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Working Paper

Higher education expansion and social inequalities in sub-Saharan Africa: Conceptual and empirical perspectives

UNRISD Working Paper, No. 2020-10

Provided in Cooperation with:

United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD), Geneva

Suggested Citation: Lebeau, Yann; Oanda, Ibrahim O. (2020) : Higher education expansion and social inequalities in sub-Saharan Africa: Conceptual and empirical perspectives, UNRISD Working Paper, No. 2020-10, United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD), Geneva

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Working Paper 2020-10

Higher Education Expansion and Social Inequalities in Sub-Saharan Africa:

Conceptual and Empirical Perspectives

Yann Lebeau

Ibrahim Ogachi Oanda

Prepared for the UNRISD project on
Universities and Social Inequalities in the Global South

October 2020

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This United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD) Working Paper has been produced in collaboration with Professor Ananya Mukherjee Reed, with funds provided by the University of British Columbia and UNRISD institutional funds.

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Introduction to Working Papers on Universities and Social Inequalities in the Global South

This paper is part of a project which explores what role universities play in overcoming persistent and rising inequalities. Participation in tertiary education has increased significantly across the globe, in parallel with heightened social aspirations and the expectation of better labour market opportunities stemming from a university degree. However, these assumptions rely on certain economic and social conditions being fulfilled, some of which have worsened in the age of jobless growth. The project asks: What potential does higher education have today to increase social mobility, reduce inequality and contribute to the advancement of society through the production of knowledge and skills? Are institutions of higher education contributing to inequality rather than equality, and if so, through what specific actions and mechanisms? How can the transformative potential of such institutions be fully harnessed for overcoming inequality?

Working Papers on Universities and Social Inequalities in the Global South

Higher Education Expansion and Social Inequalities in Sub-Saharan Africa: Conceptual and Empirical Perspectives

Yann Lebeau and Ibrahim Ogachi Oanda, October 2020

Inequalities in Higher Education Access and Completion in Brazil

Tristan McCowan and Julio Bertolin, April 2020

Climbing the Ladder: Determinants of Access to and Returns from Higher Education in Chile and Peru

Anja Gaentzsch and Gabriela Zapata-Román, April 2020

“A Public and a Private University in One”: Equity in University Attendance in Kenya Since the Liberalization Reforms of the 1990s

Rebecca Simson and J. Andrew Harris, March 2020

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List of Acronyms

ANSD	National Agency for Statistics and Demography (Agence Nationale de la Statistique et de la Démographie), Senegal
CUE	Commission for University Education
EPDC	Education Policy and Data Centre
FGN	Federal Government of Nigeria
FRN	Federal Republic of Nigeria
GER	Gross Enrolment Ratio
HE	Higher education
HEIs	Higher education institutions
HEIPR	Higher Education Initial Participation Rate
IDS	Institute of Development Studies
IIE	Institute of International Education
IFIs	International financial institutions
ILO	International Labour Organization
ISSC	International Social Science Council
KNSB	Kenya National Bureau of Statistics
KUCCPS	Kenya Universities and Colleges Central Placement Service
MESRI	Ministry for Higher Education, Research and Innovation (Ministère de l'Enseignement Supérieur, de la Recherche et de l'Innovation), Senegal
NBS	Kenya National Bureau of Statistics
NISER	Nigerian Institute of Social and Economic Research
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
SSCE	Senior School Certificate Examination
STEM	Science, technology, engineering and mathematics
UIS	UNESCO Institute for Statistics
UN	United Nations
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

Abstract

The development of higher education (HE) in sub-Saharan Africa has presented contradictory features and outcomes over the past two decades. On the one hand, the number of public and private HE institutions has increased in the present era of massification (where HE environments have reached almost universal access). This led to a diversification of academic programmes on offer, and enrolments surged to the point that sub-Saharan Africa experienced the fastest growth of all UNESCO world regions over the period. Yet on the other hand, gross enrolment rates (less than 10 percent on average in the region) remain by far the lowest and show slower progression than in other parts of the global South, as the rise in the number of institutions and in enrolment has not kept pace with population growth and increased social

demand for higher education. These contradictions between dynamics typically associated with massified HE environments and features of highly elitist systems beg a closer examination of this process of expansion and diversification, and more specifically of how it has affected different socio-economic groups. Drawing on secondary data and policy material, and using three national contexts as case studies (Kenya, Nigeria and Senegal), the paper highlights how issues of inequalities and inequity in access to and participation in higher education were addressed by national policies in contexts of expansion and diversification. It then examines how the HE opportunities resulting from the expansion generated new inequalities at the levels of access to HE institutions and programmes, in student experience and in access to labour markets and social recognition. The case study perspective reveals how the relationship between growth and other dimensions of national HE developments are both context-contingent and shaped, or exacerbated by, international pressures. It allows a better understanding of the common challenges of African HE systems in terms of access “for whom?” “to what?” and “what for?” while avoiding excessive generalizations in conclusions and suggestions.

Keywords

Access to higher education; inequalities; Kenya; massification; Nigeria; Senegal

Bio

Yann Lebeau is Professor of Higher Education Research in the School of Education and Lifelong Learning, University of East Anglia (UK). He has previously held teaching and research positions in France, in Nigeria and at the UK’s Open University. His research interests are in the sociology of higher education communities and where higher education policy and practice intersect. He has done extensive empirical research and comparative analysis in Africa, Latin America, the Middle East and Europe, and is a member of several international education and development research networks.

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1. Introduction

Higher education (HE) participation in sub-Saharan Africa has risen at a higher pace over the past three decades, but enrolment rates remain modest by comparison with other parts of the developing world. Significantly, the rise in the number of institutions and in enrolment has not kept pace with population growth and increased demand for HE. Data on participation by social or ethnic groups is not readily available everywhere on the continent to reveal whether this expansion is equally distributed, correcting existing inequalities, or is rather exacerbating them by generating new forms of exclusion. However, studies drawing on various comparative material reveal that what has been referred to in some literature as massification of HE in sub-Saharan Africa has effectively yet to happen anywhere in the region, and that what is being experienced in HE varies a great deal according to gender, geography and ethnicity.¹ The increased resistance from students to tuition fee hikes or to other HE reforms may also be indicative of tensions between “new” groups seeking access to HE as a passport to social mobility, and elites who are bent on controlling the transformation of HE to consolidate their ascendancy (Luescher et al. 2016).

The pressure for access has also resulted in a diversification of HE landscapes, notably marked by the elevation of often poorly resourced public institutions to university status, and by the consolidation almost everywhere of a vast and disparate private HE provision, therefore raising issues of quality of “epistemological access” (Muller 2014). The social recognition and market value of qualifications obtained varies considerably in these circumstances, generating new inequalities, a feature usually associated with high participation systems (Marginson 2016b). Such trends, along with the persistence of structural inequalities affecting access to higher education, remain poorly documented in the region, and too often hidden by aggregates, comparators and typologies linking HE growth and economic development without attention to equity and social justice (Ilie and Rose 2016).

Drawing on secondary data and on debates from three national contexts of sub-Saharan Africa (Kenya, Nigeria and Senegal), the paper seeks to address the following sets of questions: How do inequalities manifest themselves at the levels of access to HE institutions and programmes, in student experience, and in access to labour markets and social recognition in contexts of unevenly distributed expansion of HE opportunities? How have issues of inequalities and equity in access and participation been addressed in national policies on HE? How have these policies evolved in contexts of expansion and diversification of HE systems? A historical perspective is brought to each case, to reveal the relationship between growth of enrolment and other dimensions of national HE developments. Linking questions of “access for whom?”, “to what?” and “what for?” through national illustrations also allows to consider more context-relevant options for greater inclusion.

¹ See Mohamedbhai (2014), Ilie and Rose (2016) and Darvas et al. (2017).

Section 2 of the paper discusses the various ways in which expansion and equity in HE have been conceptualized and measured. The section also discusses the limitations of Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) and commonly associated features as descriptors of the historical development of HE in sub-Saharan Africa. Section 3 discusses trends in access and enrolment in the three countries under focus, highlighting points at which inequalities in access are generated. Section 4 discusses institutional-level manifestations of inequalities in contexts of diversification of subjects and qualifications. Section 5 reviews what is known of the relationship between the expansion and transformation of HE and the employment prospects of graduates from various socio-economic backgrounds in the three case countries. In section 6 we return to some of the contradictions and paradoxes accompanying the expansion of HE in sub-Saharan Africa with a view to emphasize how understanding the role played by HE in generating and perpetuating inequalities should be part of broader considerations of economic and human development.

