Les Cahiers d'Afrique de l'Est / The East African Review

54 | 2020

Enseignement supérieur dans les Afriques : le temps des réformes

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Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/eastafrica/1143>

DOI: 10.4000/eastafrica.1143

ISSN: 2790-1076

This article is a translation of:

Étudier l'enseignement supérieur dans les Afriques : pour une analyse scientifique des réformes du secteur - URL : <https://journals.openedition.org/eastafrica/1141> [fr]

Publisher

IFRA - Institut Français de Recherche en Afrique

Electronic reference

Olivier Provini, Cédric Mayrargue and Ibrahim Chitou, "Studying Higher Education in Multi-Faceted Africa: For a Scientific Analysis of Sector Reforms", *Les Cahiers d'Afrique de l'Est / The East African Review* [Online], 54 | 2020, Online since 30 June 2020, connection on 29 December 2022. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/eastafrica/1143> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/eastafrica.1143>

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Studying Higher Education in Multi-Faceted Africa: For a Scientific Analysis of Sector Reforms

Olivier Provini, Cédric Mayrargue and Ibrahim Chitou

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- 1 Students across the continent, for example in South Africa since 2015, have mobilised to protest the increase in university tuition fees, condemn the marketisation of education, and question the content and purpose of higher education (Botiveau 2016). In the Francophone countries of Africa, academic staff have attended a great many workshops aiming to reconfigure their study programmes according to the Licence (Bachelor)-Master-Doctorate (LMD) model, a process which entails calculating the number of course units that are required to validate a student's programme of study. The media and local officials continue to rush to cover events such as the creation of a brand-new private institution funded by a local entrepreneur, the opening of a prestigious European or American university branch campus, or the laying of a foundation stone for a new lecture theatre funded by a foreign government. Everywhere, policies for evaluation, standardisation, and programme accreditation are being implemented. Across the continent, universities are proliferating and new governments question the legitimacy of those set up by their predecessors, as was the case in Benin following the 2016 presidential elections.
- 2 All of these events attest to the large-scale nature of the reforms which have impacted higher education systems on the African continent for many years. Acting in turn as instigators and bystanders are the students, academic staff, administrators, ministry officials, states, regional and international organisations, private stakeholders, and local authorities. Changes can be observed on multiple levels, together with an unprecedented growth in student numbers resulting from the recent mass expansion of the primary and secondary education sector. Between 2000 and 2010, the number of students registered in higher education institutions more than doubled, from 2.3 to 5.2 million (The Africa-America Institute 2015: 10), and participation rates in higher

education reached 8.5% for sub-Saharan Africa and 12% for the continent.¹ These rapid and fundamental changes have prompted the implementation of large-scale reforms across most states, with a view to improving higher education governance and quality.

- 3 Although a general transformation of higher education has arguably been widespread across Africa, it is nevertheless worth highlighting the diverse nature of these changes which have not been applied consistently. First, the timeframes varied according to the country: so-called liberal reforms were implemented somewhat earlier in English-speaking countries than in French- and Portuguese-speaking countries. Second, the severity of the changes was variable—various contextual aspects influenced how changes were being implemented, such as regime crisis and the operational capacity of governments and their institutions. Finally, the nature of the changes needs to be considered on a case-by-case basis as the national picture cannot be reduced to a single model, though one can identify a number of recurring trends, such as marketisation in the sector, new quality assurance procedures, and the politicisation of university reforms. One of the key aims of this article is thus to outline some of the common characteristics of the reforms that took place across the continent while also noting the need for researchers to understand the unique local settings within which these (no)change processes were implemented. The manifold yet unique nature of the changes result in a mixed picture, perhaps most noticeable when one wanders the halls of African campuses: on the one hand, deteriorating infrastructures, overcrowded lecture halls requiring students to arrive several hours early for class, and an understaffed and aging professoriate; on the other, modern buildings, the offer of vocational training courses to small numbers of students, as well as international exchange agreements and reliable internet connections.
- 4 A paradox underlies the present study: while the higher education sector has undergone significant and widespread change since the 1980s and 1990s, few research studies have been carried out on this topic within the Humanities and Social Sciences. Large-scale studies have been conducted in the school education sector—notably primary—which, admittedly, receives greater international (including financial) support and has undergone an unprecedented expansion process. However, it would seem that higher education in Africa is not yet considered a legitimate topic of research in and of itself, one that would be suited to enquiry and discuss some of the usual topics of African Studies, such as state trajectory, the drafting of public policy, or the study of social movements. Yet, investigating recent reforms in the higher education sector on the continent entails more than simply questioning the changes affecting the sector; it also means reflecting on the place that education and training hold in African societies and, beyond this, tackling key debates and meeting head-on the social, economic, political, and cultural challenges. This article therefore offers an initial review of existing work and suggests avenues for further reflection. Ultimately, the aim is to present higher education in African contexts as an object of study in its own right within the field of African Studies and, more widely, within the Humanities and Social Sciences.

