



Africa must do more to develop doctoral students

Such graduates are critical to a nation's success

EVERY year on November 12, the Association of African Universities (AAU) invites higher education institutions across the continent to celebrate Africa Universities Day.

The theme for 2021 is "Building Technology Based Resilient Universities, Now!" The AAU states that this theme is "inspired by the fact that 19 months after Covid-19 was declared a public pandemic, most African universities seem to still be in a predicament about how to move towards a sustainable process of technology-supported teaching, learning, research, collaboration and administrative operations".

One could add to this the important aspect of scholarship development on the continent, which faces both challenges and unique opportunities. Generally, African nations under-invest significantly in research and development, South Africa included.

Of concern is the decrease in government support and the substantial decline in the contribution of the business sector to expenditure on research and development in the country.

The migration to the global north and elsewhere has traditionally created a diaspora of the African intelligentsia, culminating in the brain drain on the continent.

Some migration to the south from other African countries has been to the benefit of South Africa, but in some cases problematic to other African countries.

Several scholars do not return to their country of origin, given the disparity in resources and environments and exposure to better working conditions.

Scholarship (which includes research, teaching and learning development) is central to universities internationally to generate new knowledge through research and innovations.

Some universities in Africa face significant challenges (exacerbated by the current pandemic) in addition to some of the typical infrastructural obstacles in Africa.

These include problems with

COMMENT



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accessing stable internet, reliable and consistent electricity, and lack of academic resources such as library services, laboratories and scientific equipment.

However, it is the ageing professoriate and shrinking pool of experts who can mentor and supervise postgraduate students and young staff at universities that is of particular concern.

Relative to other regions of the world, Africa has low enrolments and graduations of master's and doctoral students.

Unesco reported that in 2018 Master's graduates were highest in the Democratic Republic of Congo (32 000), Egypt (27 910) and Cameroon (15 740) compared with 13 520 in South Africa.

Unfortunately, figures are not easily available for many African countries. Just over 20 000 doctoral students were reported to have graduated in 2018. Generally, South Africa (where doctoral enrolments are less than 2% of all enrolments at universities) has more doctoral graduates than other reported African countries (with the exception of Egypt with 7 700) with approximately 3 000 annually followed by half that number in Cameroon and Niger.

Doctoral education is hampered by under-funding in Africa, and low numbers of academic staff at universities on the continent have a PhD. This is a hurdle to their personal growth and professional development and prevents them from contributing to their countries' human capital.

An important consideration with regards to human capital development for a country lies in knowledge production.

Master's and particularly doctoral graduates are generally viewed as being critical to a nation's success in producing, adapting, disseminating and commercialising knowledge that contributes to its economic competitiveness, growth and welfare.

However, Africa, despite its importance, size and youthful population, has remained on the edges of the knowledge society. Therefore, the training of doctoral students in research and knowledge production is fundamental to creating and growing such a society.

Recognising the importance of postgraduate students, especially doctoral students, to societies more broadly across African nations, a number of initiatives have emerged to increase the access, throughput, quality and graduation of postgraduate students.

Formal programmes at universities, networks and consortia have been offering capacity development specifically targeting doctoral students. For example, just before the pandemic the Emerging Scholars Initiative was launched by Stellenbosch University (SU) working with 12 universities in nine African countries across the continent, and during 2020 consultations and logistics were put in place.

In 2021, three research capacity development schools in three countries (Kenya, Nigeria and Rwanda) were held online and not face to face as originally designed.

Senior staff from these institutions (SU and each of these three partner universities for 2021) co-developed and co-taught for each school in total more than 200 doctoral students and staff considered emerging scholars at those institutions. These courses varied across schools depending on the needs of the partners, but focused on the preparatory requirements for doctoral education, scientific communication,

publishing and the supervision of post-graduate students.

These schools built on the earlier work conducted by the African Doctoral Academy (ADA) located at SU, which over more than a decade has offered more than 250 courses to nearly 5 000 mostly doctoral students and staff from universities in over 20 countries on the continent.

To further boost scholarship on the continent, capacity development "Joint Schools" had been held between 2016 to 2019 in Ethiopia, Kenya, Malawi, Namibia, Nigeria, Rwanda and Tanzania to over 300 students and staff. The Emerging Scholars Initiative, ADA and the Joint Schools provide examples as to how institutions in Africa can and do collaborate to support and promote research development on the continent.

The Emerging Scholars Initiative will present another four schools in 2022, including in Ghana, Namibia and Uganda, while attempting to work with universities in Ethiopia, where the civil war has interrupted the planned schools in 2020 and 2021.

Suffice it to say that civil war is another factor inhibiting scholarship in several parts of Africa. In addition to the resilience required of those living in war and unrest zones, creative solutions have to be sought by higher education institutions committed to the pursuit of scholarship development and partnerships with their counterparts in difficult environments.

Africa needs to mobilise its own resources, break the dependence on external funding and resources and invest in its own development. Only by working together can tertiary institutions and scholars in Africa address the challenges to developing scholarship and contribute to research, teaching and learning in Africa for Africa (and globally) for the prosperity of the continent and beyond.

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