2. Conceptualizing Higher Education Development and Inequalities in Developing Contexts

While the HE landscapes of most countries have changed and expanded, the extent to which this expansion benefits societies is subject to interpretation based on models, typologies and measures that do not always reflect adequately the specific trajectories of national HE systems. These models have themselves stimulated policies applied across the developing world which continue to affect current patterns of participation in HE.

2.1 Measuring equity and inequities in access and participation in higher education

Tools to measure the accessibility, availability and attainability of HE around the world have changed over time, in a reflection of the expansion and diversification of systems (Carpentier et al. 2018). While datasets of the post-war era were focused on numbers of entrants, the GER in particular, as a proxy for democratization of access, more refined statistical information is used today in high participation systems of East Asia, North America and Europe to address the questions of “access to what?” and “for whom?”. Indicators such as the Higher Education Initial Participation Rate (HEIPR) estimating the “likelihood of a young person participating in HE by age 30, based on current participation rates” (Department for Education 2018) now complement the traditional GER in a reflection of the complexification of patterns of access to and experience within HE (Clancy and Goastellec 2007). Equally, perspectives on equity in accessing HE are changing in the developing world with “equality of rights” and “equality of results” gradually replacing previous meritocratic conceptions of equality of opportunity in policy discourses, international indicators and to some extent in the foundations of national policies (UIS 2018; UNESCO 2017). The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development adopted by the United Nations in 2015 explicitly emphasizes ensuring “inclusive and equitable quality education and promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all” in its SDG 4, which set out a target of equal access “for all women and men” to “quality and affordable” tertiary education,

“including university “ (UN 2015). In a sense, the emphasis on inclusivity and quality reveals how human capital theory and returns on investment in education are today supplemented by indicators on the social benefits of education (UIS 2018). However, refined indicators of these wider benefits have yet to be measurable across and within countries, particularly in the poorest countries where data availability and reliability remains a major issue (Atenas and Havemann 2019), hence the continued use of GER by UNESCO and in worldwide comparisons.

2.1.1 Use and abuse of the Gross Enrolment Ratio

GER has been used by the UN since the 1950s to measure the “number of students enrolled in a given level of education, regardless of age, expressed as a percentage of the official school-age population corresponding to the same level of education”.² For the tertiary level (or HE level as referred in this paper), the population used is the 5-year age group starting from the official secondary school graduation age. To meet the UNESCO specification, GER in any country must be based on total enrolment in “all types of schools and education institutions, including public, private and all other institutions” that provide organized HE programmes.

Measuring participation allowed simple comparisons across countries, with positive correlations between GER and indicators such as economic growth and employment structure defining positions on a continuum from economically “underdeveloped” to “developed” countries. Rising GER in HE was also seen as a measure of success of the UNESCO strategy to generalize participation in secondary education in newly independent countries.

The post-war era and indeed the second part of the twentieth century were marked by rapid increases in GER in most countries around the world. In fact, analysis of world trends for the period shows that the expansion of HE outpaced the expansion of secondary education in most countries.

GER in HE became a proxy for development and typologies emerged that ranked countries along a continuum from low participation to universal participation. The three-stage typology developed by Martin Trow in the 1970s, although created in order to explain the evolution of HE in “advanced societies” (Trow 1973; Marginson 2016a), became a reference in research and policy circles where these “elite”, “mass” and “universal” stages (and related GER markers) continue to dominate paradigms. As we will see later, this systematic alignment of HE expansion with economic development indicators in policy strategies despite enrolment patterns across countries revealing more nuanced pictures, turned against the sector in the poorest countries when international organizations started to re-prioritize lower levels of education from the 1990s onwards, with detrimental effects on public investments in HE (Banya and Elu 2001; Zeleza 2016).

² Measured by dividing the number of students enrolled in a given level of education regardless of age by the population of the age group which officially corresponds to the given level of education and multiplying the result by 100.

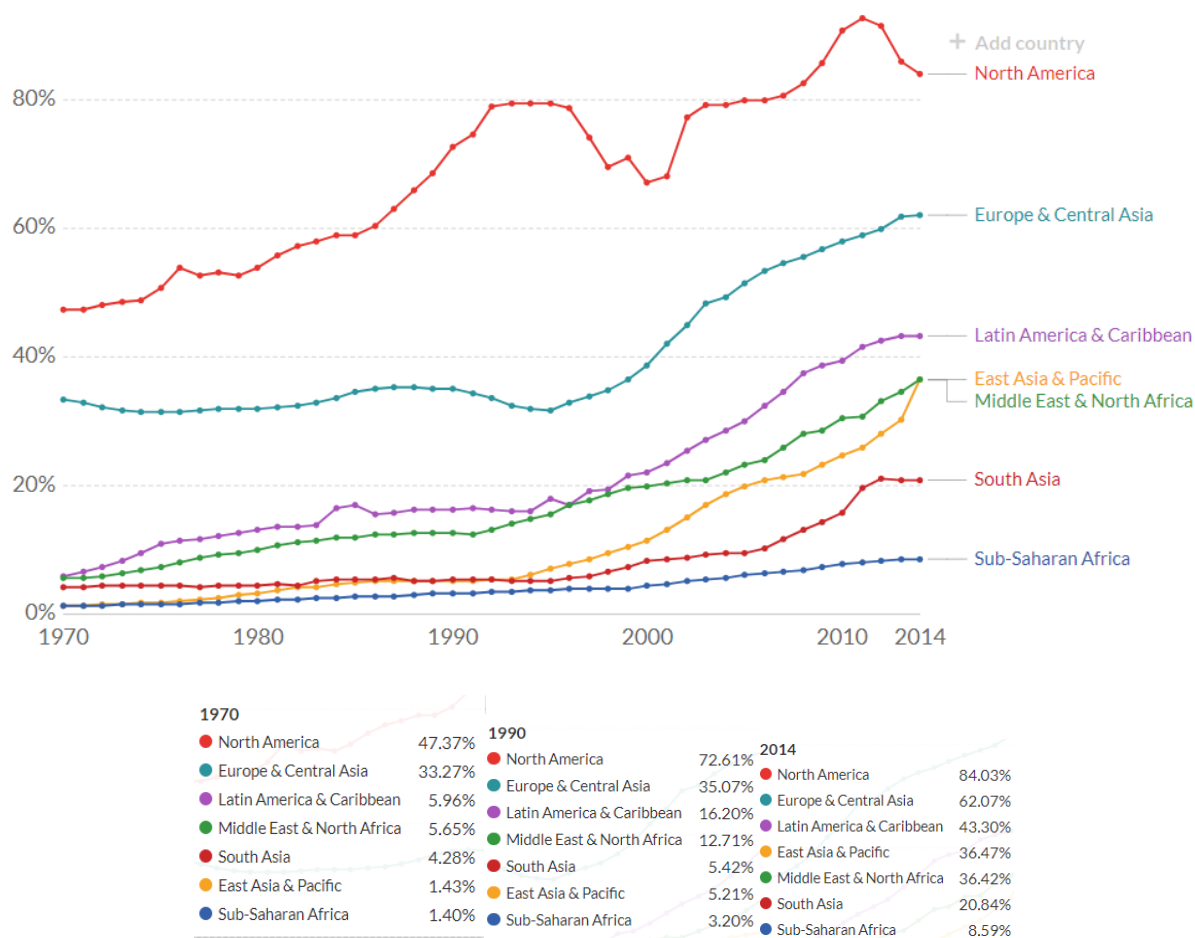
The measure of participation in HE only started to reflect the dynamics of transition from secondary to higher education in sub-Saharan Africa from the 1960s when most newly independent countries embarked on national policies of HE. Prior to that, the numbers of students enrolled in Dakar, Makerere or Ibadan remained deliberately small as colonial administrations were primarily interested in training an intermediate African workforce at local colleges, while settlers preferred to send their children to the metropole for further education (Nwauwa 1997; Lulat 2005). By 1970, the GER stood at 2 percent for sub-Saharan Africa, recording the most “elitist” systems according to the Trow typology, while North America already presented features of a mass system, recording a 30 percent ratio (Zezeza 2016). In these circumstances, GER comparisons tended to portray African countries as playing catch up from their position at the bottom of the scale. Despite a spectacular rise in enrolments over the following four decades, the average GER of less than 10 percent for the region in 2018 continues to generate perceptions of highly elitist and expensive systems across sub-Saharan Africa. Yet while access to HE systems in countries such as Kenya, Nigeria and Senegal has remained highly restricted in quantitative terms (enrolling less than 10 percent of qualified secondary school leavers until recently), the socio-economic profile of their students has never been as elitist as their position on the Trow typology would suggest. And this is where postcolonial experiences from sub-Saharan Africa require a broader perspective on matters of equity in educational opportunities, and of access to HE. Right from the 1960s, the reality of who accesses HE and the value of what is accessed in sub-Saharan Africa have not matched the “attitudes towards access” and the “functions of higher education” associated with elite systems (Mohamedbhai 2014).

