

## Diversify and Differentiate African Higher Education Systems!

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Most African countries gained independence from their former colonial masters in 1960. In the subsequent time-span of five or six decades, whatever the case may be, their higher education systems experienced unprecedented changes and transformations. The rapid expansion of access to basic education has ultimately resulted in a significant growth of higher education in Africa. The one tier and mono-institutional configuration best describes many higher education institutions in many countries at the beginning of the post-independence era. This situation started to change when the higher education landscape mushroomed with a wide range of institutions having different structures, governance bodies, study programs, and degree types but similar faculty profile. This marked the beginning the higher education systems of diversification and differentiation.

Differentiation is the process whereby distinct types of institutions progressively emerge in response to a country's need for educational programs that provide diverse types of skills and knowledge to a wide range of students with divergent interests and abilities. Through differentiation, higher education is able to expand the range of choice for various types of students, to improve efficiency in the provision of education services and enhance the set of skills and competencies in high demand on the labor market.

The set of policies that generally promotes higher education differentiation comprises the following:

1. the definition of a stratified system,
2. formulation of a framework for workforce development,
3. encouragement for private provision,
4. increased institutional autonomy with accountability,
5. use of innovative funding approaches and
6. quality assurance and accreditation procedures that avoid the implicit promotion of a particular organizational model for higher education.

By broadening the choice range for college and university studies, offering new degree programs and creating competition among various institutions, diversification and differentiation have been a boon for African higher education.

The main purpose this policy brief is to examine the contextual situation of diversification and differentiation, suggest policy options and recommendations for policy makers to consider.

### CONTEXT AND IMPORTANCE OF DIVERSIFICATION AND DIFFERENTIATION

The beginning of the independence period – the 1960s for the majority of Sub-Saharan African countries – marked the beginning of a remarkable paradigm shift in the education sector. Higher education systems in Africa have been undergoing dramatic changes that are affecting nearly all their components: structure, type, mode of delivery, governance, funding, modus operandi, faculty, academic programs and students, among others. In fact, this phenomenal evolutionary process of higher education systems on the continent did not occur overnight. It is the result of a long social and economic transformation process, as well as changing demographics and perceptions about education in general and higher education in particular.

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According to Diarra (2015), African higher education systems went through three major and different evolutionary cycles: first, a phase of stability during the first decade of the post-independence era covering the 1960-1970 period; second, a phase of rapid and steady expansion during the second decade (1970-1980); and third, phase from 1980 onwards is characterized by cy-



clical crises that are negatively impacting most African higher education systems at various degrees.

This evolutionary process of higher education systems has been shaped by factors such as economic growth, the supply and demand for qualified graduates, the changing labor market needs, integration and globalization. It is basically during the third phase of higher education systems' development crisis that Africa started experiencing; the first notable cases of cross-border provision of higher education, an offspring of globalization, which is characterized by the integration of economies and societies worldwide that involves technological, economic, political, and cultural exchanges made possible by advances in communication, transportation and infrastructure.

If diversity is a term indicating the variety of entities within a system at specific point in time (Huisman, 1995), historically and way back in the ante and immediate post-independence era, African higher education landscape had no variety whatsoever as it was fundamentally uniform and mono institutional. Huisman (1995) further reveals that differentiation is the process in which new entities in the system emerge.

Thus the focus of the policy brief is higher education systems rather than institutions. Viewed from this perspective and at the country level, the overwhelming entities of the systems were public, coexisting with confessional or faith-based based institutions especially in Eastern Africa, a legacy inherited from the colonial school system and based on a deliberate colonial education practice to drastically restrict the indigenous population's access to higher education.

Thus from a historical standpoint, African higher education systems are patterned after those of the colonial masters (France, Britain and Portugal) and retain most of their key features namely structure, type, governance, academic programs and degree categories. For example, many Francophone African countries' higher education systems reflected the same type of variety as in France illustrated with the coexistence of the dual system: the University and the *Grandes écoles*<sup>1</sup>. As for Britain, the system was dominated by the University and the Polytechnics even if this configuration was not fully reproduced at the time in Africa.

