

Today, Africa has around 2,000 universities and colleges. However, employers and officials complain that education and training is outdated and sub-standard.

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## Is Africa's education landscape fit for the future?

There has been an escalating need for more and better skills to support the wave of democracy that swept Africa during the 1990s followed by rapid economic growth. The inability of education systems to produce sufficient numbers of skilled and employable youths has been stalling development, and this crisis has ratcheted up the political agenda of governments. The problem is particularly acute in rural areas, where education institutions are most scarce and neglected, obstructing opportunities for young people.

At the continental level, the Rural Futures strategy of the African Union and its implementing agency NEPAD, the New Partnership for Africa's Development, is about propelling countries towards greater employment. According to NEPAD's Director of Programme Co-ordination and Implementation, Estherine Lisinge-Fotabong, agriculture and agri-processing account for 30 to 60 per cent of gross domestic product in some countries, and an even larger share of employment. She argues that states should play a central role in redirect-

ing national economies to drive rural economic transformation, and concludes that "Africa's fight against poverty will be won or lost in rural areas, because this is home to about 63 per cent of the population; 73 per cent of the poor live in rural areas."

With one billion people in Africa today and 2.3 billion people projected for 2050, the continent faces the challenge of harnessing this expanding reservoir of human capital. "By 2040, Africa will have the largest workforce in the world, surpassing China and India," Lisinge-Fotabong points out, adding that while the proportion of rural youth is declining around the world, their number in sub-Saharan Africa is set to increase until 2030 or 2040. The combined burden of a youth bulge and a shrinking job mar-

ket have left millions of young people jobless, underemployed and excluded from economic opportunities, in urban and rural areas.

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### ■ Schools and private skills providers

In their 2014 report "Youth Employment in Sub-Saharan Africa", produced for the World Bank and the French Development Agency, Deon Filmer and Louise Fox outlined a skills agenda for young people and actions for governments, stressing the need for policy action "to ensure that children and youths acquire foundational skills through quality basic education". Filmer and Fox maintain that African education systems are performing poorly in this respect, preventing

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youths from acquiring additional skills and reaching their full potential.

Improving schooling is a particular problem in rural areas across Africa, where schools face multiple challenges including teacher shortages, lack of funding and resources, and children walking long distances to school and assisting families with work and chores, among others. In rural areas, the report contends, traditional agricultural technical and vocational education and training (TVET) and extension have a mixed record. But there are promising new approaches, including farmer field schools and “beneficiary-driven models to deliver extension services, build skills and facilitate access to information among young people”. Informal training is prevalent in the household enterprises sector, and “there is scope for governments to leverage NGOs and private providers to support youth through demand-driven, performance-based models”.

### ■ Higher education

The few universities built in Africa during the colonial era were primarily meant to train locals to support the colonial civil service. In the independence era from the 1960s, new flagship universities were established. Intellectual life thrived, focused on a post-colonial narrative that sought to advance African knowledge in order

to uplift the continent. This optimistic era proved short-lived, also because of growing antipathy towards universities and their critical academics among increasingly despotic African governments, and the World Bank’s directive that African countries should focus on primary education – both drained investment from universities and ran them into the ground. Higher education remained mostly confined to flagship public institutions in cities and a small number of colleges in both rural and urban areas, generally poorly funded and sub-standard.

Change came in the 1990s with re-democratisation and economic growth that required more and higher skilled staff. With governments convinced of the connection between higher education and development, and the need for more institutions to produce more graduates, higher education across Africa expanded rapidly, and today, there are some 2,000 institutions in a diverse sector with universities, polytechnics and colleges.

“Despite this growth, the sector faces serious challenges manifested in poor quality, inadequate infrastructures, outdated pedagogies, low levels of funding, scholarly productivity and global competitiveness,” stated a declaration following the first African Higher Education Summit held in Senegal’s capital Dakar in 2015. It was critical to develop a “high quality, massive, vibrant, diverse, differen-

tiated, innovative, autonomous and socially responsible higher education sector that will be a driving force to achieving the vision outlined in Agenda 2063 by the African Union”. Today, many African countries with expanding tertiary education face the paradox of high graduate joblessness amid skills shortages. Employers and officials insist that this is because education and training in universities and colleges is outdated and sub-standard, and fails to provide the skills employers need.

A 2014 survey of employers by the Inter-University Council for East Africa, or IUCEA – which regulates higher education in the East African Community countries of Burundi, Kenya, Rwanda, Tanzania and Uganda – found that most graduates are not fully prepared for the job market and that this is denying economies the skills needed to drive growth. With most of the best universities located in cities, not only are rural areas underserved by institutions but where they exist the quality of education and training is lower, undermining the prospects of students. Many private institutions offer work-related skills, but they tend to ‘cherry-pick’ courses that are popular and inexpensive to run, such as in media, business and computers, which are valuable but narrow in range – and concentrated in cities.

