2024 UNESCO Forum on Higher Education in Africa: A driver for Sustainable Development

10 and 11 December 2024, Nairobi, Kenya

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Context

In the African context, the demographic landscape is shaped by a population of 400 million youth, with approximately 10 million graduates entering the labour market each year. As the youngest continent, with 60% of its populace under the age of 25 and a median age of 19.7, Africa holds a vast reservoir of untapped talent. Africa's young people hold the key to unlocking opportunities for greater economic growth,

innovation and sustainable development across the continent – provided they are well-educated and equipped with the right skills.

To offer more decent jobs for young people, Africa needs more inventors, innovators, scientists, engineers, academics and researchers. The region also requires adequately resourced and academically excellent universities, higher technical education and technical and vocational education and training (TVET) institutions that are closely aligned with industry training, research and innovation needs, as well as entrepreneurship and development-oriented companies to co-finance important research while offering workplace learning, internship and apprenticeship opportunities.

Higher education and tertiary systems in Africa possess a range of existing and evolving assets that could rise to meet this demand, positioning countries for substantial growth and impact. With increasing enrolment rates, and an expanding network of institutions focusing on research, development and innovation (RDI) in future-oriented, green and digital transition sectors, African higher education systems are championing new approaches to addressing local and global challenges and more flexible learning pathways.

Key RDI growth and research output areas include science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM), renewable energies, digital technologies, and agriculture, with universities such as the University of Cape Town (UCT) and Stellenbosch University in South Africa, Makerere University in Uganda, University of Ibadan in Nigeria and the University of Nairobi in Kenya leading the way. Institutions such the African University of Science and Technology (AUST) also exemplify regional champions advancing STEM education.

The surge in innovation hubs and university-based entrepreneurship centres across the continent has further nurtured technological transformation and the green transition, while transforming local economies through essential services such as: incubation programmes, mentoring opportunities with local businesses, networking events and access to venture capital and innovative funding to develop and scale initiatives.

Governments are showing increased policy attention, enacting reforms to support funding to higher education research capabilities and outputs, quality assurance, and industry partnerships. Despite the bright outlook, however, Africa's contribution to global knowledge production remains low. The continent invests a mere 0.78% of its GDP in research and development (R&D), compared to the global average of 1.93% (UNESCO, 2024), and generates less than 1% of the world's research. The African Research Universities Alliance (ARUA) and World Bank estimated that African universities should produce as many as 100,000 PhDs over the next ten years to meet labour market and development demand[1]. This increased capacity is key not only for advancing academic excellence, but for driving innovation and research in non-academic sectors across the continent.

Many African countries also struggle to fully harness their youth dividend, facing challenges in fostering inclusive growth and shared prosperity. Access to higher education and TVET is low. In sub-Saharan Africa, the gross enrolment rate in Tertiary Education is 9% (compared to 42% globally) and the share of all students in Upper Secondary enrolled in TVET is less than 15%. Very few children acquire foundational learning: only 13% of children by the age of 10 can read and understand a simple story.

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[1] Waruru, M. (10 Nov 2022). Africa - Universities must strive to produce 100,000 PhDs in a decade. University World News.

Africa Union Year of Education

In recognition of the transformative role of education, the African Union adopted a resolution to make 2024 the Year of Education under the theme "Educate and Skill Africa for the 21st Century".
This initiative underscores a continent-wide commitment to equipping Africa's youth with the skills and knowledge needed for sustainable development and to achieve Agenda 2063: the Africa We Want. UNESCO, in collaboration with the African Union and Member States, has intensified its efforts to support the continent in the success of this initiative, including through higher education, technical and vocational education and other important areas of education policy.

Key initiatives include the update of the Continental Education Strategy for Africa (CESA), which focuses on harmonizing and strengthening educational systems to foster skills development, employability, and innovation. Complementing this, the Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) Strategy aims to bridge skill gaps and increase employability, particularly for youth entering technical fields. Additionally, the Science, Technology, and Innovation (STI) Strategy for Africa prioritizes building research capacity, enhancing innovation ecosystems, and fostering STEM engagement across educational institutions. These initiatives collectively reinforce Africa's educational landscape, positioning it to meet the challenges and opportunities of the 21st century.