2.2 Colonial and post-colonial experiences: Massified institutions in low participation systems

As discussed earlier, the twentieth century expansion of HE systems is rooted in meritocratic conceptualizations of equality (McCowan 2016; Clancy and Goastellec 2007) where standardized procedures and criteria of admission are supplemented with targeted compensatory measures (subject to availability of public funding) to ensure that the most able individuals from all strata of society are given an equal opportunity of access to HE. Yet in the context of sub-Saharan Africa, growth towards “massification” has rarely gone hand in hand with a fair distribution of opportunities (Hornsby and Osman 2014; Mohamedbhai 2014).

When considered from a world comparative perspective (figure 1 below), post-colonial sub-Saharan Africa stands out with its persistently low levels of enrolment, reaching a 10 percent regional average in 2014 (compared to 85 percent in North America).

Figure 1: Evolution of gross enrolment ratio in tertiary education by world regions

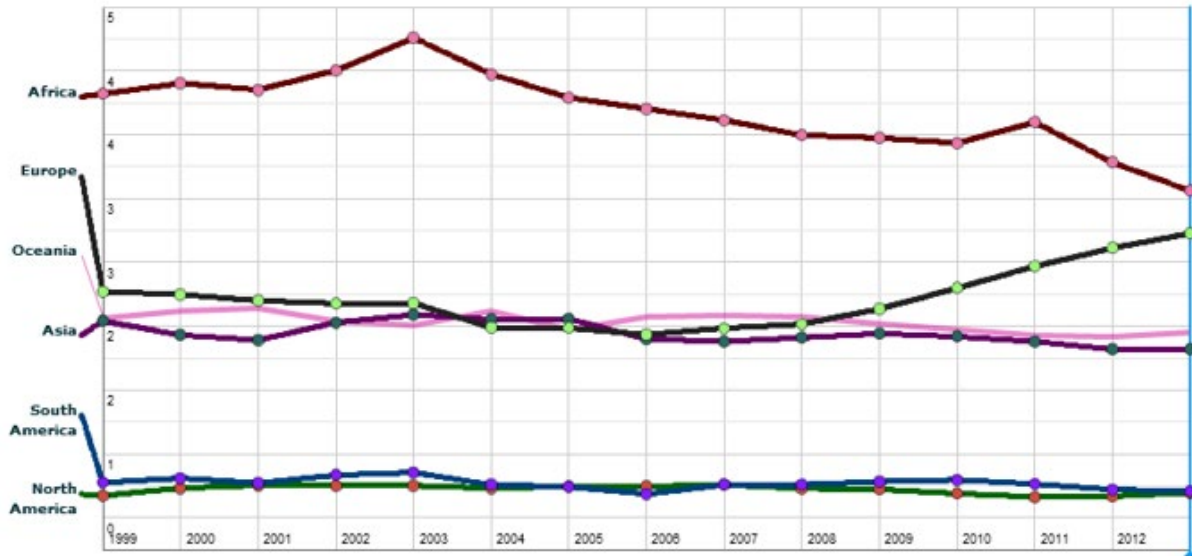


Source: UIS n.d.a

While the whole world progressed towards mass HE from the early 1990s, the sub-Saharan African region stagnated with levels of participation unable to absorb an increasing demand resulting from the generalization of secondary education (Ilie and Rose 2016). A greater rise occurred from the 2000s, in part resulting from a liberalization of the sector in most sub-Saharan Africa countries from the 1990s, although it was still unable to satisfy the demands of the ever-increasing population of qualified secondary school leavers.

And despite a high proportion of African students enrolled outside their country on the continent or beyond (figure 2), HE remains out of reach for large segments of the population. Unlike in other contexts of expansion, HE systems in the region never appeared to control the balance between efforts to address inherited barriers in accessibility (at the point of entry in HE), and the necessity to widen the geographical availability of institutions and programmes in order to enhance the attainability of all qualifications. Instead, in almost everywhere in the region, unavailability, inaccessibility and unattainability combine and perpetuate increasingly unequal HE systems (Carpentier et al. 2018).

Figure 2: Outbound mobility ratio, all regions, both sexes (%) (1999-2013)



Source: UIS, n.d.b

2.2.1 Conceptualizations of equity in the transition from colonial to post-colonial access policies

A similar climate of suspicion accompanied the parsimonious and very late development of HEIs across colonies of Africa. Both French and British colonial powers in particular had resisted the introduction of the type of universities established decades earlier in the colonies of North Africa and Asia. This had resulted in a steady flow of “educated elites” towards the metropolises for further education, often encouraged and sponsored by the colonial state. Returning home with “proper” HE qualifications, the elites were unimpressed by what was about to be offered at home.

Even the emphasis on “adapted education” (a model of education designed to address the practical needs of a people and oriented towards fostering family and community cohesion) introduced from the 1930s in the framework of the British colonial policy continued to be perceived as an “external” construction of what counted as knowledge. According to Samoff and Carrol, this externalization of the values upon which the system was built made it more receptive to international pressure and dependent on donor resources for decades to come (Samoff and Carrol 2004). Although resting on a different philosophy than the British “adapted education”, the French strategy of parsimonious and downgraded HE offered to local populations (towards the training of intermediate cadres) also created patterns of intellectual dependency and symbolic domination that continued to define the shape of national HE systems in countries such as Senegal, Côte d’Ivoire or Madagascar (Singaravélou 2009).

2.3 Conclusion

Postcolonial developments in African HE took different routes influenced by colonial experiences and subsequently remodelled by local political dynamics, waves of economic growth and crises, massive demand for HE, and the internationalization of the sector.

The colonial origin of these university systems can be said to have shaped their early “model” of management of access to HE, with Senegal adopting a model of formal equality of access built upon a national academic qualification (the baccalauréat) that students can obtain at the completion of their secondary education, and Nigeria and Kenya combining highly selective and meritocratic admission systems with a planned geographical distribution of HEIs to support regional socio-economic development and empower marginalized communities (Oanda and Jowi 2012).

The three countries discussed in the remainder of this paper therefore offer both contrasting examples of the postcolonial trajectories of HE systems in sub-Saharan Africa and illustrations of the common challenges they are facing. As the following sections will show, Senegal, Nigeria and Kenya made strategic choices over the past 50 years to facilitate access to HE for targeted underrepresented groups (Kenya, Senegal) or to correct blatant educational inequalities and the underrepresentation of certain states in federal positions (Nigeria). These diverse approaches to HE participation within broader state-led developmental strategies generated high social demand, particularly in urban environments, where universities struggled to cope with the pressure right from the late 1970s. All three countries were then hit hard by waves of externally imposed or stimulated reforms and strategies, whose consequences are among the challenges discussed in this paper. The cases of Kenya, Nigeria, and Senegal are not presented here from a strictly comparative perspective due to the unequal availability of data across the range of indicators of interest to this paper. The three countries illustrate options, challenges, and patterns of dependencies that generally characterize, but sometimes contradict, regional trends. This is why we offer them as case studies, discussing in turn the accessibility of their HE systems, the availability of different options for accessing HE, students experiences within the HE institutions, and the employment and economic opportunities that their HE qualifications offer.

3. Trends in Access and Enrolment

The growth and expansion of HE systems in sub-Saharan Africa have been marked over the last four decades by four features. These are the increase in the number of public universities through the conferment of university status to middle level HE institutions, the rapid establishment of private universities, a broader spatial distribution of both public and private universities even though skewed towards economically endowed regions, and the gradual emergence of institutional and academic programme stratification. These developments, as will be argued, have had multiple implications as regards access to HE and inequalities. While the socio-economic recruitment of universities widened, old inequalities in terms of access and completion continue to operate within new institutional landscapes. In other instances, new forms of inequalities are emerging in ways that erode gains realized through increased enrolment of students from lower socio-economic groups.

