

Background

Africa is a continent of opportunity, with the youngest population on the planet. While ‘talent is equally distributed opportunity is not’ (UNESCO, 2022). For example, access to higher education in Africa is dramatically low, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa, where students with the potential to succeed in tertiary education, belonging to disadvantaged or marginalised groups, do not make it to tertiary education. In sub-Saharan Africa, the gross enrolment ratio in higher education reached only 9% in 2020 (compared to 40% worldwide), and the gender parity index showed that 78 women for every 100 men participated in higher education.

Regarding knowledge production, Africa invests a mere 0.6% of GDP on research and development, compared to a world average of 1.79% (UNESCO, 2021), and generates less than 1% of the world’s research. Doctoral education has received lower priority in Africa, given the attention to the undergraduate level: an unbalance that plays against the significant interdependence between these levels. In addition, relevant studies (British Council and DAAD, 2018) have highlighted low or inconsistent PhD capacity despite the significant expansion in master’s level graduations – an issue related to funding capacity and lack of mechanisms to assess the quality and socio-economic relevance of PhD outputs, among others. Moreover, Africa ‘faces a huge digital skills gap, which is diluting economic opportunities and development. Some 230 million jobs across the continent will require some level of digital skills by 2030’ (World Bank, 2020).

The Continent experiences one of the greatest migration waves in history due to internal displacements associated with people’s search for employment opportunities or with humanitarian and other crises (UNESCO, 2020). As in other regions, academic mobility is increasing in the Continent and thus recognition systems need to be enhanced or established. However, robust quality assurance mechanisms and agencies, which are key to upholding academic standards, do not exist in some countries.

To engage firmly in a sustainable development path, Africa needs more inventors, innovators, scientists, technologists, academics, and researchers. For this to happen, the region requires adequately resourced and academically excellent universities and higher technical institutions that train, research and innovate; companies that are entrepreneurial and investing in research and development; incubators that can nurture new technologies and partnerships and venture capital networks that can sponsor these initiatives. At the same time, Africa needs to implement pro-equity policies throughout the education system and appropriate measures for an equitable distribution of opportunities to enter tertiary education, thereby attracting more and more diverse skills for fairer and more sustainable growth.

To accomplish these purposes, the region should elaborate sound policies and strategies for strengthening higher education systems, based on reliable data and information. According to an initial needs assessment and mapping conducted by UNESCO, there have been many efforts to increase the production and dissemination of data on tertiary education in and for Africa. Yet, internationally comparable information remains limited and data collection across Africa is weak. Hence, there is a great need to improve the quality, coverage, and frequency of data collection and strengthen capacities for data analysis to adequately inform education policy discussions and decisions.

Campus Africa Programme

In an effort to support African Member States in addressing these challenges, UNESCO elaborated the flagship programme I ‘**Campus Africa: Reinforcing Higher Education in Africa**’ within the framework of its [Operational Strategy for Priority Africa 2022-2029](#), in alignment with the Sustainable Development Goals ([SDGs](#)), in particular,

SDG 4 on quality education, and with the [African Union 2063 Agenda](#) - ‘The Africa We Want’, in particular, its Goal on “well-educated citizens and skills revolution underpinned by science, technology and innovation”.

The overall objective of the Campus Africa Flagship Programme is to **build integrated, inclusive, and quality tertiary education systems and institutions, for the development of inclusive and equitable societies in the Continent**. The Programme is implemented along three interrelated main lines of action through which UNESCO jointly with its partners will strengthen and enhance equity and quality of higher education systems, connect Africa’s tertiary education systems, institutions, researchers, and communities, and promote mobility and employability of higher education students. To achieve the Campus Africa objective, UNESCO works with its networks and partners to pool expertise and resources and ensure synergies in action and sustainable impact.

Main Line of Action 1: Enhance the research capacity of African tertiary institutions and increase research outcomes with effective networking

Workstream 1.1: Enhance inter-university collaboration in Africa by facilitating the development of collaborative research and doctoral programmes that prioritize interdisciplinary work and focus on SDGs-related issues. The **UNESCO Chairs network*** within Africa is the primary stakeholder and will be supported to strengthen and expand cooperation among higher education institutions (HEIs) within Africa and beyond.

Workstream 1.2: Support and strengthen mechanisms that facilitate the exchange of students and professors and investment in joint research programmes and publication, and provide access to research grants, scholarships and fellowships that give due attention to girls and women applicants, as well as to applicants from marginalised population groups.

** UNESCO leads the [UNESCO chairs and UNITWIN Networks Programme](#) created in 1992, to promote international inter-university cooperation and networking to enhance institutional capacities through knowledge sharing and collaborative work. Through this network of 850 higher education institutions in 117 countries, resources are pooled to address pressing challenges and contribute to the development of their societies and notably to the SDGs. As of 2023, there are 98 UNESCO Chairs in Africa active in all UNESCO fields of competence and focused on SDG-related themes: sustainability, climate change, human rights, inclusion, gender, education, teacher education, science and technology, water and ocean, engineering and mathematics, peace and democracy, urban development, etc.*

Main Line of Action 2: Improve Equity and Quality in higher education

Workstream 2.1: Improve **access and inclusion** and address gender disparities in tertiary education. Actions are focused on strengthening higher technical education to respond to national skill needs for development, by enhancing labour market-oriented teaching and competency-based learning.

Workstream 2.2: Enhance access to quality tertiary education, student mobility and employability by supporting the establishment of robust mechanisms for the **recognition of qualifications and quality assurance as well as national information centres**, within the frameworks of the UNESCO [Global Convention](#) on Higher Education and the regional [Addis Convention](#). Particular attention is given to the design and implementation of targeted measures to mitigate the challenges faced by students, and refugees, in particular through the promotion of the [UNESCO Qualifications Passport for Refugees and Vulnerable Migrants](#).

Main Line of Action 3: Improve evidence-based policymaking in higher education

Workstream 3.1: Provide technical support to strengthen capacities and mechanisms for higher education data collection, dissemination, and analysis to inform policymaking in higher education. Partnerships and financial resources will be leveraged and mobilized to ensure synergies among all international organizations and African specialized entities.

Contact: p.portales@unesco.org