Diversity and differentiation bring choice and value addition. From this perspective, they have to be pursued for the benefits of African higher education stakeholders.

Further, the local configuration of higher education sys-

1 A Grande école is a higher education institution offering several post-secondary degrees (high school diploma + 5 or above) whose admission is based on restricted criteria such as success in certain national concours (exams), application file and degrees earned.

tems started to change although it retained many features inherited from the French or British models. Regional or sub-regional organizations such as the African and Malagasy Council for Higher Education (CAMES<sup>2</sup>), and the Association of Commonwealth Universities (ACU<sup>3</sup>) were established and serve as vehicles for the higher education harmonization process. The Licence Master Doctorat (LMD) reform currently implemented in Francophone countries and the adoption, signature and ratification of the revised Arusha Convention by Member States are means for achieving this harmonization strategy continent wide.

## **POLICY OPTIONS**

The following policy options proposed by William Saint (2009) are, for the most part still valid today. Whenever necessary, they have been revisited to suit the specific African context.

### **What are diversification and differentiation?**

Evolutionary change affects all living organisms, systems and structures no matter how deeply rooted they are. Tertiary education institutions are no exception. Thus from the early 1960s to today, African higher education systems have been influenced by the rapid social transformations taking place across the continent that, to a great extent, compelled them to diversify and differentiate at an unprecedented rhythm that was faster in some countries than in others. From their emergence to the present, diversification and differentiation, are gathering momentum in most African countries and appear to provide more choice at an affordable cost for a wide range of traditional and non-traditional student population across Africa. What are diversification and differentiation?

According to van Vught (2008) diversification is the variety of new entities within the system, whereas differentiation is defined as the process whereby new entities emerge in the system. William Saint (2000) echoed these definitions and further revealed that differentiation is the process whereby distinct types of tertiary institutions progressively emerge in response to a country's need for educational programs that provide diverse types of skills and knowledge to a wide range of students with divergent interests and abilities. He further identified two types of differentiation:

- 2 CAMES was established in 1968 and is based in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso. Its main mandate is to act as a harmonizing framework for higher education policies and strategies of the Francophone African countries. Its current membership comprises 19 countries with 52 universities and research centers spread out in West, Central, East Africa and the Indian Ocean. For more information please visit its website at: [www.cames.org](http://www.cames.org)
- 3 ACU is the oldest international network of universities founded in 1913. It comprises 535 institutions from 37 Commonwealth countries including African. It is based in London.

horizontal and vertical. Whereas he defined horizontal differentiation as a response to increasing student demand for more educational services, vertical differentiation is usually understood as a response to labor market needs for greater diversity in levels of training. This resorts, in the final analysis, to the provision by training institutions including the universities of a fairly wide range of program offerings resulting in a fairly large conferral of degrees, diplomas and other university qualifications that are in sync with the labor market needs of the labor force.