The increase in the number of institutions and in enrolments has also been accompanied by a stratification of institutions and academic programmes along various cleavages (e.g. public versus private institutions, urban versus rural, first versus second or third generation institutions, research versus teaching universities). In terms of academic programmes, distinctions operate along prestigious versus non-prestigious programmes, STEM versus social sciences and humanities, and between programmes perceived to have higher employability prospects and others. Emerging studies across the continent do suggest that in the context of this competition for access to reputable institutions and academic programmes, students' socio-economic background and political influence are playing a larger part than in the past in determining access to reputable institutions and academic programmes (Darvas et al. 2017).

3.1 Diversity of institution types and student demographics

In the three countries under focus, the increase in the number of HE institutions has been accompanied by the emergence of new types of institutions and changing student demographics. In terms of public universities, new institutions have been established, often located in new areas of economic development within the countries, attracting new populations (more rural, more female students) attracted by locally available HE opportunities. In all three countries though, these newer institutions, suffering from chronic underfunding, have struggled to match the level of academic infrastructures and the overall reputation that first generation public institutions have established over-time. At the same time the proliferation of private universities, established by religious organizations, local businesses, or foreign universities and companies, further diversified the field. Accompanying the diversity of institutional landscape is the changing student demographics. Over the first two decades of the post-colonial era, universities targeted students transiting directly from high schools to universities and the students' HE costs were subsidized through public funding. The emerging institutional diversity in a context of reduction of public subsidies for students forced the institutions to subsequently diversify their intake towards working adults and full fee-paying students. While these trends are positive in terms of increasing enrolment of various groups of students, they have restricted the proportion of places available for younger students seeking to access HE through free or subsidized places in public institutions. For example, much of the growth in university enrolment witnessed in Kenya in the 2000-2010 decade is accounted for by the influx of adult working students into universities, especially teachers seeking to raise their academic qualifications (Oanda and Jowi 2012; Simson and Harris 2020). Besides household capacity to pay for education, a historical combination of ethnic and regional inequalities tends to increasingly determine access to both public and private universities (Simon and Harris 2020). These trends have contributed to the emergence of new forms of inequalities as students from marginal backgrounds, such as those from rural populations, those from low socio-economic groups, special needs students and those stranded in conflict zones end up being marginalized within a stratified HE system where affordability and mobility capacity determine what is being accessed. Marketization and privatization of HE in Kenya have undeniably brought in more women and more students from underrepresented groups to universities (primarily in the private

sector and in non-degree fee-paying courses of public institutions), but they have tended to come from high income families (Simson and Harris 2020; McCowan 2018).

The three case countries have experienced fast growth in gross enrolment rates (GER) over the last decade. In Kenya, GER rose from 3.99 percent in 2009 to 11.46 percent in 2017; in Senegal, from 7.94 percent in 2009 to 11.51 percent in 2017; and in Nigeria, HE GER stood at 10 percent in 2011, the latest year for which data is available, from 6 percent ten years earlier (UIS n.d.a). This is above the sub-Saharan GER average which stood at 9.5 percent in 2017 and could be seen as the result of a greater institutionalization of HE in these countries and of their capacity to reform and open up their systems to the needs of the economy. But the three countries are also, according to a UNDP report, among those in the region whose recent economic growth was accompanied by a rise in overall social and income inequalities (Bhorat et al. 2017). Kenya, for example is cited as the most unequal country in East Africa, with a 2017 report by Oxfam showing that less than 0.1 percent of the population owned more wealth than the bottom 99.9 percent, with the richest 10 percent of Kenyans earning on average 23 times more than the poorest 10 percent (OXFAM 2017). In Nigeria, the share of people living below the national poverty line increased from 69 million in 2004 to 112 million in 2010, equivalent to 69 percent of the population, while income inequality grew from 40 percent in 2003 to 43 percent in 2009 (OXFAM 2017). In Senegal, whereas economic growth averaged 6.5 percent between 2009 to 2015, the number of poor people rose by 10 percent, from 5.7 to 6.3 million within the same period (UNDP 2016). These trends suggest economic growth whose benefits are not equitably distributed, which, as we will see, tends to translate into inequalities in access to HE.

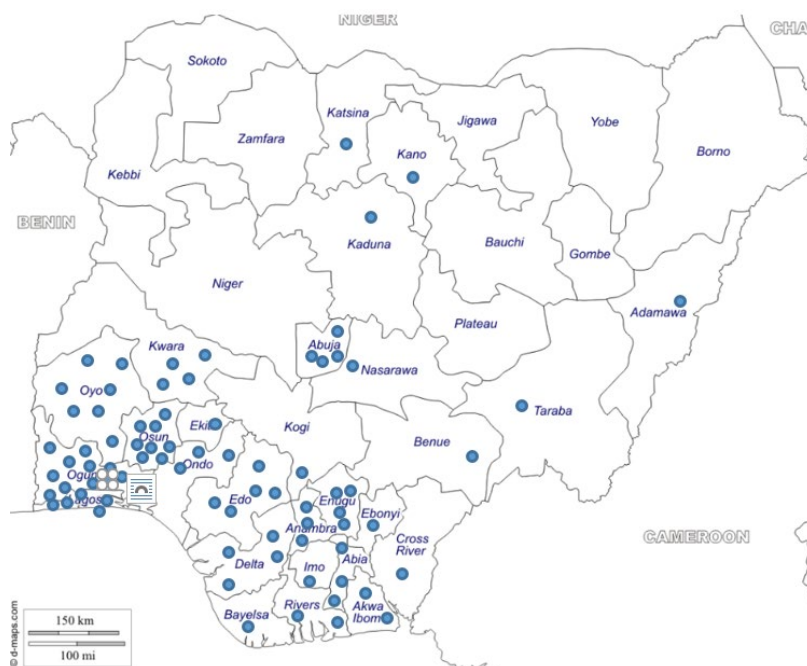
3.1.1 Nigeria

In Nigeria, the HE sector includes universities (federal, state and private) as well as polytechnics (skills-intensive and experiential learning programmes) and colleges of education. Expansion and diversification have taken place among all these categories of institutions over the last two decades. Until 1999, the university sector was primarily dominated by public universities, categorized as federal and state. The number of both types of public universities grew from 45 institutions in the year 2000 to 95 institutions by the year 2017, comprising of 43 federal universities and 52 state universities (National Universities Commission 2018). This was complemented by 79 approved private universities, bringing the number of university institutions to 174 (National Universities Commission n.d). Private universities therefore constitute 45 percent of all Nigerian universities, a majority of which are religiously affiliated. Data from the Nigeria Federal Ministry of Education show that by the academic year 2012/2013, the latest for which data is available, only 5.8 percent of undergraduate students were enrolled in the 50 then existing private universities, compared to 59.7 percent in 40 federal universities and 34.5 percent in 39 state universities (Federal Ministry of Education n.d.).

Following a trend that was set with the location of universities during the colonial period, the Southern part of Nigeria has the highest concentration of public and private HEIs (figure 3). A

large number of these private universities have been set up by churches in the Lagos-Ibadan area of the south-west where economic opportunities and demands for new skills are high.

Figure 3 Location of private universities in Nigeria (2018)



Source: Authors' compilation based on National Universities Commission (n.d.)

This concentration of opportunities in the South contradicts the principle of the Nigerian Federation (and its obligations under the “federal character”) to make educational opportunities available across the country. This is a good illustration of inequalities generated within a process of system expansion. Besides, rather than being a strategy to enhance access and participation and redress regional and social inequalities, the distinction of HE institutions into federal, state and private determines access to increasingly unequal educational opportunities. The competition for places tends to be intense in federal universities because of their higher public subsidies and lower tuition fee charges, and also because of their historical reputation and perceived higher standards. Hence, even where tuition fees as high as those applied in the private sector are introduced, those public universities remain more attractive, and therefore more selective, because of their higher reputational capital, despite poorer teaching infrastructures than those of private institutions.

The capacity of public universities to meet demand for access is however far from satisfactory, as only about 30 percent of the students who qualify are admitted (typically after two or three attempts) (Kazeem 2017). The alternatives available to the remaining 70 percent are to seek admission to the National Open University of Nigeria—which offers open and Distance learning (ODL) programmes to 150,000 students annually (UNESCO 2014)—to apply to a private institution, or, for those who can afford it, to go abroad. About 85,000 Nigerian students are currently enrolled in university-level education outside their country (UIS n.d.c; Keteku 2017).

