S. Momanyi,
A. Surmeier,
D. Littlewood,
Q. Apollis

photo © freepick

Academic Decolonization

Inequality and African Universities: Challenges and Pathways to Change

Higher education in Africa holds great promise for social mobility and development, yet remains shaped by deep-rooted inequalities. Colonial legacies, resource constraints, and structural barriers in the global academic system continue to marginalize African scholars and limit access to quality education. Despite these challenges, African universities are actively driving change through student movements, institutional reforms, and continent-wide initiatives that promote African-led research.
This article explores how historical and structural inequalities persist in African higher education while highlighting vital locally driven efforts to decolonize curricula, build research capacity, and forge more equitable global partnerships.
It concludes with a call to action for actors worldwide to engage in meaningful collaboration—supporting African leadership, amplifying African knowledge systems, and helping unlock higher education's transformative potential across the continent.

Introduction

Higher education in Africa is often seen as a pathway to social mobility, economic development, and innovation. Yet, for many students and scholars, universities remain sites of exclusion rather than opportunity. Access to quality education is deeply unequal, shaped by historical injustices, resource disparities, and structural biases in the global academic system. From underfunded institutions to dominant Western curricula, the legacy of colonial education continues to shape knowledge production, access, and voices heard.

At the same time, African universities are not passive actors. Across the continent, student movements, faculty initiatives, and institutional reforms push back against these constraints. The #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall movements in South Africa ignited global debates on academic decolonization, while initiatives like the African Research Universities Alliance (ARUA) are working to build stronger research partnerships. Universities, policymakers, and academic networks are taking steps to decolonize curricula, expand access to quality education, and strengthen African-led research. These efforts recognize that higher education can be a powerful driver of social transformation and sustainable development.

Against this backdrop, this article examines three interrelated dimensions of inequality in African higher education: the impact of enduring colonial legacies, local resource constraints, and structural disadvantages in the global academic system. While these barriers remain deeply

entrenched, the potential for change is substantial. By proactively tackling these challenges and fostering more equitable academic partnerships, universities in Africa and globally can help shape a more inclusive and just future for the continent.

Colonial Legacies and the Struggle for Decolonization in African Higher Education

History matters, and in the African higher education context, colonialism has profoundly shaped university systems, leaving a legacy that continues to influence academic freedom, curricula, and governance. Universities were originally established not to serve broad populations but to train colonial administrators, reinforcing structural inequalities that persist in contemporary higher education. Colonial-era education policies not only marginalized African knowledge systems but also created a lasting disconnect between university curricula and local realities. Today, many institutions still prioritize Western theories and methodologies while sidelining African intellectual traditions.

One of the most enduring impacts of this colonial legacy is the continued dominance of Western academic frameworks. African knowledge traditions—ranging from oral histories to indigenous governance models—remain underrepresented, while Eurocentric theories and methodologies are privileged as universal. The global academy often marginalizes African knowledge systems by dismissing them as anecdotal or lacking rigour. Scholars in the global North often reduce African perspectives to case studies rather than sources of theoretical advancement (Hamann et al., 2020). This marginalization sidelines African scholars and weakens the diversity of perspectives in global academia, limiting the multiplicity of ideas needed to address complex global challenges.

Responding to these entrenched inequalities, student movements across Africa have demanded a fundamental shift in higher education, challenging persistent colonial structures and Western-centric curricula. Nowhere was this movement more visible than in South Africa's #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall protests, which erupted in 2015 at the University of Cape Town (Mbongwa & Graham, 2023). What began as a call to remove colonial-era symbols quickly expanded into a broader struggle for decolonized education and greater accessibility. Similar movements for academic reform have emerged across the continent—for example, in Ghana and Kenya—as well as in Western countries such as the UK and Canada, where students and faculty are demanding greater representation of African knowledge and languages in higher education. These movements have forced universities to confront their historical legacies and implement tangible changes. Many universities have introduced curricular reforms that emphasize African scholarship, incorporating indigenous knowledge traditions and expanding the use of African languages. Despite these efforts and success, change remains slow as resistance to change remains strong and many systemic issues have yet to be fully addressed.

Resource Constraints and the Challenges of Research and Access in African Universities

While there is growing demand for higher education, many African universities remain chronically underfunded. Research and development spending often falls below 1% of GDP, well below the global average (Olufadewa et al., 2020). Public institutions, particularly those outside major cities, face acute funding shortages which limits their ability to retain faculty, support research, and expand academic programs. Many institutions struggle to secure international grants, as access often depends on faculty networks and global academic ties. With limited internal funding, universities rely heavily on short-term, externally funded research initiatives that align with the priorities of international agencies rather than university-led agendas. This dependency restricts the ability of institutions to shape long-term research strategies.

A further challenge is that teaching and administrative duties often crowd out research and

'Third Mission' activities such as community engagement. While faculty at universities worldwide juggle competing demands, African institutions offer few structured incentives, such as teaching load reductions, internal research funding, or sabbaticals. This makes it particularly difficult to sustain research careers. Additionally, institutional promotion structures do not always reward research, particularly more theoretical or internationally focused work. In many cases, applied, consultancy-driven research is prioritized, as it aligns with funding streams and provides a necessary supplement to faculty salaries, which often remain low. These dynamics contribute to a steady loss of research talent, as scholars seek better working conditions and career progression opportunities abroad or in the private sector. While precise data is scarce, this movement weakens the long-term capacity of African universities.