UNESCO contributions

UNESCO's contributions to unleashing the potential of Higher Education systems in Africa and its contributions to a sustainable development path cover several areas including:

1. **Supporting recognition of qualifications and mobility**: Through its normative work, UNESCO promotes mobility for students, researchers and jobseekers across Africa and beyond. In particular, the Revised Convention on the Recognition of Studies, Certificates, Diplomas, Degrees and other Academic Qualifications in Higher Education in African States, known as the Addis Convention, establishes a legal framework for the fair, transparent and non-discriminatory recognition of higher education qualifications and strengthens trust in the quality enhancement of institutions and systems across the region. By encouraging the mutual recognition of qualifications, it allows students and professionals to move more freely across borders, thereby contributing to the growth of knowledge exchange, regional integration, and workforce development. The convention is implemented in complementarity with the Global Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education, which promotes recognition, mobility and inter-university cooperation on a global scale among countries of the world.

2. **Supporting integrated, inclusive, and quality tertiary education systems and institutions**: **Campus Africa** is a UNESCO flagship programme operating within the framework of UNESCOs **Operational Strategy for Priority Africa 2022-2029**, and in alignment with the **Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)** and the **African Union Agenda 2063**. **Campus Africa** supports African Member States in addressing present and future challenges for sustainable development, the programme was launched with the objective to support the building of integrated, inclusive, and quality tertiary education systems and institutions in the Continent. Specifically, **Campus Africa** has the following aims:
   - **Research Capacities** – Enhancing professional research management of African higher education institutions and increasing research outcomes with effective networking.
   - **Doctoral Programmes** – Promoting mobility and equity through Campus Africa support to doctoral studies and scholarships for PhD fieldwork.

- **Employability & Advanced Technical Higher Education** – Improving relevance through youth skill development and employability in technical higher education and focus on gender equality.

Furthermore, there are two underlying priorities for Campus Africa that serve as enabling components: (i) robust quality assurance systems to underpin qualifications recognition decisions; and (ii) data and better-informed decision making.

3. **Enhancing relevance of Higher Technical Education**: Recognizing the importance of empowering African youth, UNESCO, in collaboration with the People's Republic of China, initiated the **China Funds-in-Trust Project Phase III:** *Higher Technical Education in Africa for a Technical and Innovative Workforce* **(CFIT III)**. The primary goal of CFIT III is to strengthen the capabilities of higher technical education institutions (HEIs) to respond to the skill requirements for national development by facilitating **collaboration between Higher Education Institutions and the industry**, improving **labour market-oriented teaching**, and enhancing **competence-based learning** to equip graduates with professional skills through quality higher technical education.

UNESCO Forum on Higher Education in Africa: A driver for sustainable development - Key orientations and frameworks

UNESCO in partnership with the African Union and the Government of Kenya is organizing a **two-day Forum on** '**Higher Education in Africa: A driver for Sustainable Development'** in Nairobi, Kenya, from 10 to 11 December.

The **Forum** is organized as a key contribution to UNESCO's work in higher education in Africa within the framework of the **African Union Year of Education 2024** and will contribute to the vision outlined in **Agenda 2063 – 'The Africa We Want'**. It is also guided by the **2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development** and its pledge to **'leave no one behind'**, while taking into consideration the report of the **International Commission on the Futures of Education 'Reimagining Our Futures Together: A new social contract for education'**.

The **Forum** will highlight the contributions of UNESCO's Priority Africa Flagship programme **'Campus Africa: Reinforcing Higher Education in Africa' (Campus Africa)** and the **China Funds-in-Trust project (CFIT III)**, which supports higher technical education. The event is also an opportunity to celebrate the 10th anniversary of the adoption of the **Revised Convention on the Recognition of Studies, Certificates, Diplomas, Degrees and Other Academic Qualifications in Higher Education in African States (Addis Convention).**

Forum objectives

The Roadmap of the **World Higher Education Conference (WHEC2022)** - **Beyond Limits: New Ways to Reinvent Higher Education** - recognized higher education as a human right, and a public good, and sets out key transitions to shape higher education to 2050 and beyond. The Roadmap offers a general reference to shape ideas, and suggests flexible routes of action for addressing institutional, national and regional needs in higher education.