3.1.2 Kenya

In Kenya, as in Nigeria, public universities dominate in terms of number of institutions and number of students enrolled over the last two decades. In terms of institutional growth and diversification, the number of universities increased from one public (University of Nairobi), and one private (United States International University) in 1970, to 31 public universities (with 6 constituent colleges and 111 public university campuses) and 32 private universities (with 5 constituent colleges) by 2018 (KNBS 2019; Simson and Harris 2020).

The growth in public universities has however not entailed establishing new universities, but occurred through the conversion of middle level technical and vocational colleges (TIVET) into full-fledged universities. There have also been trends towards the establishment of regional public universities and colleges as a strategy to promote equity and regional development (Oanda and Jowi 2012). Rather than promoting equity, however, the new regional universities, established in the context of declining public resources, have focused on increasing the enrolment of fee-paying students while doing little to invest in the quality of academic programmes (Nganga 2016). Middle-level TIVET colleges operated on huge public subsidies and served to train the large pool of high school graduates who would not get admitted to public universities nor have the resources to pursue HE outside the country. This alternative for poor students has however been compromised by the fact that once converted into universities, these institutions started to focus on attracting fee-paying students (Oanda and Jowi 2012). Establishing regional public universities and colleges in the context of reduced public funding also resulted in poorly resourced institutions in the rural regions of the country offering low cost entrepreneurial courses, without sufficient measures to reduce existing marginalization (Oanda and Jowi 2012).

3.1.3 Senegal

In Senegal, Université Cheikh Anta Diop (UCAD) remains the country's largest university, enrolling about 80 percent of students in the public HE sector and unable to absorb the ever growing demand for places from qualified candidates, despite the diversification of the field in the last two decades.³ The university has an official capacity of 25,000 students, but by 2016 UCAD had a student enrolment of 79,943 (MESRI 2019). Overcrowded facilities have been seen as responsible for low completion rates (as low as 30 percent in certain public social science departments) and frequent programme disruptions due to student and academic staff strikes (Caerus Capital 2018). UCAD operates within the constraints of a public policy guaranteeing university education to everyone with a baccalauréat, retaining a virtually tuition-free public HE, and a system of bursary covering in certain conditions the fees to attend private institutions (between USD 2206 and USD 2836 per year in 2018), and also attracting a substantial number of students from other Francophone West African Countries (UIS n.d.d).

³ MESRI 2019; Wade 2017; Ly 2019.

In terms of expansion and diversification, public HE expansion began in the early 1990s with the establishment of the University of Saint-Louis (now Université Gaston Berger, UGB) and the creation of another three universities later in 2007, namely the University of Thiès (UT), University Alioune Diop of Bambey (UADB) and University Assane Seck of Ziguinchor (UASZ). Besides public universities, the government of Senegal has also invested in distance education to expand capacity (see section 4.3).

At the same time, from the 1990s, private universities have been allowed to operate in Senegal. By 2016 there were 75 private HE institutions authorized by the state, most of which are management schools with a capacity of about 200 students each (Dimé 2018). The government also supports the private HE sector by redirecting about 15 percent of baccalauréat graduates applying for places in public universities and covering their tuition fees (MESRI 2019). The percentage of students paid for by the government to attend private institutions now reaches 25 percent of all enrolments in private HEIs (Diallo 2019; Dia and Kane 2018).

3.1.4 Institutional diversification and student choices

To a large extent, the dynamics of HE growth and diversification in the three countries reflect trends observed across sub-Saharan Africa. First, expansion has overall occurred more within the public university sector than in alternative providers such as public or private technical and vocational institutes, open and online learning programmes, and work-based programmes. Alternative public HEIs however are providing, in Senegal for instance, more equitable access for large segments of the population from all social backgrounds (Ba 2018). But almost everywhere they represent a second choice for candidates seeking admission into universities. The desire of most families to enrol their children in public universities has resulted in the emergence of a vibrant private secondary education sector across the countries to better prepare students to pass the competitive examinations that enhance their chances of being admitted to public universities. Private secondary schools require huge resources that only wealthy households are able to afford, and this disadvantages children from poor families as private secondary schools, using said resources, are able to better prepare their pupils to pass examinations. Third, the emergence of numerous private HE institutions, which are small scale in terms of their enrolments and disciplinary offerings, has had little impact on access to higher education. This is because private universities target students who can afford to pay for their programmes or who are sponsored by the government to do so. Finally, the three countries are lacking more progressive equity policies and dedicated equity agencies to regulate the operations of HE institutions in this context of diversification (Salmi 2018). While the number of institutions and students has been on the rise, access to universities remains relatively limited to a small cohort of students, as we show in the next section.

3.2 Implications of higher education expansion for equity of access

What implications do these trends in HE expansion have for students from low socio-economic or marginalized groups in sub-Saharan Africa? Two variables can help draw conclusions. One

is the level of national level funding and access policies deliberately designed to increase the quota of students from low socio-economic groups to public and private universities. Second is institutional level data that profile students in terms of their socio-economic status. Unfortunately, such variables do not exist in comparable formats across the three countries. However, studies have tried to map out trends in access to universities by population quantiles, which indicate that the proportion of students from poor socio-economic groups that have benefited from recent expansion of the systems remains negligible. The 2016 Global Education Monitoring Report (UNESCO 2016) shows for example that in Senegal in 2016, less than 1 percent of students aged 25-29 from the poorest households had completed four years of HE, compared to nearly 10 percent of students of the same age from wealthy households. In Nigeria, the figures reported are 1 percent from poor households compared to about 19 percent from wealthy households (UNESCO 2016). These trends are consistent with the recent World Bank study (Darvas et al. 2017) which analyzed enrolment trends in a number of sub-Saharan African countries across population quantiles between 1998 and 2012, and established that the enrolment ratio for the bottom 80 percent of the population increased by 3.1 percent, whereas that of the top 20 percent increased by 7.9 percent, with wider disparities by income found in Francophone African countries than in Anglophone countries. So, while overall numbers have definitely increased as a result of the expansion and diversification strategies adopted, the concern is that the additional opportunities for access to HE of the past twenty years seem to have primarily benefitted students from wealthier socio-economic groups. Initiatives to broaden participation in HE appear to be hindered by inequalities at lower levels of the system, and by public funding policies for education at all levels that lack a broad-based consideration of equity (Ilie and Rose 2016). This does not come as a huge surprise if one considers that in Nigeria, for instance, about 98 percent of adolescents from the richest quintile complete lower secondary school compared to only 9 percent of those from the poorest (ISSC et al. 2016). Data available across the region reveal that the proportion of students from poor households eligible for the next level of education thins as they move up the educational ladders, and that the gap in HE showed little signs of abating over the past two decades of expansion (ISSC et al. 2016).

3.3 Institutional level consolidation of social inequalities in access

Institutions appear to have played their own part in consolidating the inequalities observed above, especially through the policies they have designed to further regulate access to their over-subscribed courses on top of already burdensome and expensive national selection procedures, and through policies for generating extra resources to compensate for shortfalls in public funding.

Given the importance attached to HE in the last two decades, four groups of students have emerged competing for university places through various access paths. The first group are young people, usually aged 18-19 years who have completed high school education and met the minimum requirements to seek admission to universities. This constitutes the largest group with a clear entry path to universities as long as they pass required examinations. The large size of this group makes it a priority target for national level admission and public funding policies.

The second group consists of students who have some post-secondary certificate or diploma qualifications from recognized HEIs. Usually, these are students who didn't meet the required qualifications to gain straight entry to university degree courses and therefore opted for lower tier qualifications, used as access routes into those degree courses. The third group is made up of executives with higher professional qualifications but in need of a university level education relevant to their career. The growth in business and management postgraduate programmes in African universities and private HE institutes has been a result of this demand. The last group is made of the mature students seeking reskilling. Often, these students do not have formal university entry qualifications but boast a long period of work experience. The social justice imperative of providing opportunities for university education to adult learners has required that universities also design access pathways for this group of students.

The concern is that over the last two decades, as enrolments have expanded and public funding to universities declined, institutions have come to rely on a cohort of students with private resources to fund their education (groups 2, 3 and 4 above). The need of the institutions for operational resources and the growing number of students who can pay has therefore driven the design of access paths for these "new" profiles of students. In so doing, HE institutions contribute themselves to limiting access opportunities for poor students and those from marginalized groups. The emergence of institutional and academic programme diversification and stratification coupled with dwindling state support also contributed to restricting access of poor students to lower quality institutions and academic programmes.