### ■ Differentiation and TVET

While universities have a key role to play in producing high-level skills, and particularly postgraduates and researchers, Africa requires more and a far greater range of skills across all levels. There have been appeals to boost TVET colleges to meet this demand. Spread across countries in rural as well as urban areas, TVET colleges are said to have the potential to deliver key skills to young people outside cities, and that expanded and improved col-

*Trades like auto mechanics, hairdressing or carpentry are often considered a poor alternative to university education.*

*Photo: FAO/Pietro Cenini*



lege systems could create the framework conditions to boost the future prospects for young rural people. However, studies indicate that these 'Cinderella' sectors are underfunded, outmoded and in urgent need of boosts in quality, relevance and reach.

Ghana is among the African countries focusing more attention on colleges. The government is reforming TVET to support the development of industrial sectors. The Council for Technical and Vocational Education and Training was launched to reform TVET to "improve the productivity and competitiveness of the skilled workforce and raise the income-generating capacities of people – especially the marginalised – through quality, industry-focused, competency-based training".

Obstacles facing Africa's TVET sector include the need for more and better trained lecturers, more links with industry, lack of a clear qualifications framework – and, crucially, improving people's recognition of the sector. "Most people have dreams of pursuing academic careers to become doctors, lawyers, or accountants. Trades like auto mechanics, hairdressing, and carpentry are considered the poor alternative to university education," wrote Margherita Caggiano for Sustainable Skills. "As a consequence, university graduates spend an average of two to five years looking for non-existent employment, as local universities produce more graduates than the job market can absorb." Meanwhile, emerging industries such as oil and gas must import foreign labour to fill yawning gaps in the local skilled workforce.

In a 2004 report for the World Bank and International Bank for Reconstruction and Development on Skills Development in sub-Saharan Africa, Richard K. Johanson and Avril V. Adams found that TVET had fallen sharply in African countries over the past 15 years. Further, formal TVET was failing to deliver skills for existing jobs and was focused on skills for wage jobs, which offers limited opportunities, especially in rural areas. It had also been slow in responding to the changing needs of the labour market. In Mozambique

and Zambia, training and certification were stuck in the 1960s, and curricula were centrally developed, with little or no adaptation to local needs, while TVET in Francophone Africa had "suffered from obsolescence, insularity and improper orientation". A further major deficiency of Francophone systems, the authors argued, was neglect of the informal sector and failure to take account of traditional apprenticeship.

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### ■ What needs to be done

A wide range of policies and actions have been proposed for Africa's education landscape.

For NEPAD's Lisinge-Fotabong, educational strategies to transform rural areas across Africa should include aligning educational, technical and vocational skills training systems "with a future national workforce configuration that gives priority to jobs for youth in value-addition, processing and marketing of products and services". Educational, technical and professional employment training should be reassessed and reformed to meet market demands. Education systems need to be more 'practical' to support relevant skills development and entrepreneurship, and need to offer career guidance in partnership with private and government sectors.

There should be investment in ICTs and other targeted sectors, and entrepreneurship, life skills and strong work ethics should be fostered, with education geared towards inculcating an entrepreneurial spirit among youth rather than preparing them for the job market, she argued. Finally, governments should design and scale up interventions for socially marginalised and rural youth apprenticeships, internships, work placements and industrial attachments.

In their 2004 report, which remains relevant today, Johanson and Adams reach five major conclusions: reform of skills development in the informal sector is essential to poverty alleviation; the record of TVET reforms in the previous decade was promising; pub-

lic training continues to face challenges in reform; NGO training institutions and enterprises account for most of the regional and rural capacity for skills development; management and finance provide powerful instruments for promoting reforms. They call governments to "foster partnerships with other providers, promote social equity and fill critical skills gaps, and perform market functions that governments are uniquely equipped to perform. Getting the policies right to encourage efficient training markets is an important first step."

Filmer and Fox offer a range of policy options. Skills 'markets' are active across Africa – such as apprenticeships in household enterprises and on-the-job training in the wage sector. Governments can assist by providing information about training opportunities and greater access for the marginalised. In the TVET sector, government support should focus on public goods such as quality assurance and information and facilitate access to training for poor, rural and disadvantaged youths.

Post-school vocational training should be provided selectively based on targeting and demand-driven models that link employers and training providers. Where governments support training, they should emphasise portable skills rather than the firm- or job-specific skills that employers should provide.

"Overall, education and skills matter. The starting point in meeting the youth employment challenge is to improve human capital by providing education and allowing youths to acquire the skills needed for productive work," Filmer and Fox say. However, they also stress the critical role of policies addressing the economic and business environment.

It appears that Africa's formal education landscape is not yet fit for the future. But gains certainly have been made.

A longer version of the article with insights from Kenya and South Africa can be found at: > [www.rural21.com](http://www.rural21.com)