The first day of the forum will explore frameworks for advancing together such as that offered through UNESCO's Priority Africa Flagship - Campus Africa. The second day will host the annual meeting of the China Funds-in-Trust Phase III (CFIT III) project: *Higher technical education in Africa for a technical and innovative workforce.*

Immediate objectives are as follows:

1. Examine higher education policies and frameworks needed to advance the WHEC Roadmap and Agenda 2063 in Africa, including research, innovation, employment creation and entrepreneurship opportunities driving inclusive, sustainable growth.

2. Celebrate the 10th anniversary of the Addis Convention, reflecting on its achievements and way forward for strengthening the ratification and implementation of the convention.

3. Present Campus Africa Initiatives and mobilize African countries, UNESCO Chairs, the wider higher education stakeholders, and international technical and financial partners.

4. Organize the Annual Meeting of the China Funds-in-Trust Phase III (CFIT III) project and encourage dialogue and knowledge sharing to identify critical areas for project impact, sustainability and scalability.

Expected outcomes

1. Identification of higher education policies in Africa that have succeeded in expanding access, inclusion and relevance of higher education through flexible learning pathways, academia-industry linkages and sustainable funding mechanisms, and are advancing research, innovation and employability in alignment with the AU 2063 Agenda and SDG 4.

2. Identification of successful intra-continental higher education research collaborations, including models for multistakeholder and interdisciplinary research cooperation and partnerships leading to innovation and sustainable growth.

3. Identification of successful models for student, academic and professional mobility across Africa, and robust frameworks for quality assurance and qualification recognition and adherence to the Addis and Global Conventions.

4. Identification of approaches and solutions emerging in the higher technical education sector that can support closer alignment skills demand and supply in agriculture, energy and digital including AI sectors and cultivate innovators and leaders of the future through entrepreneurship skills training.

5. Knowledge exchange around best practices emerging through the China Funds in Trust III project to inform national policies and partners programming and to ensure sustainable technical education and youth skill development.

Participants

- Ministers of Education (Higher Education, Research and Innovation, etc.)
- AU Officials
- Africa higher education stakeholders including universities, regulatory bodies, higher education personnel and student representatives.
- UNESCO chairs and networks
- Representatives from CFIT III project, including national focal points, institutional coordinators from 12 partner higher education institutions, and UNESCO focal points.
- Experts/practitioners in the field of higher technical education and youth skills development
- Private sector representatives
- Intergovernmental agency and international organisation representatives

Practical information

- **Date:** 10 and 11 December 2024
- **Place:** Nairobi, Kenya
- **Working languages:** English and French, with simultaneous interpretation

Agenda structure

Date		Activity
9 December	**18:00 – 19:00**	**Registration, Meet & Greet - Welcome cocktail**
10 December		**Conference on Higher Education in Africa and Campus Africa**
11 December		**Annual Meeting of CFIT III Project – Higher technical education in Africa for a technical and innovative workforce**

Tentative agenda

Higher Education in Africa: A driver for Sustainable Development	
Day 1: Conference on Higher Education in Africa and Campus Africa	
08:00 - 08:30	**Arrival and registration**
08:30 - 09:15	**Opening of the Forum** Group Photo
09:15 - 09:30	**Messages from Africa's Youth about the Education They Want** <u>Goal</u>: Bringing messages from young people at this year's AU Pan-African Youth Forum on the theme of "1 Million Next Level is Knocking: Educate an African Fit for the 21st Century."
09:30 - 10:40	**Panel discussion: Ministers of Higher Education** <u>Goal</u>: Ministers will discuss how the WHEC III is being contextualized to the African higher education sector and unpack how higher education is supporting sustainable development in the African context.
10:40 - 11:00	**Coffee break**
11:00 - 12:30	**Presentations from regional and international partners** <u>Goal</u>: This session will bring together representatives from Regional Economic Communities (RECs) and key international partners to present ongoing and planned initiatives in the region. This presentation aims to raise awareness of regional efforts, identify synergies, and explore potential partnerships to enhance impact.
12:30 - 14:00	**Lunch**
14:00 - 18:00	**African Higher Education Systems: Challenges, opportunities and responses through Campus Africa**