4. Access to What? Inequalities in the Availability of Academic Programmes

Equity of access to HE does not necessarily translate into a fair availability of equally recognized institutions and programmes. In the three contexts discussed here, where graduate employability is overall problematic, academic programmes with a clear vocational orientation and those offering work placement opportunities are the most sought after and more likely to be offered in fee-paying institutions. In those circumstances, the expansion in access to HE may actually allow inequalities to resurface within the system due to the level of competitiveness operating among programmes of unequal availability and attainability (Carpentier et al. 2018). In this section, we briefly review evidence available for the three countries to show how institutional level access modalities to programmes and associated support interventions potentially disadvantage students from poor backgrounds and other marginalized groups, and therefore contribute to widening social inequalities.

4.1 Access to what in Kenya

In Kenya, patterns of access to both public and private universities tend to reflect increasing regional, ethnic, gender and socio-economic differentiation in the country. The organization and operation of the schooling system, coupled with the prevailing school cultures, often

influence students' perceptions of what HE can offer them and of their own abilities in a manner that tends to intensify social inequalities in the accessibility of courses and institutions.

Overall and unsurprisingly, the wider range of HE programmes in Kenya is found in the public universities. Their largest clusters of programmes are found in agriculture and allied subjects and in the STEM subjects. Public university constituent colleges offer a significantly smaller number of programmes (particularly in STEM subjects), but across a reasonably large spectrum of clusters (including agriculture and forestry, life sciences, teacher training, and business administration). Availability of postgraduate and research programmes is very limited in these colleges.

Conversely, private universities offer limited opportunities in resource-intensive science-based courses and are much more concentrated in the following clusters (by order of availability): the humanities and arts, followed by business and administration, health and welfare (excluding medicine), and social and behavioural sciences.

Another factor affecting the distribution of places across subjects is the introduction of parallel (fee-paying) programmes in public universities from 1998. While providing a much needed injection of cash into public universities, the system has had the double effect of lowering the quality of courses targeted (students paying a fee do not have to meet the same entry requirements) and of exacerbating social inequalities within the public HE system (the number of free places in those courses is falling, while more academically demanding courses—usually recruiting from wealthier socio economic groups—remain unaffected).

Overall, Kenya offers the picture of a very large and partly commercialized public sector offering the widest number and range of courses (CUE 2019; Simson and Harris 2020). This is important: in some countries, particularly among the francophone group, the explosion of small private colleges has introduced a shift in patterns of studies, with well over 50 percent of HE students now enrolled in short cycle courses, in the private sector of Cote d'Ivoire for instance (Darvas et al. 2017). In Kenya, by contrast, numbers in the private sector have only marginally affected overall figures of enrolment in the last two decades: primarily small private institutions continue to offer a narrow range of courses to a very small proportion of Kenyan HE students. However, the type and geographical distribution of institutions has had an impact on who accesses what. With science and engineering courses still predominantly accessed by male students in public HEIs, private institutions generally show a more balanced male/female ratio in their intake, predominantly for arts/social sciences-oriented courses. However, the fees charged, and the location of most private institutions in the most economically dynamic urban environments, do little to address the social inequalities discussed earlier. With the government pushing for differentiated unit costing of programmes to determine the tuition fees charged to students (Republic of Kenya 2019), and an “inappropriate targeting and lack of transparency in the allocation of student aid” (Charo et al. 2019, 30), access to the most rewarding courses in

both public and private universities remains largely out of reach for students from disadvantaged background.

4.2 Access to what in Nigeria

From the early 1980s, the states of the Nigerian Federation started to take responsibility for establishing a local university and one or more colleges (polytechnics, colleges of education, etc.). With the fragmentation of the Federation into more and more states over the years, the number of state-owned universities quickly surpassed that of federal institutions, offering a remarkable geographical distribution of HE opportunities in a country of deep regional disparities in educational attainment inherited from the colonial era.

Yet as seen earlier, federal and state universities and colleges have never been in a position to absorb the ever increasing demand for HE, particularly from the mid-1980s when state subsidies began to dwindle (Salihu and Jamil 2015).

The same recipes were adopted as almost everywhere on the continent; they involved a change in regulation to allow private operations in the HE sector, a certain liberalization within the public sector allowing institutions to introduce new courses and qualifications, and the gradual introduction of cost sharing in the funding formula of public universities.

As in the case of Kenya discussed earlier, private universities tend to be much smaller (no more than 6000 students) than the public ones and offer a narrower range of courses. Their distribution on the national territory also reveals striking contrasts.

The range of HE courses offered has undoubtedly increased over last 20 years under the combined effects of an increase in the number of institutions and the opportunity given to publicly-funded universities to run fee-paying part time and sub-degree courses alongside their standard accredited degree programmes (Ekpoh and Edet 2017). Private universities and colleges also contributed to this rise in course availability, but to a much smaller extent, with their offer often replicating on a smaller scale what is already available in the public system. According to the most recent digest of statistics published by the National Universities Commission, (National Universities Commission 2018), private universities offer an average of 24 programmes, while 48 are offered on average in the public sector (60 in federal institutions, with over 100 programmes commonly offered in the most comprehensive ones).

Public universities, the federal ones in particular, have over the years been controlled in their delivery of science-based courses (imposition of a 60:40 ratio in favour of STEM subjects), and in spite of the difficulties encountered in the implementation of this policy, they offer a wide range of courses in all disciplines, and are scattered across the country. Polytechnics and other technical colleges complement this picture with sub-degree courses offered in more vocational subjects. By contrast, private universities are overwhelmingly concentrating their offers in a small range of arts and social science courses. In this respect, and contrary to comments

previously made regarding the contribution of the private sector (Iruonagbe and Egharevba 2015; Suleiman et al. 2017) there is little evidence supporting the assertion that private universities have enhanced the employability of Nigerian graduates by offering courses more adequately tailored to the needs of the economy.

In Nigeria, concerns related to inequitable outcomes from policies that have been designed to regulate admission of students to federal and state universities have been raised in a number of studies (Omeje et al. 2016; Agbaire 2018). With respect to universities, the quota system employs three criteria for admission, recruitment, promotion and appointment. These include merit, catchment area and degree of educational disadvantage at state level (Omeje et al. 2016). For example, candidates who qualify for university entry on the basis of merit but are not from the state in which the university they applied for is located and are also not from an educationally less developed region may be denied admission (Agbaire 2018). In practice, the policies contribute to favouring some candidates in access to universities and degree programmes at the expense of others on the basis of state of origin, local government area, nepotism or choice of course of study (Omeje et al. 2016).

In an effort to remedy the shortcomings of the quota system, and to respond to regular allegations of mismanagement and corruption in the central admission system, the government, from 2005, allowed universities to conduct their own screening admission exercise, known as Post-University Matriculation Examination (PUME), for candidates having met their course cut off point in the national university entrance examination (Abdulkareem and Muraina 2014). Screening has taken various forms, depending on the university, posing new challenges and increasing the financial burden of the admissions process on candidates.

The recent diversification of the sector stimulated by rising numbers of private providers and the multiplication of public-private partnerships seems to have served primarily three (overlapping) categories within the Nigerian population: the urban middle classes (capable of meeting the costs of private education), the urban population of the South, and the female population. To portray the typical student enrolled at a private university as a middle-class female private school leaver from the urbanized south-west zone of the country would be reasonably accurate. With overall student numbers ranging from 100 to 10,000 and a striking concentration in the already economically affluent and highly educated regions of the country, the private universities have had limited impact on the opportunities to access HE courses for more marginalized groups. They have however entered into some sort of competition with public providers in certain areas, showing better staff-to-student ratios and employability prospects and dragging the whole sector towards more targeted offers. Elsewhere, high competition for very few places in a largely underfunded public sector dominates the picture, pushing candidates towards institutions and courses they often did not choose after repeatedly taking entrance examinations (Agbaire 2018; Kanyip 2013).