Despite these challenges, there are efforts to strengthen research ecosystems in Africa. Some universities have begun linking research outputs to promotions and fostering international collaborations. Initiatives like ARUA are working to create more equitable and sustainable research partnerships. However, systemic reform is needed to achieve better balance in teaching, research, and Third Mission activities to ensure African universities can contribute meaningfully to global knowledge production and local development.

African Universities in the Global Academic System

The structural challenges facing African universities—shaped by colonial legacies and resource constraints—are reinforced by dynamics in the global academic system, where African institutions often occupy a peripheral position. Limited access to research funding, restricted participation in academic networks, and the dominance of Western theories and frameworks contribute to the underrepresentation of African scholarship. One key issue is the dominance of Global North institutions in setting research priorities. The most prestigious universities, funding bodies, and high-impact journals are concentrated in Europe and North America and are shaping global agendas in ways that often overlook African realities. While African scholars can apply for international research grants, these are frequently tied to donor-driven priorities, forcing them to align with externally defined concerns rather than local needs. This dependency limits academic autonomy and reinforces inequalities in knowledge production.

photo © Freepick

Access to global academic networks also remains uneven. Major conferences are typically held in the Global North, making participation financially and logistically difficult for African scholars due to high travel costs and visa restrictions. This limits opportunities for collaboration, co-authorship, and professional visibility and disconnects African academics from global scholarly debates. This exclusion is particularly evident in academic publishing, where African researchers frequently face barriers. Even when African scholars publish internationally, citation biases persist, with Global North scholars primarily referencing research from their own networks.

Addressing these imbalances requires greater recognition of diverse knowledge traditions, stronger African-led research collaborations, and institutional reforms to ensure African universities shape global research agendas rather than remaining on the margins. Some efforts are already under way. For example, several academic associations are challenging these disparities and have introduced tiered membership and fee systems to reduce financial barriers and increase access for scholars from lower-income regions.

The Way Forward: Shared Responsibilities for an Equitable Academic System

Addressing inequalities in African higher education cannot be the responsibility of African scholars and institutions alone. The global academic community—particularly institutions, funding bodies, and publishers in the Global North—must actively work to dismantle systemic barriers that continue to disadvantage African scholars. Decades of exclusion and marginalization were not accidental but the result of historical and structural power imbalances. Redressing these inequities requires a collective commitment to shifting power, funding, and influence in global knowledge production.

One critical step is ensuring more equitable research partnerships. There is a need for collaborations that prioritize African leadership in setting research agendas, moving away from extractive relationships where African scholars are secondary contributors. Additionally, South-South collaborations are providing alternative models of knowledge exchange, reducing reliance on Western institutions and expanding regional research networks. Global funding bodies should increase direct support for Africa-led research without imposing external priorities. African scholars need greater autonomy in determining research directions that reflect local needs and priorities, rather than being constrained by Western, donor-driven agendas. Furthermore, addressing barriers to publishing is essential. Many leading journals continue to prioritize Western knowledge systems and undervalue research grounded in African contexts. Expanding open-access publishing models and challenging citation biases can help ensure African scholarship is recognized on equal terms.

The decolonization movement has already pushed academia toward greater inclusivity, but deeper structural change is needed. If the global academic system is serious about promoting equity, it must move beyond symbolic inclusion to actively redistribute power, money and influence. A truly just and inclusive global academic landscape is one where African universities are not just participants but leaders in knowledge production. Only by dismantling long-standing inequities can African higher education fully contribute to global knowledge production and shape its own destiny.

In summary, addressing inequalities in African higher education requires a multifaceted and collaborative approach, including targeted efforts to expand opportunities for underrepresented students and faculty, curriculum reform, and long-term research and funding partnerships. A crucial aspect of this process is recognizing the great value that research from Africa and by African scholars brings to global knowledge production. African universities and researchers offer unique insights, methodologies, and approaches that are vital for tackling pressing global challenges, from climate adaptation to inclusive development. Ensuring that African

scholarship is acknowledged, funded, and integrated into mainstream academic discourse is essential for promoting a truly equitable academic system. This approach has the potential to reduce systemic barriers while advancing equity and equal access to quality education, as envisioned in Sustainable Development Goal 4.

Stephen Momanyi is a teaching faculty at Rongo University Kenya. He holds a Ph.D. degree in Economic Geography from Philipps Universität Marburg Germany and his work has been published in Social Enterprise Journal.

Annika Surmeier is a Senior Lecturer at the University of Cape Town's Graduate School of Business. Her research and teaching explore how actors promote social innovation both locally and in the global economy.

David Littlewood (PhD MA BSc Hons) is a Senior Lecturer (Associate Professor) at Sheffield University Management School. He conducts research in the field of business and society, and particularly on social entrepreneurship in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Quinton Apollis is the Inclusivity and Capacity-Building Specialist at the University of Cape Town's Office for Inclusivity and Change. His work focuses on transformation, critical diversity, and community development with a focus on higher education.