Higher education: a sector structured and regulated by supranational actors

- 5 Since the 2000s, changes in higher education systems in Africa evolved in an international context marked by a growing interest in the sector from international donors and multilateral organisations. This enthusiasm partly explains the increase in activity and funding for expertise programmes. The full set of reforms manifests itself in a transnational flow of educational reforms between countries in the North and in the South, and within the southern countries themselves (Hirtt 2003; Lebeau 2006; Khelfaoui 2009; Makosso 2009; Akkari and Payet 2010; Leclerc-Olivier et al. 2011; Ball 2012; Charlier and Croché 2010, 2012; Oketch 2016). Nowadays, African agendas for higher education are shaped by the proffered expertise of international actors (bilateral cooperation, World Bank, International Association of Universities, The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], Francophone University Agency [AUF], Association of African Universities [AAU], the African and Malagasy Council for Higher Education [CAMES], etc.). By endorsing recruitment processes, projects, training programmes, reports and conferences, these actors promote technical skills and a specific vision of what higher education in Africa is, should be, and claims to be. This higher education expertise and international enthusiasm to develop and invest in the sector is set against a unique history characterised, since independence, by a wholesale reinterpretation of the purpose of the university and its role within society. From the early 1960s until late in the 1970s, national elites touted universities as emblems of colonial emancipation that must reform the curriculum imposed by—and modelled on—the knowledge systems of major cities. Above all, universities needed to promote the making of a new African elite, namely government officials, to replace colonial administrators. From the early 1980s until late in the 1990s, universities were heavily criticised on the grounds that they were operating under state supervision and authority, hence threatening their independence and the development of academic freedom and autonomy. A number of measures were subsequently adopted to release universities from the interference of restrictive governments: financial reform to guarantee universities' financial independence; political reform to enable the autonomous selection of administrators; and pedagogical reform to encourage student employability beyond the public sector.
- 6 Since the turn of the century, there has been a growing interest in the sector from international donors and organisations, particularly in view of the role that public and private tertiary institutions are perceived to play in terms of economic growth and development. It is on this topic of the role of higher education in economic development that there has been the most progress in terms of global knowledge and understanding, sustained by new theories and power dynamics between, notably, the World Bank and UNESCO (Davis 1983; Finnemore 1993; Alexander 2001; Banya and Elu 2001; Brock-Utne 2003; Klees et al. 2012; Stromquist Monkman 2014). Since the 1980s, experts from the World Bank have shaped higher education reforms on the continent and attempted to impose a neoliberal framework for solving problems and finding solutions in the sector. The 1988 policy study produced by the World Bank on the topic of higher education in sub-Saharan Africa marked a turning point in recommending a gradual reduction in public funding for the sector and a greater mobilisation of resources in primary education instead (World Bank 1988). This policy marked the start

of a new decade during which investment in primary education was given top priority as a form of economic development on the continent, to the detriment of tertiary education. In 2000, a report drafted in collaboration with UNESCO instigated a fundamental change in the investment strategy of international donors and organisations in the sector (World Bank and UNESCO 2000). It argued that the high priority assigned by international donors to investment in primary education in the 1990s had had dire consequences on higher education systems, for example in terms of faculty recruitment (World Bank and UNESCO 2000: 10). The report provided a new interpretation of the findings relating to the rate of social return on investments, citing Asian countries as an example, and argued for an increase in investment by international institutions and donors in order to promote the knowledge economy and the development of science and technology education, both key sources of employment and economic growth (see also World Bank 2007). This shift in international support was mainly apparent in the work of seven large American foundations (Carnegie, Ford, MacArthur, Rockefeller, Hewlett, Mellon and Kresge) that coordinated their support for development investment in African higher education. In 2000, the foundations launched the Partnership for Higher Education in Africa in order to promote the role of higher education in social and economic development (Lewis et al. 2010).