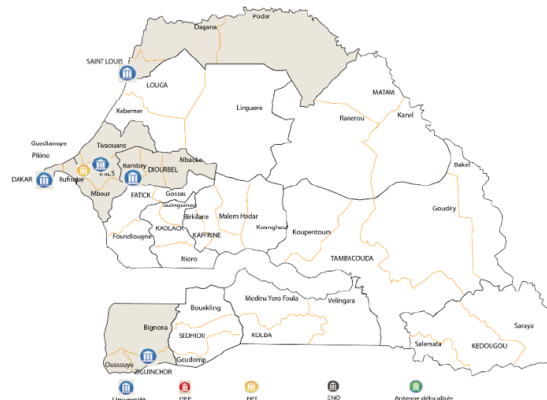
4.3 Access to what in Senegal

As already discussed, Senegal has the lowest gross enrolment rate of the three countries. It is also a country of extreme contrasts between a small number of urban centres where the wealth and educational opportunities are concentrated, and the rest of the country, affected by high infant mortality, low adult literacy and high school dropout rates. Qualifications offered in HE (universities and institutes, both private and public) depend on the specialization of the baccalauréat obtained by students seeking further studies. Currently, the large majority of students enrolled in HE obtained a baccalauréat in literature/social science/management. Unsurprisingly nearly two-thirds of those who qualify with a Bachelor's degree ("licence") do so in the humanities, social sciences and the service sector (Wade 2017).

Data presented in 2017 in support of the government's Plan Senegal Emergent, setting out the country's long term strategic development objectives, revealed the extent of the problem: a high concentration of opportunities in and around Dakar, a low enrolment rate (with marked gender and rural/urban inequalities), a large concentration of students in one single institution (UCAD), limited enrolments (20 percent) in STEM subjects, and a lack of short cycle courses in vocational subjects (Wade 2017). The programme of HE reform to address these challenges includes in particular a closer "alignment" of HE programmes to the needs of the economy (more courses in vocational subjects, greater availability of short cycle HE programmes) (Wade 2017).

Measures have already been implemented towards this strategy which also seeks to address the problem of geographical concentration, generally considered a major factor of inequalities of both access to and attainment within HE in Senegal. This issue has also been made a strategic priority of both previous and on-going HE plans of the Ministry of HE (MESRI 2019). As figure 5 below shows, the five public universities available in 2012 were essentially concentrated in the Dakar region (with the exceptions of the universities Gaston Berger in Saint Louis and Assane Seck in Ziguinchor).

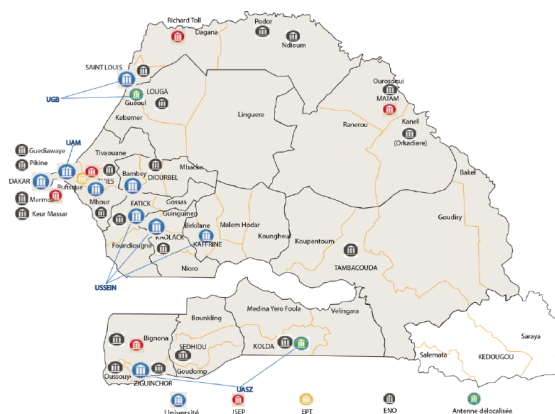
Figure 4: Distribution of public HEIs in Senegal (2012)



Source: MESRI 2019

The number of HE students in Senegal doubled between 2012 and 2019 (MESRI 2019) and the expansion within the public sector has taken two paths: a better geographical distribution (figure 5) and a diversification of offerings, with the creation of sub degree-level institutes, university branches, and the deployment of study centres (ENO) as part of the Université Virtuelle du Sénégal (UVS). With twelve study centres already established, the latter has seen its enrolment reach 27,000 students across twelve degree programmes (Ba 2018).

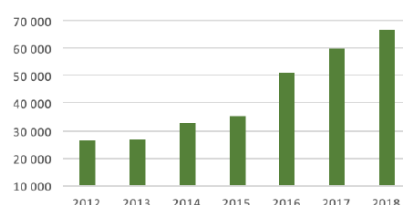
Figure 5: Distribution of public HEIs in Senegal (2019)



Source: MESRI 2019

The absorption of the rise in student numbers observed over the last decade has to some extent been the result of rapid developments in the private sector (figure 6). Accounting for 35 percent of the student population in 2018, the private sector has already seen many transformations and appears to be a dynamic sector attracting interests from local and international investors.

Figure 6: Enrolment in private HEIs in Senegal (2012-2018)



Source: MESRI 2019

Yet, despite this demand absorption role, the problems highlighted in the case of Nigeria and Kenya (concentration on a small number of service-oriented subjects, polarization around the major economic centres) are also affecting Senegal. In a country already characterized by low levels of enrolment in STEM subjects in public universities, the private sector accentuates the imbalance by situating its offers in the tertiary sector (Ndior 2013). Ndior identified the following common characteristics of most private HEIs (Ndior 2013):

- Location in urban environment
- Preponderance of tertiary sector subjects (marketing and management, catering and tourism, IT, banking, communication)
- Primarily short cycles

- Much higher levels of female enrolment than in the public sector
- Offers and fee levels targeting urban wealthy middle classes

Of course, not all private providers are for-profit organizations, and the above characteristics must be seen as the most visible trend. But the concentration in tertiary sector subjects and the small size of institutions are important common characteristics of the sector with direct impact on the size and profile of their student intake.

Mariama Diallo suggests that the rise of the private sector in Senegal should not be related to particular circumstances but rather, as elsewhere on the continent, to a liberalization of the sector from the late 1990s, orchestrated by international donors and organizations, and resulting in the promotion of “new” courses (management, finance, banking, communication) largely absent at the time in public institutions (Diallo 2019). They have since consolidated their place in those fields and brought some innovations in curriculum and pedagogy, now imitated in the public sector.

So rather than opening up opportunities to students that have been kept out of the universities, private institutions (two-thirds of whom are based in Dakar and recruiting primarily from the pool of private secondary school-leavers) have stimulated a new culture of HE where high tuition fees are associated with efficient career services, work placement schemes, smart uniforms, and other symbols of a sector preparing the new cadres of the private sector economy (Diallo 2019).

5. Higher Education-to-Work Transitions

Do students from different socio-economic groups graduating with the same qualifications have equal opportunities in transitioning to work? And has the expansion and diversification of HE landscapes enhanced the employability of graduates in ways that redress social inequalities? While levels of graduate unemployment in sub-Saharan Africa are high, and actually recorded in our three country cases as higher than for those without HE qualifications, the socio-economic profile and area of qualification of graduates mostly affected are not consistently recorded, calling for caution in interpreting a relationship that has yet to be systematically researched (Filmer and Fox 2014; McCowan et al. 2018).

5.1 Unequal benefits of higher education

As has been discussed in the previous sections, the number of students from poor backgrounds and those from marginalized groups accessing and completing universities is small, averaging less than 2 percent across most countries (Ilie and Rose 2016). For this group of students, completing university and transitioning to gainful employment is economically and socially crucial. The few that have managed to attain university level education will have imposed huge sacrifices on their families, only matched by the level of their expectations in terms of returns, symbolic or otherwise. This may include, for some, selling off any available family property

with the expectation that upon graduation, their children will be able to help recoup this once in stable and lucrative employment. In some families, getting one child to university level is often achieved at the expense of the education of other siblings. At the individual level, securing a job shortly after graduation contributes to shaping new identities and relations to others, enables entry to networks that facilitate better jobs and opportunities in society, and shape people's expectations and aspirations for the future, their sense of the stake they have in society and their perceptions of fairness (Filmer and Fox 2014). In this process, the poorest students are the most reliant on what the university offered them.

Studies tracking HE-to-work transitions and employment outcomes among university graduates disaggregated by income groups in sub-Saharan Africa are not available. However, data exist that suggest that decent work (as defined by SDG target 8.5) is lacking for a greater majority of the youth, as underemployment, working poverty and poor job quality remain significant problems among graduates, resulting in an increase of the number of poor working youth by as much as 80 percent for the past 25 years (ILO 2018a; ILO 2018b). With little social capital to draw on, and lacking the benefit of family/household owned enterprises, options available for the poorest are even more limited (Filmer and Fox 2014). A study conducted in South Africa among a sample of 1,175 respondents who graduated between 2006 and 2012 established that the strongest determinants of graduate unemployment were the graduates' race, their socio-economic status and their year of graduation (Baldry 2016). Elsewhere on the continent, the stratification of HE systems also comes into play to discriminate against those graduating from the least prestigious, often "regional" universities, and of course, the exclusion of students from poor and marginal backgrounds from gainful employment over a long period of time perpetuates and deepens generational cycles of poverty, and breaks down social cohesion.