14:00 - 16:00 **Parallel Round Tables**	**Round Table 1:** "Rethinking higher education in Africa: Towards Africa's Socio-economic transformation in a competitive world" (UNECA, Campus Africa Pillar 1) Goal: A discussion between regional economic actors, UNESCO Chairs, experts, innovators and representatives of the higher education community to identify political, regulatory and institutional reforms supporting a more results-oriented higher education sector in Africa.
	Round Table 2: Supporting student and academic mobility and inter-university cooperation within the higher education sector across Africa (Campus Africa Pillar 2) Goal: This session will showcase diverse approaches for strengthening student and academic mobility within and outside the African continent, including through inter-university collaboration, scholarships and grants opportunities for faculty and doctoral students, knowledge exchange and mobilization through higher education and research networks.
	Round Table 3: Enhancing relevance of Higher Technical Education (Campus Africa Pillar 3) Goal: Participants will share solutions and success stories and discuss how higher technical education systems can be revitalized and better joined up with broader sustainable development policies to enhance employability of graduates, generate flexible, inclusive skills pathways, realign curricula to skills-in-demand in fast growing green and digital sectors, and facilitate entrepreneurship.
16:00 - 16:20	**Coffee break**
16:20 - 18:00	**Round Table 4:** Reinforcing Africa's tertiary education systems and institutions decision-making capacity with data Goal: The session will explore the enabling role of evidence, data, and statistics collection to support higher education institutions and decision makers in utilizing data for planning, financing, and quality assurance purposes.
	Round Table 5: The Addis Convention – Ensuring the recognition of qualifications and robust quality assurance mechanisms Goal: The session will focus on developments related to the Addis Convention, including efforts to ensure the fair, transparent and non-discriminatory recognition of qualifications, establish/enhance adequate quality assurance mechanisms and operationalize the African Network of National Implementation Structures to foster mutual exchange and build trust among higher education systems in the region.
18:00 - 18:10	**Close of day 1**
18:10 - 19:00	**Cocktail reception:** A Celebration of the 10th Anniversary of the Revised Addis Convention

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Day 2: Annual Meeting of CFIT III Project – Higher technical education in Africa for a technical and innovative workforce	
08:00 - 08:30	**Arrival and registration**
08:30 - 09:00	**Welcome remarks** Group photo
09:00 - 9:15	**Presentation – Skilling for the Future through Higher Technical Education: Introducing the China Funds-in-Trust Project (CFIT III)** Goal: This session will introduce the key programming directions, implementation modalities and main achievements of the CFIT III project; an initiative aligning higher technical education and skills training in 6 African pilot countries with local labour market demand, and which supports students transition to employment or entrepreneurship through career services, employability and transferable skills.
09:15 - 11:00	**Panel - Dialogue on CFIT III achievements and flagship products** Goal: The session will showcase CFIT III-supported achievements and flagship products across participating Higher Education Institutes (HEIs). The session will explore the significance of different flagship products for each participating Institute's development and discuss how these can be applied sustainably and upscaled to other HEIs.
11:00 - 11:20	**Coffee break**
11:20 - 12:30	**Workshop - Demand-oriented greening and digital transformation of higher technical education** Goal: This session will use successful case studies to look at how higher technical education in Africa is responding through the elaboration of curricula and skills training in facilitating the green and digital transitions.
12:30 - 14:00	**Lunch**
14:00 - 16:00	**Round Table – Planning for sustainable impact: Embedding CFIT III experiences and practices at university level** Goal: This session will bring together CFIT III participating HEIs leadership to discuss how to extend the impact of CFIT III's flagship products on a larger scale and enhance their sustainability.
16:00 - 16:20	**Coffee break**
16:20 - 17:20	**Strategic round table - From project to policy: Embedding CFIT III experiences and practices in national strategies** Goal: This session builds on cumulative CFIT III experiences to look at how the project is supporting and influencing national policies in the 6 pilot countries.
17:20 - 17:30	**Closing of day 2**

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