- 7 National and regional organisations also invested in higher education, for instance through funding from the African Development Bank. In West Africa in the late 2000s, the West African Economic and Monetary Union launched a support package for higher education for the benefit of its member countries. The package aimed to improve national systems and accelerate regional integration. An East African agenda for higher education, led by the Inter-University Council for East Africa (IUCEA) and receiving financial support from Germany under the aegis of the East African Community (EAC) regional organisation, also aimed to standardise higher education systems in the region in order to increase the mobility of students and staff and to promote knowledge sharing.
- 8 Around the same time, bilateral donors already active in the higher education sector developed support initiatives for the new reforms, particularly those implemented as a result of the Bologna process which aimed to harmonise and promote European higher education training structures. The promotion of a European model for higher education was also perceived by some as a driver for change in African states. This was the case for France, for instance, which encouraged the adoption of reforms and the reconfiguration of regional training structures by developing support mechanisms in the mid-2000s in partnership with national authorities in order to implement the LMD model in a number of Francophone countries. The Dutch and Belgians, through the Nuffic institute and the Interuniversity Council of the French Community of Belgium, also lent their support to the reforms with both funding and expertise, albeit in a smaller number of countries.
- 9 The keen interest shown by international and national donors and organisations in the African higher education sector triggered a number of consultancy and research studies on the many cycles of reforms in tertiary education. Various analyses were therefore conducted by experts and consultants to assess, on the one hand, the *modus operandi* of higher education structures and systems in African countries and, on the other, to determine a set of reforms and changes to implement. These studies are generally led by scholars-administrators involved in applying the reforms within their

own institutions. These actors attract and make use of international research schemes to publish and justify ongoing university changes to the scientific community. Although these studies may seem academic in nature, they are mainly narrations of a professional experience. They make use of action-research methods, or simply rely on expertise approaches, and contain various policy recommendations and guidance.

- 10 This review of the current situation raises the troubling question as to why so few scholars have researched higher education in Africa. As such, the present article aims to provide both a review of existing work—still decidedly limited in Francophone circles—and a step forward in the literature by suggesting avenues for further research and adding to the debates within the various social science disciplines (Education, Political Science, Sociology, Economics, etc.) The aim is to go beyond mere recommendations and descriptions of the state of play in higher education in order to address the issues raised.

Literature review: moving beyond international narratives

- 11 The growing interest in higher education on the continent in the last few years, as evidenced by the vast sums involved in international funding for support programmes, has resulted in a number of studies investigating the reforms implemented post-independence and how these have been adopted by public institutions in response to the emergence of private providers, massification in terms of access to higher education, and diversified sources of finance. Generally, these studies explore the underlying factors and consequences of reforms applied in university systems, which usually involve an expansion in public and private offerings, the introduction of tuition fee policies, and the enrolment of self-funded students in public institutions (Johnstone 2004; Zeleza and Olukoshi 2004). In African states, these changes took place in a 1980s context of socio-economic and political crisis, structural adjustment programs, and soaring university enrolments (Banya and Elu 2001). This adverse context thus prompted administrators to rethink the business models of their institutions.
- 12 By and large, within the English- and French-language research dealing with reforms in the African higher education context, two distinct bodies of literature can be found. First, it can be argued that the field is dominated by mostly descriptive and normative studies that tend to prescribe a set of recommendations to face challenges in the sector (Mamdani 1993; Affa'a and Des Lierres 2002; Assie-Lumumba 2006; Mabizela 2007; Maindo and Kapagala 2012; Teferra 2013). These studies generally start with an account of how the university system—or other institution of interest—operates in terms of staffing, existing structures, and means of funding. Subsequently, when addressing ongoing issues and challenges, they mostly draw on theories, tools, and methods from the field of Education to make recommendations and draw conclusions regarding the measures and reforms that would need to be implemented (e.g. the Uganda example in Kajubi 1992; Kasozi 2009). These works, often in monographic form, tend to be produced by academic or administrative staff involved in reforming their institutions, working for education departments, or collaborating closely with national ministries overseeing higher education (see the Kenyan example in Kiamba 2004). At times, this literature is grounded in solid scientific research. For instance, studies on southern Africa carried out by the Centre for Higher Education Transformation include large

data sets and robust empirical analyses of the present situation in the sector (Johnstone 2004; Marcucci et al. 2008; Pillay 2010).