5.2 Multiple barriers to graduate employment: Evidence from Kenya, Nigeria and Senegal

The British Council funded study already cited (McCowan et al. 2016), covering South Africa, Kenya, Nigeria and Ghana, established that university graduates in these countries who come from disadvantaged backgrounds face a combination of barriers: after beating the odds to get to university in the first place, they struggle while at university to engage in the kinds of enrichment activities such as internships and work study programmes that employers increasingly consider when hiring new graduates (McCowan et al. 2016). The study also established that a majority of the university students in the sample thought that background inequalities in society affected their chances to access university level study and employment; and that increasingly, non-academic factors such as gender, ethnicity and family networks influenced transition from HE to work. In Kenya, a 2013 national report by the Kenya National Bureau of Statistics and the Society for International Development, shows that the share of the population with secondary and HE that are unemployed across the country's counties correlates with regional poverty profiles, with the northern and coastal counties having the highest number of unemployed graduates with secondary and higher level educational qualifications (KNBS

and SID 2013). Studies from Nigeria suggest a similar trend to that of Kenya regarding the profiles of university graduates that are likely to remain unemployed for a long time.⁴ A closer look reveals that graduate unemployment affects female graduates and those from the rural areas most, who typically remain unemployed for more than five years after graduation (NISER 2013; National Bureau of Statistics 2018).

In Senegal, with no more than 57 percent of the working age population in some form of declared employment (ANSD 2017), the national agency of statistics and demography officially estimates that the highest unemployment rates are affecting the 20-24 and 25-29 age groups, a situation unchanged since the 2000s (Ndior 2013; Dia 2016). Moreover, university graduates appear to be experiencing the greatest difficulties of insertion in the labour market.

Disaggregation by gender indicates that at equivalent qualifications, female graduates are more affected by unemployment. Although graduates in economics and management do find internships, such positions are limited and usually secured through private education, social networking and intervention from high-level contacts in political or economic circles.⁵ Students from poor socio-economic backgrounds and from marginal groups usually do not have such networks and therefore are likely to be disadvantaged. Students who do not secure employment but manage to get some family support enrol for further studies, referred to in universities as “eternal students”, to boost their chances of employment by acquiring further qualifications (Lom 2011).

Other studies on access of youth more generally to jobs in Senegal indicate that employment conditions are influenced by variables such as gender and location, with education playing a limited role (Echevin and Murtin 2009). The labour markets also do not seem to have undergone a policy shift to considering young people for employment, resorting instead to recruitment practices based on social and family networks, which clearly puts inexperienced graduates and those from poor and socially marginalized backgrounds at a disadvantage (Echevin and Murtin 2009). By 2018, the ILO estimated the combined rate of under-employment linked to working times and unemployment at around 31.5 percent (42.4 percent among women and 23.4 percent among men), with most of the jobs being in the informal sector, which also poses challenges related to health, safety and social protection (ILO 2018b).

The studies reviewed here from the three countries do suggest that socio-economic inequalities that limit opportunities for individuals from poor socio-economic backgrounds to access HE also come into play in limiting the rate of their transition to gainful employment. In terms of interventions, what this means is that HEIs need to go beyond affirmative action policies that promote access for students from disadvantaged and marginal backgrounds, to also provide targeted interventions that enhance their chances for employability.

⁴ Eneji et al. 2013; National Bureau of Statistics 2018; Longe 2017; Aminu 2019.

⁵ Lom 2011; Dia 2016; Diallo 2019

6. Conclusions

The literature and analysis in this paper do suggest contradictory developments regarding HE and social inequality in sub-Saharan Africa.

First, rising numbers of HE institutions have had little impact on inequalities of access and participation. As the country cases presented in this paper suggest, most of the expansion in the number of institutions and academic programmes has taken place outside standard public fee-free courses, and stemmed instead from the emergence of private universities and the introduction of private academic programmes in public institutions, stimulated by the incapacity of states to provide a public response to the increased demand for HE. Private universities and private degree programmes in public universities focus on a segment of students who are able to pay tuition fees within ranges that exclude the poorest students. Their demand absorption capacity is insignificant as evidenced by the evolution of participation rates throughout sub-Saharan Africa. Besides, as illustrated by the case of Nigeria, private universities tend to mushroom in the most economically vibrant urban centres where the public offer was already excessively concentrated. In their great majority they do not facilitate access to HE for students located in the most remote parts of the countries. And finally, the narrow range of academic programmes offered in private institutions does not constitute an alternative to publicly funded courses in terms of widening curriculum opportunities. This means that the competition for access has continued to be located in underfunded public universities where the range of both academic and professional courses remains broader. As shown in all three cases, countries are making little progress in their capacity of absorption of qualified applicants.

This in turn has led to intensifying the competition at the lower tiers of the education systems (primary and secondary), through increased privatization and deployment of family resources in ways which skew the competition for access to universities against students from poor and marginal backgrounds. Data that has been reviewed across the three countries does suggest that by the time they get to universities, students from the poorest quintile of the population in the three countries constitute less than 2 percent of total student enrolments.

The second paradox is that funding strategies for HE have a tendency to exacerbate inequalities. Kenya presents clear evidence that loan policies do not represent a viable alternative to maintenance grants and that undergraduate fees operate as a deterrent for the more marginalized communities. Lack of sufficient public support to students also generates income motivated attitudes that are detrimental to academic progress. Progression in first cycles among the poorest remains problematic in the region and the absence or erosion of equity policies, combined with exclusive rather than inclusive institutional cultures, tends to exacerbate inequalities in the midst of HE expansion. Some encouraging alternative access and participation strategies are being deployed that signal a realization of the extent of the problem: the deployment of the Virtual University with regional study centres will be an interesting initiative to follow in Senegal. Elsewhere in Tanzania, scholarships awarded to female students to enrol in science-oriented programmes increased the proportion of female students in science disciplines from a

low of 15 percent to about 30 percent (Kilango et al. 2017). But the evidence that accessibility, availability and attainability are better addressed together is unlikely to translate into policies when public budgets operate under such pressure and when responses to demand remain dominated by philosophies of competition and cost sharing.

Finally, in relation to graduate employability, the literature suggests that expansion and institutional diversification have contributed to only a few more students from poor backgrounds accessing HE. But access to job opportunities remains problematic for these students, as factors other than academic merit, in particular social networks, increasingly determine the chances and rate at which graduates secure formal employment. This is in part related to the quality challenges resulting from reduced public funding to institutions. First, unlike students coming from wealthy backgrounds, poor students do not have the resources to undertake extra courses to ameliorate perceived deficits in public provision and boost their chances of employability. Second, and as evidenced through studies reviewed here, with decreased employment in the formal sector, graduates are increasingly resorting to self-employment in family-owned enterprises or using family connections to secure employment in the private sector or set up more and better resourced informal enterprises. Top end private institutions found a niche in programmes preparing graduates for the needs of the knowledge economy (placements, communication skills) but these are only accessible to a minority already empowered by relevant social capital. These conditions generate new inequalities deepened by the availability of fee-paying and better recognized opportunities, and actually sustain and widen old ones, leading to further erosion of social capital in poor households.

How can HE in Africa then be organized differently to redress rather than accentuate social inequalities? As illustrated earlier, inequalities that eventually manifest themselves in HE are generated at lower levels of the educational systems. While universities and other HEIs can do little to address these, they could do a lot more to ensure that students from poor and marginalized groups that eventually make it to HE are not subjected to teaching and learning conditions that accentuate their disadvantage. First, it is important that HE systems operate in a socially responsive manner by keeping up-to-date data on the profiles of their students to allow a closer monitoring of their learning needs instead of treating them as a homogeneous category. Even where systems of bursaries exist to support needy students, as in the cases of Kenya and in Senegal, the burden of establishing the extent of their needs is left to the students as instruments used to assess the levels of support required are often flawed and end up benefiting students who do not require the support in the first place. Also, current admission procedures to institutions and academic programmes themselves constitute a barrier in many countries. Institutional interventions such as pre-entry programmes to university, known to boost enrolments and completion rates—and therefore the employability—of poor and marginal students in institutes and professional programmes, need to be scaled up. Finally, a new formula for public spending on HE needs to take into account prevailing inequalities. The patterns of enrolment discussed in this paper are nowhere close to the image of massified systems discussed elsewhere in the world. Systems unable to absorb more than 30 percent of

their qualified candidates to HE can hardly meet the expectation of “equal access for all women and men to affordable quality technical, vocational and tertiary education, including university” (UN 2015). Equity will have better chances to be achieved if public funding mechanisms for HE give more weight in their allocation of resources per student to addressing disadvantages and gaps in participation (once adequately identified) than to the uniform formula currently observed.

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