ARUA 2023 Biennial International Conference
15-17 November 2023

Theme: Reimagining the Future of Higher Education in Africa

1. Background

The higher education sectors in Africa have recently witnessed some changes, both in terms of structure and operation. This is in sharp contrast to what was previously known about them being fundamentally lagging in terms of the quality and productivity of their primary processes, the material conditions under which they operated, including the institutional capacity for enrolling students and conducting research, as well as their engagement with industry and more generally, their relevance to the continent.[1] Higher education institutions (HEIs) in Africa are gradually being appropriately accredited and have witnessed significant increases in enrolment, research output, educational funding and rankings in global university systems.[2] Regional bodies such as the African Union (AU) have recognized the need for investment in education, skills development and science (Agenda 2063) and this has been central to transforming higher education in Africa. The private sector is also contributing in diverse ways to enhance access to higher education.

Despite these improvements, there is still the general impression that the quality of higher education institutions in Africa is generally not high enough to form a strong and formidable foundation for global competitiveness, address the continent's complex challenges and facilitate the types of collaboration that can be found in other universities in advanced economies. It has been suggested that most African universities can, at best, be described as not being in a strong enough state to harness the gradually increasing availability of different sources of international funding for higher education. Not much is seen in the various efforts to address the set of asymmetries that have for a very long time existed between African universities and those of the rest of the world. With the ever-growing need to address the continent's complex challenges, the transition towards a knowledge-based economy and maximize the growing number of cooperation

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[1] See Altbach & Balán (2007) and Cloete et al (2018)
[2] See Cloete et al (2018)

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agreements between Africa and the world (e.g., the AU-EU innovation agenda which recognizes universities as the gateway between Africa and the EU, and the positioning of science at the heart of development), it is becoming crucial for the continent to reimagine the future of its higher education institutions and prepare them to become more relevant.

Globally, the attention of the higher education sector is moving to the development of research-intensive and world-class institutions that are the pillars for developing a strong human capital base and an efficient national innovation system. These institutions typically have highly qualified faculty, excellence in research, undertake high-quality teaching, have high levels of government and non-government sources of funding, have dedicated funding to support research and development (R&D) and innovation, have international and highly talented students, academic freedom, well-defined autonomous and flexible governance structures, and well-equipped facilities for teaching, research, administration and student life.[3] These institutions are highly ranked on global university rankings, they undertake research in the search for effective responses to pressing world (global) problems and they undertake a participatory academic economy based on peer-to-peer or collaborative knowledge production, social innovation and collective intelligence.[4] These institutions have a strong connection with industry. These institutions rely on the high use of science and various technologies (including digital) to support teaching and learning, they teach the most innovative curricula, produce graduates that stand out because of their success in an intensely competitive arena and generally make research an integral component of their activities.

Currently, it is difficult to identify higher education institutions in Africa that embody wholly these characteristics. Although there are methodological challenges with relying on university rankings for university comparisons, they provide a useful guide to properly understanding the challenges faced by African universities, relative to those of the rest of the world. For instance, when relying on the Times Higher Education (THE) university rankings for 2022, no African university can be found in the top 100, only one university[5] was placed in the 101-200 range and eight universities[6] were placed in the 201-500 range. The Shanghai rankings similarly do not place any African university in the top 100 for 2022. The best-performing African university can only be found in the 201-300 range. The Leiden rankings, which incorporate research publications and a measure of impact in ranking universities, similarly do not place any African university in the top 300 range.

While the number of researchers per million people at the global level was above 1,300 in 2020, that of Sub-Saharan Africa was 96 (that for Northern Africa was 771).[7] It is instructive to note that Africa further loses some of its researchers through brain drain. Sub-Saharan Africa commits an average of about 0.3% of GDP to Gross Domestic Expenditure on R&D (GERD) and North Africa commits about 0.7%. Both are lower than the average of 1.92% of GDP at the global level. Several other statistics show the extent to which African HEIs rank lowest when it comes to the number of scientific citations, the number of scientific papers with the highest impact, the number of registered patents by origin and the number of PhD graduates. African universities are generally

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[3] Salmi (2009)

[4] Rider et al (2020)

[5] University of Cape Town

[6] Stellenbosch University, University of Witwatersrand, University of Cape Coast, University of KwaZulu-Natal, Addis Ababa University, Aswan University, Durban University of Technology, and the University of Ibadan.

[7] UNESCO database (http://data.uis.unesco.org/#)

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poorly staffed, lack adequate funding for research (most of which are from international funding agencies and are not usually on a long-term basis) and have limited collaborations.

The future of higher education in Africa does not look good if current conditions and projections remain unchanged. Africa needs to reimagine the future of its higher education sector to make it more relevant to the needs of the continent, address pressing economic and social challenges which are transnational in nature as well as place them in a globally competitive position. This certainly cannot be an easy task given the extent of work that needs to be done. Increasing research capacity, and particularly those of the highly skilled and internationally competitive workforce will require a long and complex process, requiring continuous input at the individual, institutional and system-wide levels.[8] It requires a new way of thinking about education policy on the continent and the need for universities to leverage their resources towards shared thinking. It also requires research universities to take the initial steps to conscientize policymakers about the need for change.