- 13 The second body of literature dealing with higher education in Africa consists of studies adopting a critical stance in relation to the societal consequences of the reforms (Lebeau and Mobolaji 2000; Lebeau 2003; Mamdani 2007; Charton and Owuor 2008; Chouli 2009; Alemu et al. 2010a, 2010b; Bugwabari et al. 2012; Ngwé and De Prince Pokam 2016). In particular, these studies condemn the privatisation and marketisation of higher education institutions and tackle the impact of university reforms by conducting a review of structural adjustment programmes and their impact on the university budgets of public and private institutions, and on the financing of the higher education sector as a whole. These works discuss the advent of private market funding models for universities which suggests a withdrawal of the state's role in regulating the sector—the reforms being, after all, linked to the prescriptions and conditions attached to receiving development assistance. More specifically, scholars in this area have shed light on the societal consequences of the reforms since the 1990s as a result of budget cuts, notably for publicly-funded institutions, and outlined existing educational provision and living conditions on campus, for instance in Morocco (Touré 2014), Senegal (Goudiaby 2012; Diop 2016; Diouf 2016), Benin (Eyebiyi 2011), Nigeria (Uwakwe et al. 2008) or in Mozambique (Chissale 2012). Some of the elements addressed in these studies include increases in enrolments against a backdrop of freezes in staff recruitment, decaying infrastructures, inadequate working conditions for academic staff, and the outsourcing of a number of activities traditionally carried out within universities.
- 14 Despite the different perspectives adopted, particularly when it comes to describing existing systems, research on higher education reforms in Africa is distinctive in that it addresses changes in university systems via a vertical—or top-down—theoretical framework. Generally, authors will argue that governments and institutions have blindly adopted international models for a higher education market shaped by the narratives of international financial institutions and promoted by donors as part of the conditions attached to development assistance. These models are usually influenced by international organisations conveying common messages relating to global issues, such as the importance of adopting a perspective of cost-effectiveness to solve global challenges. In the area of university reform, the World Bank is therefore often the focus of discussion. It is presented as a dominant international actor best known for producing and disseminating market ideals. However, it is somewhat surprising and unfortunate that the majority of studies on the sector overestimate the influence of international actors and focus most of their attention on this international dimension of transformations in African higher education. Indeed, these studies ignore the specificities of national contexts, historical and public (de)regulation initiatives in the sector, and the role of various players within institutions themselves, such as administrators, teaching staff, and students (Munene 2013a; Provini 2015, 2017, 2018, 2019). Key studies on social movements in Africa highlight the importance of staff- and student-led university protests for initiating political change and sectoral reform (see for example Sory 2012; Morillas 2015). For the most part, however, these findings have not been fully exploited to shed light on changes and reforms in higher education despite the fact that individuals on the ground play an active part in the reconfiguration of university systems and activities (Lebeau and Mobolaji 2000).

- 15 In the following sections, changes affecting the higher education sector are presented from a number of different perspectives in order to come to an understanding of their specific trajectories, national configurations, and local contexts. Four key thematic areas are introduced to explore and analyse the changes, in a bid to identify heuristic hypotheses and avenues for further research which may serve to foreground African higher education as a relevant object of research in the Humanities and Social Sciences.

