

Envisioning Research Futures in Africa: Policy, Innovation, and Institutional Transformation in Higher Education

Background and Rationale

Higher education systems across Africa are undergoing significant transformation due to demographic change, urbanisation, and escalating demand for post-secondary education. These developments occur in the context of education massification, disparities in state capacity, and increasing pressure on universities to function as centres of teaching, research, innovation, and public engagement. Higher education institutions must navigate the challenge of balancing expanded access with the maintenance of academic quality, institutional differentiation, and research productivity. Nevertheless, tertiary enrolment rates remain relatively low in numerous African contexts, underscoring both the extent of unmet demand and the enduring structural constraints that contribute to exclusion and uneven development. This situation necessitates an analysis of how African universities are integrated within evolving knowledge economies, and the conditions under which they can bolster research cultures, enhance innovation capacity, and augment societal relevance.

Symposium Overview

This symposium brings together scholars and higher education leaders to explore the future of research, innovation, and policy development in African universities. Situated within the broader context of Africa's evolving higher education landscape, it focuses on how research cultures are shaped, how institutional transformation is enacted, and how policy frameworks can enable more responsive and impactful research ecosystems. It interrogates research gaps, limited funding structures, and uneven institutional capacities that constrain university contribution to national and regional development. The goal is to promote innovation and develop more flexible institutional frameworks within a complex higher education landscape. The event aims to analyze the development of research cultures, processes of institutional transformation, and policy conditions that facilitate universities in functioning as socially integrated and strategically vital centers of knowledge production.

Comparative Focus and Objectives

The symposium features case studies from Mauritius, Botswana, Ghana, and Nigeria to analyze how various national and institutional systems are addressing ongoing challenges in higher education and research. It explores how the systems respond to these pressures. The case studies will illustrate varied trajectories of policy reform, institutional strategy, and research development, and how universities engage with national research priorities and socio-economic challenges. The symposium will also explore how selected Asian higher education systems compare, on increasing access, using technology, fostering innovation and connecting university research with industrial policies and national growth plans.

The symposium is guided by four interrelated objectives, mainly to:

- Explore institutional responses to research transformation across Mauritius, Botswana, Ghana, and Nigeria
- Examine how policy frameworks, governance structures, and funding models, shape research capacity in African universities
- Discuss relevant lessons from Asian higher education systems that can inform African contexts; and
- Generate practical recommendations for strengthening university research ecosystems, innovation, and policy engagement.

Expected Outputs and Significance

The symposium promotes interdisciplinary discourse and critical examination of national policy and institutional practices to generate substantive and policy-oriented results. These outcomes comprise strategic advice for institutional leaders and policymakers in higher education, and a foundation for continuous scholarly collaboration centered on research, innovation, and transformation in African higher education. Furthermore, it aims to establish a more conceptually rigorous agenda for exploring African higher education. It provides a platform to reconceptualize universities not merely as service providers but as pivotal agents in knowledge creation, public issue resolution, and transformation across Africa.

The symposium aims to envision future-oriented research ecosystems and generate actionable insights for policymakers, institutional leaders, and researchers on how to bridge existing gaps, leverage emerging opportunities, and transform African universities into agents of knowledge production and socio-economic development.

THE FOUR SYMPOSIUM PRESENTATIONS

BOTSWANA – Dr Ishmael Magare

In Botswana, higher education is undergoing a significant transformation. These developments are shaped by the various national policies, national planning and research, and the Human Resource Development mandate. This presentation discusses uneven institutional capacity, quality-assurance demands, underdeveloped research ecosystems, and discrepancies between graduate output and labour-market requirements and offers mitigation.

GHANA -Prof Ruby Hanson

Ghana presents a case of higher education transformation agenda, even with the tension between massification, quality assurance, innovation and research. The University of Education, Winneba case reflects an evolving higher education landscape, in teacher education transformation and research, exemplifying how institutions can leverage their mandate towards national development while responding to globalisation, and technological change.

MAURITIUS – Prof Sandra Mariaye

This case explores the National Strategy for Higher Education, Science and Research of Mauritius (2025–2035). It supports how African universities can strategically align policy, innovation, and institutional capacities to create socially embedded and internationally engaged research ecosystems. It offers insights for policymakers and higher education leaders to foster resilient, knowledge-driven development in Africa.

NIGERIA- Prof Isaac Ogundu

Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) has increasingly become strategic for addressing youth unemployment, skills mismatch, poverty, and development. Advancements in digital technologies and Industry 4.0 have transformed work and altered required competencies. Through research, this case examines TVET transformation routes to youth employability and entrepreneurship in Nigeria.

Key words:

Africa, Research Futures, Higher Education, Policy and Innovation, Institutional Transformation