2. The focus of the ARUA 2023 Conference

The 2023 ARUA Biennial Conference will bring together experts from universities, research institutions, government, industry, civil society, international organizations, etc., to discuss the potential pathways of reimagining the future of HEIs on the African Continent in the coming decades. How can the projections be altered significantly? In reflecting on the prominent lessons from other institutions, including those from both the Global North and other Global South regions, the focus of the conference will be on significantly increasing the output of higher education institutions in the region while enhancing the quality of the output to match that in other regions. The conference will seek to embolden university leaders to pursue needed reforms while drawing lessons for medium to long-term changes that need to be undertaken by national governments and their regulators. These will consider national development aspirations as well as regional development goals and targets, including the SDGs and Agenda 2063. The conference will thus seek answers to many questions, including the following:

- What are the potential pathways for enhancing higher education in Africa to make them globally competitive?
- What role should higher education play in changing the material condition of the African people?
- How can higher education contribute more to improvements in the quality of life, health, and education of the African people?
- How can African HEIs significantly enhance linkages with industry through innovation and technology uptake?
- What should the student of the future be capable of and how should he/she be prepared?
- What are technology's new and evolving roles in pedagogy and the type of research undertaken in African HEIs?
- Do African scientists/researchers have what it takes to transform HEIs?

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[8] https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2017/05/scientists-are-the-key-to-africas-future/

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- Where are Africa's and African scholars in the development of the context-relevant strategies that will revolutionize Africa's knowledge economy?
- How can research collaborations and the sharing of resources facilitate the drive towards making African HEIs more research-intensive?
- Considering technological developments, what major steps do African governments need to take to address challenges in their higher education sectors and make their institutions relevant in the knowledge economy?
- What should be the defining role of governments/regional bodies in ensuring that African universities become globally competitive?
- Can African HEIs leverage the opportunities offered through various international cooperation agreements that relate to the knowledge economy, e.g., the AU-EU innovation agenda?
- Where is Africa's competitive advantage in the global knowledge economy?
- How can Africa turn around the challenge of the low number of scientists?
- What strategies should African universities adopt to attract and retain the best talents?
- How can HEIs deepen the contribution of the diaspora to research capacity building?
- What type of leadership and governance reforms do African HEIs need to become globally competitive?
- Are the current reforms in the higher education sector enough to spur its institutions to be globally competitive while simultaneously working to meet the material needs of the continent's inhabitants?
- What is Africa's HEIs' role in shaping continental policy on pre-tertiary education?

Submissions may be organized around the following sub-themes:
a. Changing technology and reimagining the future of higher education in Africa
b. African higher education and national development
c. Pathways/best practices for enhancing higher education: lessons and opportunities
d. Research collaboration and resource sharing
e. Governments and the development of HEIs
f. Governance reforms at HEIs
g. National higher education policy; harmonies and dissonance
h. Broader education sector reforms and HE
i. Capacity building for research
j. Faculty development at HEIs
k. Bringing industry closer to HEIs

3. Conference structure

The conference will be held over two days and admit about 250 participants from all over the world, but with about half of the participants from ARUA member universities.

The conference will have two plenary sessions each day addressing the broad theme of '**Reimagining the future of higher education in Africa'.** These will be used to present the 'lay

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of the land' papers and map out the possibilities for what African universities can do to change the narrative. They will be delivered by known international experts from Africa and elsewhere.

There will also be 10 parallel sessions on each day, covering relevant sub-thematic areas of interest as listed above Altogether, there will be 20 parallel sessions in the two days. Each parallel session will take place over two hours with a maximum of three presentations and discussant comments.

4. Conference Dates

The conference and workshops will take place on **15-17 November 2023**. The two-day conference will be extended to a third day of workshops for the thirteen (13) ARUA Centres of Excellence (CoE).

The workshops on the third day will focus on:
   i. Reimagining higher education for sustainable food systems
   ii. Reimagining higher education for the African identify
   iii. Reimagining higher education and habitable cities in Africa
   iv. Reimagining higher education for effective post-conflict societies
   v. Reimagining higher education for reducing poverty and inequality in Africa
   vi. Reimagining higher education for effective water conservation
   vii. Reimagining higher education in the face of migration and mobility in Africa
   viii. Reimagining higher education to reduce unemployment and enhance skills development.
   ix. Reimagining higher education to contribute to tackling climate change in Africa
   x. Reimagining higher education to promote good governance in Africa
   xi. Reimagining higher education to enhance the renewal of energy in Africa
   xii. Reimagining higher education to combat rising multimorbidity in Africa
   xiii. Reimagining higher education to enhance the use of nanotechnology in Africa

These workshops will devote time to drawing lessons from the conference and working with Early Career Researchers (ECRs) to develop a strategy towards properly understanding what it will take for the continent to transform its higher education institutions.

5. Venue

The 2023 conference will be hosted by the University of Lagos, Nigeria.

6. Outputs

The conference is expected to lead to an edited volume on the key takeaways on what it will take African HEIs to transform and become relevant and competitive in the coming decades. Depending on the ambitions of ARUA Centres of Excellence, it should also be possible for each CoE to produce an edited volume related to the conference's main theme.

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7. Participation and Submission of Abstracts and Papers

Participation and Submission of Abstracts and Papers

Persons interested in participating in the conference may submit an abstract of not more than one page to the organisers at https://arua.org.za/conferences/arua-conference-2023/abstract-submission/ before 28 February 2023.

Applicants will be notified about decisions on their submissions by 31 March 2023.

Completed papers must be submitted before 30 September 2023.

There will be funding to support basic travel for a limited number of participants from poorly endowed universities and institutions. Award of such travel grants will be made strictly based on paper quality and the timeliness of submission.

References

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