A comparison of higher education actors and reforms

- 16 One of the key areas of interest when it comes to scientific research on African higher education reforms lies in understanding the aims of the reforms that have been implemented in the sector. A particular topic of note are the changes in public policy regulating university systems with, on the one hand, an emphasis on the historical trajectory of the reforms and, on the other, a focus on comparative case-studies aiming to analyse commonalities and differences in reforms between and within countries (Provini 2016). Adopting these descriptive and comparative perspectives allows for the testing of various hypotheses in relation to the similarities of higher education reforms implemented on the continent, particularly in terms of the financial regulation of the sector (see for instance the case of Tanzania in Ishengoma 2004, and of South Africa in Wangenge-Ouma 2012). Indeed, market-driven ideals (Musselin 2008) have seemingly been imposed on the continent as standard and uncontested—a situation which raises troubling questions regarding the impact and imitation effects of ongoing reforms. For instance, it would be useful to shed light on the underlying reasons for restructuring higher education systems according to a tuition fee regime, for stimulating competition between public and private providers, and for implementing new management models within university administrations. Mechanisms of standardisation and homogenization of African university systems achieved via higher education reforms are a response to challenges such as increasing access in public and private institutions, the long-term financial viability of the sector, as well as the adoption of a new cycle model and training structure. However, they also raise questions regarding the public policies that have shaped the sector since achieving independence.
- 17 It is also necessary to pay particular attention to the role played by actors who have taken an active part in shaping public policy or who were involved in this transformation of higher education. As previously mentioned, the scholarly literature has mainly focused on sector changes as a result of the guidance and recommendations provided by international actors. It would now seem important to adopt new perspectives in order to better understand the reforms, for instance by shifting the focus of analysis from texts and discourses to practices and individuals, or from international to national and local actors: policy makers, ministerial advisors, university managers, administrative staff, academics, and students. Indeed, it would be relevant to explore the role of these “grassroot” actors in the reconfiguration of university systems. It would also be useful to study the frameworks for drawing up and negotiating reform implementation with these various stakeholders, and to shed light on the processes of consultation and/or disengagement of these individuals regarding decision-making and implementation. Another element requiring careful analysis is the role played by regional actors, such as intergovernmental organisations, university partnerships, and experts. An in-depth sociological study of the roles played by actors

involved in the various cycles and stages of reform must take into account the different phases of the change process—from agenda setting to decision-making, implementing, monitoring and evaluating. Indeed, it is noteworthy that some actors can play a visible and active role upstream of a reform while being virtually absent from it downstream.

Analysing the challenges of a diversified offering

- 18 Diversity in the offerings of higher education institutions, in terms of courses and types of universities available, is one of the most striking changes affecting the sector. This innovation is noticeable in most African cities, as evidenced by a proliferation of all kinds of academic institutions. In the space of two decades, the higher education landscape has been significantly altered, coinciding with an unprecedented growth in student numbers and a so-called process of liberalisation and withdrawal of state support. Depending on the country, this greater diversity in offerings—also known as differentiation—covers different areas to varying degrees, and raises many questions.
- 19 One trend of interest is the broadening of public institutional offerings. Faced with intake pressures in first generation universities that were set up post-independence and mostly in capital cities and dense urban agglomerations, we are now witnessing a decentralisation of university education and a proliferation of universities in different regions of the country. This approach has varied in form and scope, from the establishment of universities *ex nihilo*, to the partial decentralisation of activities to new branch campuses, the upgrading of existing establishments into fully-fledged universities (such as regional technical colleges and polytechnics in Niger), the conversion of existing faculties into universities (for instance in Mali where the University of Bamako was dismantled in 2011 and four new universities were created in its place), or the setting up of distance learning universities, for example in Senegal, with open digital centres scattered across the nation. These policies aim to provide a response to the growth in demand for higher education, and to ensure increased efficiency in the system by providing more extensive regional coverage. However, many different interests are involved and sometimes contradict one another. Together with considerations relating to regional development and integration, as well as the creation of links between training centres and employment zones, a number of community and patron-client agendas are added to the mix. For instance, local authorities demand to have their own university, or ministers favour their own catchment area. The decentralisation and differentiation of university offering in Kenya is a prime example, resulting from political elites strategizing to construct a higher education market that would enable them to consolidate their own social, economic, and political positions, defined in relation to ethnic patronage and clientelism (Munene 2013a). As such, the proliferation of universities entails symbolic and political, as well as educational, challenges.
- 20 A second prevailing trend linked to differentiation is the rapid proliferation and development of private higher education. This trend is noticeable in states where it there is a precedent (e.g. Anglophone countries such as Kenya, see Eisemon 1992) and also in other areas where it occurred at a later stage, generally at the turn of the new century (e.g. most Francophone countries). These days, private higher education institutions can be found all over the continent. They can vary significantly in nature, from small establishments with few means to university empires set up by rich business