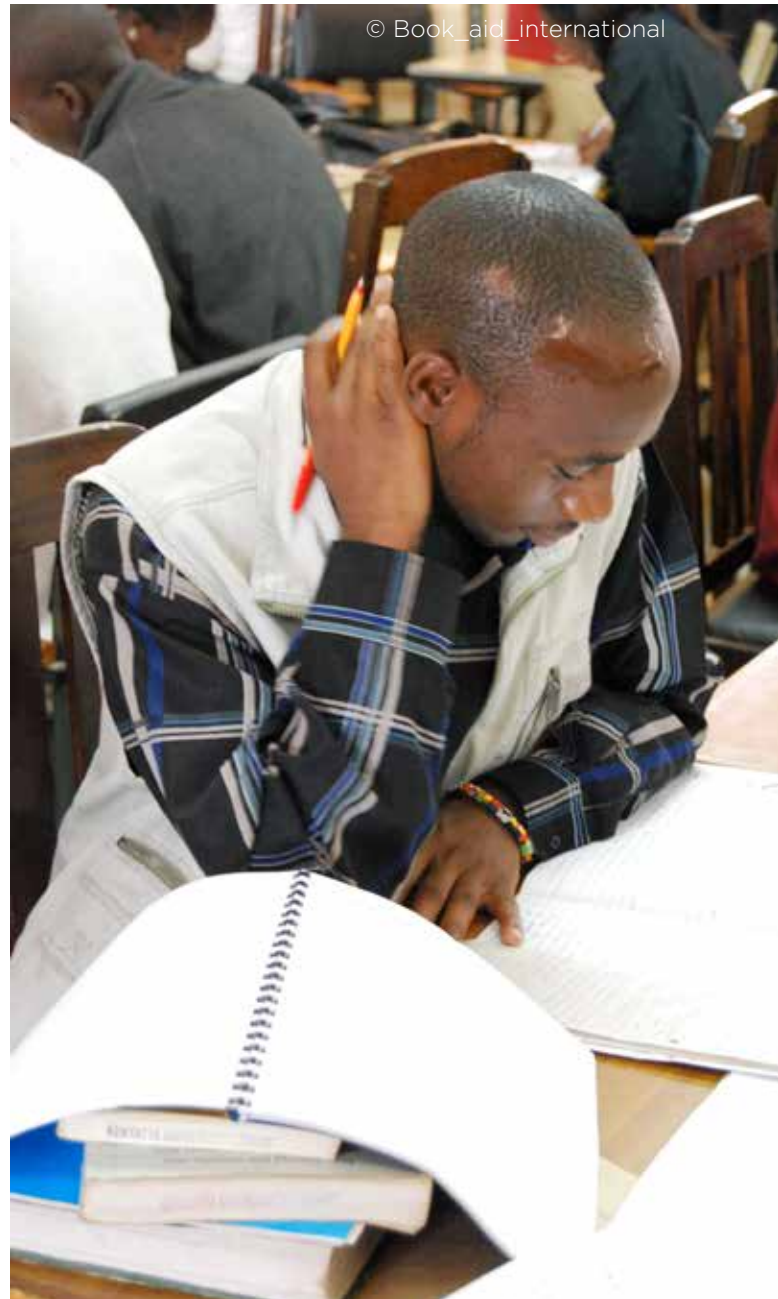
### How is differentiation promoted?

In a sense, drawing a parallel between differentiation and school choice may be an interesting exercise and serve all useful purposes. School choice is a common educational practice, a philosophy of education generally accepted in North America and Western Europe and implemented in elementary schools. School choice gives parents the freedom to choose their children's education while encouraging healthy competition among schools to better serve families' needs. Further, school choice lets parents use the public funds set aside for their children's education to choose the schools-public or private, far or near, religious or secular-that work best for them<sup>4</sup>. The same holds true in higher education. If so differentiation may be conceived to be the replica of school choice in higher education.

According to William Saint (2008), a series of policy actions is needed to promote the healthy development of a higher education system. From the standpoint of differentiation the main steps are:

- ▶ **Define a stratified higher education system** where **one tier is oriented to selectivity and research, and the other imparts a broad range of more tertiary education to a large number of students**. In this way, policy concerns of educational quality, relevance, access and differentiation are advanced together.
- ▶ **Formulate a framework for workforce development that addresses the country's full range of human resource needs**. The process of developing this strategy must go beyond the tertiary sector to involve government policymakers (to define larger economic goals and potential), and private sector representatives (to articulate the mix of competencies and levels of skills needed to improve productivity), but should also incorporate tertiary education leadership (to identify areas of comparative strength within the tertiary system).
- ▶ **Encourage private higher education**. Private provision is an important step in diversifying higher edu-

<sup>4</sup> For more information please visit the following website : [www.edchoice.org/school.choice](http://www.edchoice.org/school.choice)



cation, as it makes possible a range of entrepreneurial responses to education and training needs at little or no cost to the government budget. It increases competition among educational institutions that often sparks healthy adaptations to the changing needs of students and employers, ultimately increasing institutional differentiation.

