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The state of Africa: the universities

A few days ago a Tanzanian friend noted, in an email, that “Africa is going backwards socially, politically and most importantly economically”. Few hours later, a friend from Togo remarked that “the situation is worsening day after day”. A Nigerian friend (with a bachelor degree in physics), after working for a few months in an Ivorian NGO had to ask family and friends for help because with her salary she would not have been able to buy a ticket to go back home. Another Togolese friend is constantly overworked and underpaid, another one (with bachelor and master degree) never managed to land any kind of permanent job with a decent salary, another one with a master degree in journalism ended up working as a cashier in a local supermarket, and several of them would be ready to leave their country to find better employment and a better life.

The words of my friends made me wonder as to what is actually the state of Africa. Is the situation as grim as my friends’ words seem to suggest is it getting worse? Is it really true that Africa is going backwards socially, politically and economically?

Since education is a driver of economic growth and determinant of socio-economic development, the state of African universities can provide an indication not only of how well Africa is doing but also, and more importantly, of how well it may be expected to do in the future.

South Africa has several prestigious universities such as the University of Cape Town, Witwatersrand and Stellenbosch university. But good universities can also be in the rest of the continent. The university of Cairo is 507th in the world, Makerere University in Uganda is

646th, the University of Kinshasa in the Democratic Republic of Congo is 677th, the University of Addis Ababa is 689th, the University of Ghana is 703rd, while the University of Nairobi is 719th.

To appreciate how good these rankings are, one should recall that the prestigious university of Trento is 517th, that the university of Verona is 536th, that Ca' Foscari university in Venice is 677th, that Parthenope university is 702nd and that the university of Macerata is 826th.

In other words, many of the good African universities are as good as several solid Italian universities.

If instead of looking at the overall ranking, we assess the universities' research performance, we find that the University of Cape Town is 225th, Witswaterrand is 274th, Stellenbosh is 292nd while the University of Trento is 293rd. Both the University of Cairo (299th) and Makerere University (343rd) outperform the Universities of Udine (354th) and Sassari (380), and that the once glorious Ca' Foscari in Venice (400th) is behind the University of Ghana (387th) and the University of Kinshasa (397th).

While the fact that several African universities outperform established European institutions is a good thing, which makes one wonder whether Africa is declining as some of our friends suggested.

Yet, while the state of African universities is very promising in some respects-the good African universities are good and do good research- the situation is not always not entirely positive. There is also a dark side of African universities.

Some of them have low academic standards and are unable to improve them. In 2017-18 58 universities were de-registered in Nigeria and 9 of them were de-registered last week in Tanzania. Some African universities, including some Kenyan ones, are plagued by academic corruption. Sex for grades was reported in Ghana, Malawi, Nigeria and Uganda. In some cases

(Uganda) faculty members were fired for having fake degrees, while in other cases conferred degrees had to be revoked. Fake degrees, bad faculty, sex for grades, academic corruption, substance abuse, violence and murder are some of the problems that affect African universities. Failure to address these problems will derail African universities and will Africa go backward not only academically.

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