entrepreneurs, and generally cross disciplinary boundaries, employ qualified teaching staff, and sometimes include branch campuses in several countries. The faith-based sector, be it Muslim or Christian, can sometimes be a sustained area of growth in this context of diversified offering. For instance, the Catholic University of West Africa is present, through branch and satellite campuses, in several Francophone countries in the region (Ivory Coast, Mali, Benin...), and the Catholic tertiary institution Chouyapa is expanding its Catholic network in Chad. In terms of Muslim faith-based institutions, the King Faisal University in Chad is a notable example of a private university that has become public in 2015. For ministries with oversight of the sector, this private offering presents both an opportunity and a set of challenges. On the one hand, it partly helps to meet the growth in student numbers and eases the pressures on impoverished public universities. On the other, it requires unprecedented, complex, and costly procedures for regulating the sector, including the implementation of new measures for issuing degree-granting licenses and accreditations. Often, a significant lack of capacity within the technostuctures of government ministries for higher education, combined with a chronic lack of means to control private institutions, encourage a “planned chaos” approach to authorising the set-up of new training structures. Ultimately, this considerably undermines the quality of educational provision. The difficulties are compounded with the advent of providers targeting mostly foreign students. In Benin, for instance, near the Nigerian border, new English-language courses were created that tailored for thousands of Nigerian students.

- 21 The third trend deserving of attention in this context of diverse provision is the increased presence of foreign cross-border providers, involving the setting-up of new institutions, satellite campuses, and distance-learning courses. As a result, business and management schools have a visible presence on the continent, alongside European and North American engineering schools. One such example is the Kedge Business School—a French business school offering several programmes in Dakar since 2008. The growing reach of French institutions and programmes in Africa is, in fact, a fundamental objective of French policy in terms of bilateral cooperation in higher education. Interestingly, Indian universities also offer distance-learning degrees which are delivered by a number of public universities on the continent.
- 22 Together, these changes contribute to an increasingly competitive market and a growing privatisation of higher education. Parallel to the public system, the commodification of education is enacted by a new breed of local entrepreneurs who play an active part in large-scale restructuring of the sector. To compete with the proliferation of private offerings, public universities have also taken steps towards reforming their activities and outsourced a number of these. It could easily be assumed that the emergence of private institutions in itself would serve to transform the higher education market on the continent. However, what we are witnessing is a gradual market-driven transformation of public universities as a result of adjusting to new market forces. Initiatives have included: the gradual implementation of innovative programmes that are more attractive and better suited to the needs of the market, an expansion of evening class delivery, and a new reliance on private capital (tuition fees, funding from philanthropic organisations, etc.) Competition is fierce between public institutions where entry fees are still relatively low, leading to market saturation and a threatening of the financial sustainability of universities.