- ▶ **Award maximum feasible autonomy to institutions of higher education while holding them accountable for performance**. This creates flexibility for the management initiative for responding to changed circumstances or new opportunities, and the space for the institution to devise its own unique strategic vision. One way of advancing autonomy and accountability goals in tandem is to place responsibility



for institutional performance in the hands of a broadly representative governing board with a majority of members outside the institution.

- ▶ **Provide funding in ways that encourage competition and reward innovation.** Competitive funding mechanisms are increasingly being used in higher education to encourage quality, innovation and productivity. They are most effective when private institutions are included along with public ones in the competition and when funding proposals are reviewed by respected peers using publicly announced criteria.
- ▶ **Implement quality assurance and accreditation procedures that do not stifle differentiation.** Quality assurance or accreditation procedures can impede or facilitate differentiation. In practice, accreditation procedures have frequently generated a push for conformity and uniformity in the mission, academic work and procedures of higher education institutions. To avoid this, it is important that accreditation not be based on a particular model of higher education provision such as the traditional multi-disciplinary research university, that it not insist on stifling affiliation of new institutions with older ones, and that accrediting bodies possess sufficient professional capacity to understand why differentiation is important. Accreditation can best play its role by ensuring a level playing field for all types of providers wishing to enter the market.
- ▶ **Promote public awareness in differentiation in higher education.** Students and families cannot take advantage of learning systems they don't understand. Only by building this understanding through media-based public information initiatives can they come to appreciate the alternative forms of tertiary education available to them.

**How is a diversified and differentiated system articulated?**

William Saint (2008) states that the policy that ties together a differentiated system of higher education is called articulation.

Articulation is the creation of multiple pathways by which different types of students enrolled in various types of tertiary institutions with different academic reputation can arrive at the same end, i.e graduation.

Articulation is accomplished by linking study programs at diverse tertiary institutions so that students may start at one and finish at another, suspend their studies and later continue them, or progress at their own pace while working or raising children. This policy entails a fairly large dose of harmonization, a key vehicle for academic and student mobility through higher education systems



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that bear a lot of resemblance. It is usually based on a defined structure of educational 'building block' called academic credits that are awarded to a student as she or he passes each course. Once earned these credits are permanent. Without the student having to start over, they enable him/her to transfer to another study program within the same institution (if vocational interest changes), to another public or private institution within the same country (as personal circumstances or preferences may require), or even to another institution in a different country (where a unique study program or more rigorous preparation may be available).

**Where to go from here?**

A strategic direction must be clearly defined and a compass to do so acquired before the action is undertaken. Higher education systems need a strategic vision to guide them, or they may evolve in costly and unproductive directions. Differentiation and articulation among the institutions that comprise these systems are one essential element of such a strategy. It is the responsibility of government policy to steer tertiary institutions towards this goal.

**CRITIQUE OF POLICY OPTIONS**

It should be recalled that higher education is a system. The concept is defined as an organized, purposeful structure that consists of interrelated and interdependent elements (components, entities, factors, members, parts, etc.). These elements continuously influence one another (directly or indirectly) to maintain their activity or the existence of the system, in order to achieve its goals.

With this caveat in mind, one may level critique at policy options governing the functioning and operations of the higher education system, especially diversification and differentiation.

- It is common knowledge that to fulfill its mandate a system must be fully integrated or at least the ma-

jority of its components, entities, factors and other essential parts must all be in a perfect state of functioning. Malfunctioning may put in jeopardy the very existence of the system. It appears that unfortunately, in numerous African higher education systems, components, processes, procedures, and ethos are deficient and hinder their optimal operations even if the systems enjoy a relatively high level of diversification and differentiation.

