUM, there are a number of other on-going initiatives that are focused on strengthening higher education in Africa. Support from the European Union has enabled engagement of European partner universities through programs such as the Educational Linkages Program (EDULINK) and the ACP Science and Technology to strengthen African higher education. Bilateral programs have also provided significant support such as through USAID’s Feed the Future, NUFFIC, NORAD, SIDA, the French Government and others. More recently, the African Centers of Excellence Project, was created by the World Bank through IDA funding to national governments. Established in two phases, the first phase focused on West Africa and Phase 2 was recently launched that focusses on Eastern and Southern Africa.

RUFORUM has further built on the work by the Inter-University Council of East Africa (IUCEA) jointly with the National Commissions and the Higher Education Quality Management Initiative for Southern Africa (HEQMISA) to strengthen Quality Assurance Mechanisms (QAM) and Credit Accumulation Transfer (CAT) frameworks. The previous efforts have largely focused on undergraduate training, with pilot programmes in ICT and Business Management and RUFORUM has expanded this across the two regions, with focus on postgraduate level.

However, a lot more will have to be done to surmount the significant challenges facing higher education institutions in Africa. It is clear that innovative means will have to be brought to bear to support the strengthening of the quality of higher education institutions. These ‘Game-Changers’ need to be built around them a set of incentives that are

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adaptable to various systems across Africa while ensuring quality of higher education. For example, academic mobility is being used by the European Union through the Intra-Africa Academic Mobility Program (previously the Intra-ACP Academic mobility program) to strengthen the cooperation between higher education institutions. Academic mobility is being seen as a means to ‘contribute to the improvement of the quality of higher education through the promotion of internationalization and harmonization of programmes and curricula within participating institutions’. Secondly, mobility will support students and staff to learn about the contexts in the partner countries within Africa, and ‘benefit linguistically, culturally and professionally from experience gained in the context of mobility’¹.

ICT could be another ‘game changer’: 1) ICT technologies and devices are becoming much cheaper and accessible; 2) Connectivity is becoming more pervasive and mobile – even in rural areas – with a broad range of wireless, mobile and other devices, and smart and intelligent devices capable of a wide range of operations and 3) More services will be provided through cloud computing – removing the need for sophisticated local ICT systems and capabilities.

There is need to more aggressively search for and lobby for political support to ‘Game-changers’ to surmount current challenges and transform the higher education sector in Africa to contribute more meaningfully to national development efforts.

Objectives of the side Event

The overall goal of the session is to review the higher education sector in Africa, to identify lessons and opportunities to support the enhancement of quality of the sector within context. These ‘Game-changers’ would have to have the potential to radically transform the higher education sector in Africa.

Approach and Methodology

A plenary session will be held on Friday 21 October, 2016 at the Century City Conference City in Cape Town, South Africa. The Session will be moderated by a Chair. The Meeting will bring together higher education

¹ Guidelines for the Intra-Africa academic mobility scheme 2016. See www.eacea.ec.europa.eu

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experts and policy makers from around the globe to deliberate on challenges and lessons for the higher sector in Africa. A key note presentation will be delivered by leading higher education experts to set the stage for plenary discussions and the parallel events. The first key note will focus on 'Prospects for Quality Higher Education in Africa'. Following this presentation, a respondent will make remarks to provide additional input to the key note paper, both providing important gap filling information, but also where necessary providing rebuttal and broadening the ideas available for discussion. A panel discussion will ensue. The Panel will highlight important innovations that would be potential 'game-changers' higher education. The Parallel session after the plenary will enable detailed discussion on more focused areas for in-depth discussion and recommendations for the Conference.

Expected outputs of the session

The following are the expected outputs from the Session:

1. Possible the strategies for assisting African Universities to more systematically strengthen quality of higher education
2. Information on innovative programs in higher education that demonstrate effectiveness in achieving objectives of the higher education system in Africa
3. Key messages to African policy makers for influencing a sustainable commitment to support agricultural higher education in Africa

Venue and Participants

Venue: Century City Conference Centre

Date & Time: Friday 21st October 2016 from 0830-1040

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