Day-to-day administration, teaching, and studying

- 23 An additional area of interest in terms of academic research on reforms in African higher education is the day-to-day business of universities. In a context generally characterised by persistent hardship, new forms of institutional management and governance practices are being implemented within universities. These new practices have an impact on the work of teaching staff, students, and administrators (Chitou 2011), and are in large part the result of new accountability tools adopted, remarkably, from neoliberal management practices (Munene 2013b). Although the wider literature on the sector has, so far, mainly focused on providing a social critique of the reforms so as to identify and report on the issues linked to rising student enrolments, decreasing budgetary support, and decaying infrastructures, it would seem relevant to shift the focus of analysis to the changing working practices of university staff. What is the impact of higher education transformation on the individuals working within these institutions? To what extent have administrative, teaching, and study activities on campus changed since independence? Local and qualitative studies of different trajectories should enable us to understand these changes, both in terms of the students' learning environment and in relation to the working practices of the faculty and administrators. On a broader level, it is necessary to explore more systematically in the literature what changes might have taken place in relation to the social status of students, graduates, faculty, and administrators.
- 24 In the administrative sector, the implementation of new working and management models have facilitated institutional restructuring and transformed staff working practices. For instance, a number of new processes and procedures aiming to promote "optimal" institutional governance were introduced, such as the proliferation of strategic and development plans, the advent of ISO certification and, additionally, the adoption of quality assurance mechanisms (Munene 2013b). In Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, Rwanda, and Burundi, the Inter-University Council for East Africa (IUCEA) coordinates and steers university policy at regional level. Since 2006, and in partnership with the German Academic Exchange Service and the German Rectors' Conference, IUCEA developed a roadmap for implementing quality assurance programmes in both public and private universities (The Inter-University Council for East Africa 2010a, 2010b). Similarly, since 2017, UNESCO—with financial contribution from the Shenzhen Municipal Government in China—launched a project in 10 African countries to strengthen quality assurance mechanisms at the institutional, national, and regional levels. Aiming to embed an entrepreneurial culture in universities, bureaucratic procedures and norms have introduced an unprecedented conception of the role and mission of university administrators. Although these themes are not sufficiently explored in the African higher education literature (Charlier 2006), such changes have contributed to redefining the mission of the sector, including its institutions and teaching staff. New administrative tasks are devised which serve to transform the daily work of the teaching staff. Faculty also engage in new types of activities, generally in a bid to top up their wages. These might include teaching in several universities simultaneously, engaging in consulting activities instead of carrying out scientific research, etc. The introduction of tuition fees in African universities in the 1990s also had a major impact on students. Nowadays, they study while in full-time employment—a situation which allows an increasing number of

young adults to access higher education. As such, public and private higher education institutions are increasingly turning into service providers, catering to the needs of customers and clients (formerly students), managers, administrators, and to new national requirements for the development of so-called useful and financially-viable research expertise (Charton and Owuor 2008).

Questioning the vocational shift in higher education

- 25 Higher education is currently facing exceptionally strong external pressure, akin to a paradigm change. Beyond its teaching remit, universities are expected to train graduates who will enter the job market in a seamless manner. Until the 1980s, university graduates usually entered public service, however, the reductions in public spending and in the number of civil servants in the 1990s and 2000s has led to a growing number of students being employed in the private market instead. In turn, this has led to unprecedented requirements for vocational training. Despite scant statistical evidence of its existence, the ghost of the unemployed graduate seems to haunt African policy-makers. Buoyed by the dominant discourse of international donors and organisations, the latter now expect that higher education institutions will set up vocational courses and make a positive contribution to graduate employment. This way of thinking, however, is also shared by the general population who has high expectations of the education system. Transformation in the African higher education system therefore encompasses knowledge and understanding, as well as programmes and training courses. The latter is particularly evident since private institutions often introduce innovative offerings that public institutions subsequently attempt to imitate. These new courses usually focus on interdisciplinarity, engineering, new information and communication technologies, management, business, and economics, to the apparent detriment of the humanities and social science disciplines.
- 26 In this context, priority has been given to a number of areas. The emphasis was placed, for instance, on developing technical and vocational programmes, especially fast-track two- and three-year degrees. However, there is often a lack of technical staff to support these types of courses and upfront costs are exceedingly high, requiring substantial investments that the public purse is generally not in a position to provide. In all programmes, the general steer has been towards greater connectedness between universities and businesses and the embedding and monitoring of graduate employability. Faced with a weak formal provision, the rhetoric of entrepreneurship has taken centre stage—training is provided to enable students to create start-ups upon completion of their academic programmes, and universities have established business incubation centres to support their students' professional ambitions.
- 27 This new conceptualisation of higher education raises many questions. On the one hand, it highlights that Africa has joined the ranks of universities faced with fundamental issues and challenges in a globalised environment. On the other, it places tremendous pressure on the educational system as a whole, now ostensibly and singlehandedly responsible for solving a country's economic difficulties and its—by and large inadequate—levels of formal employment. This conceptualisation also implies a wholesale change in university culture, one that appears ruthless and is being resisted by both faculty and students. Here and elsewhere, it goes to the core of the very purpose of education and challenges the market ideals at work.

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NOTES

1. Data drawn from the UNESCO Institute for Statistics: <http://data.uis.unesco.org/index.aspx?queryid=142&lang=fr> (accessed on 26/04/2017) [archive].