- Diversification and differentiation are a key ingredient of higher education systems across Africa. The proliferation of different types of institutions (in the case of systemic diversity) such as two-year, three-year, four-year, five-year public, private, confessional, enterprise and graduate schools has increased the choice for students who are offered a wider range of degree programs tailored after the labor market needs.
- While diversification and differentiation have improved graduate employability the truth of the matter is that a number of these institutions are micro-institutions governed by too much informality. They often do not comply with the regulatory policies and Education Acts governing the operation of higher education institutions in terms of quality assurance, accreditation, recognition and equivalence of degrees, diplomas, and other university qualifications. Despite the gradual implementation of the License, Master, and Doctorate (LMD) reform undertaken recently to counteract issues of this nature there is still a long way to go.
- Diversification and differentiation have not always been synonyms of quality in tertiary education institutions. Many tertiary institutions were given authorization to “start business” without them meeting the basic requirements for operating such a structure. These institutions often have insufficient or sub-standard infrastructures, lack the right mix, number and qualifications of faculty members, and either do not have or have obsolete laboratories and libraries. They further suffer from a huge gap in other essential educational resources such as research journals and reference books. This has negatively impacted the quality of teaching and learning in tertiary institutions in Africa. While there are clear advantages to diversify and differentiate there is also a need to regulate, monitor and ensure that public and private providers of educational services also operate in an environment conducive to quality teaching and learning.
- Diversification and differentiation, in many regions of Africa tend to imitate and replicate models of reputable institutions across the world. Van Vught (2007) refers to this as the academic drift. The search for a model to replicate or to adapt to the local situa-



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tion has not always brought about the desired result for African higher education institutions, public or private. In a sense, hampering credit transfer systems from one tertiary institution to another in the same sub-region and across the entire continent as the LMD reform is just taking off the ground in Franco-phone countries' institutions of higher learning.

- The cross-border provision of higher education has boosted diversification and differentiation and therefore has been favorable to well-known and reputable foreign universities especially those of Western Europe and North America (namely Canada and the United States of America) that are taking advantage of their financial robustness to open institutions of higher education in Africa. However, some local tertiary institutions benefit immensely from their partnership and exchange with foreign universities.
- Diversification and differentiation have demonstrated that beyond the effects of the so-called merchandizing of higher education, a policy issue hotly debated now in African academia, an abundant supply of tertiary institutions exists, offers more choice to a wide range of students at an affordable cost, enhances the competition among institutions and provides a lot of potential for improving graduate employability.

## **POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS**

The following policy recommendations are made:

### **Recommendation N°1**

Adopt a legal framework and a higher education Act that govern the general operations of higher education systems at the country level (if not yet done).

### **Recommendation N°2**

Formulate and implement policies and strategies that regulate the provision of higher education in terms of structure, governance, study programs, degrees types and hierarchy as well as diversification and differentiation at the country level.

### **Recommendation N°3**

Grant more autonomy to public institutions and put them in a better position to fulfill their mandate.

### **Recommendation N°4**

Reinforce the institutional and organizational capacity of differentiated institutions of tertiary education so that they perform better their academic mission.

### **Recommendation N°5**

Allocate more financial resources to public tertiary institutions to enable them to better fulfill their triple mission of training, research and service to the entire community.

### **Recommendation N°6**

Establish a national quality assurance and accreditation agency to ensure the supervision and oversight of pub-

lic and private tertiary institutions in an effort to guarantee the quality of teaching and learning, and give more credibility to differentiated institutions.

### **Recommendation N°7**

Encourage and assist tertiary public and private institutions to set up their own quality assurance and accreditation entity to closely monitor the implementation of policies and strategies.

### **Recommendation N°8**

Put in place higher education harmonization strategy at the sub-regional level to ensure a smooth implementation of the LMD reform that is currently underway in Francophone African countries.

### **Recommendation N°9**

Differentiate but do not imitate. In a search for a model to replicate ensure that the institution is in a position to cater for the needs of all the users especially students.

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This policy brief is drawn on William Saint (2010) Differentiate, Don't imitate! Building a Diverse Tertiary Education System as far as part of the executive summary and policy options section are concerned.

