

AFRICAN UNIVERSITIES: ESSENTIAL FOR A HIGHER EDUCATION AND INDIGENOUS RESEARCH CAPACITY

By Dr. Ashley N. Bybee

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Student holds a placard as riot police officers watch during their protest against university tuition hikes outside the union building in Pretoria, South Africa, Friday, October 23, 2015. (Source: AP Photo/Themba Hadebe.)

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Filipe Jacinto Nyusi, president of Mozambique, here speaks during the 71st session of the United Nations General Assembly, Wednesday, Sept. 21, 2016, at U.N. headquarters. (Source: AP Photo/Frank Franklin II.)

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IDA's three federally-funded research and development centers provide objective analyses of national security issues and related national challenges, particularly those requiring scientific and technical expertise.

IDA's Africa team focuses on issues related to political, economic, and social stability and security on the continent.

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Background

Following the wave of independence movements that spread across Africa in the 1960s and 1970s, numerous African universities enjoyed a [period of distinction](#) characterized by academic excellence, critical thinking, and important research contributions in the fields of social and economic development. [Research](#) on the subject of graduate education in sub-Saharan Africa shows that until the 1970s, faculty was highly educated, class sizes were small, schools were well funded through public and private means, and graduates typically found employment in the public sector. The research capacity of universities was equally as commendable, with high academic publication output and many new research initiatives. By the mid-1970s, however, the status of African universities began to wane as many countries faced economic crises and governments could not sustain the same level of support they had provided to public universities in previous years. Universities were also viewed as a source of political opposition as post-independence politics became more hostile.

In the 1980s, [international support](#) for education in Africa skyrocketed, but it focused heavily on primary education, thus contributing to the further neglect of higher education. By the 1990s, the high costs associated with developments in information technology (IT) and other sophisticated scientific fields precluded many African universities from participating in advanced scientific fields of research. Enrollment in African universities nevertheless climbed sharply, from fewer than [200,000 in 1970 to around 10 million](#) today, due in part to a massive [youth bulge](#), placing more pressure than ever on university faculty, infrastructure, and resources. As a result of these combined factors, the quality of teaching [deteriorated](#) significantly. Likewise, the quality of research has [declined](#) as fewer resources are available to support faculty research. Given the importance of higher education and applied research to advance Africa economically, socially, and technically, this deterioration of African universities represents a significant capacity gap for many nations.

An African University Education Today

Most public African universities today suffer from the same condition: rapidly rising enrollment coupled with insufficient government funding. This affects the education received by students in several ways. First, the [poor treatment](#) of faculty (budget cuts, hiring freezes, low salaries, and low staff-to-student ratios) has driven many qualified faculty to seek positions abroad and has discouraged new graduates from pursuing careers in academia. Today, there is a distinct



Student holds a placard as riot police officers watch during their protest against university tuition hikes outside the union building in Pretoria, South Africa, Friday, October 23, 2015. (Source: AP Photo/Themba Hadebe.)

[shortage](#) of faculty members with advanced degrees, particularly professors with PhDs. Scarce funding limits universities' capacity to implement graduate programs, thus contributing to this shortage of PhDs.

Second, [limited resources](#) prevent universities from having adequate facilities to deliver a university-level education to a growing number of students. This is especially evident in advanced scientific, engineering, and knowledge-based fields, where expensive equipment and sophisticated laboratories are required. Although concentrating resources in social science departments was once appropriate to prepare students for public sector jobs, [today](#) demand is greater in the private sector, where employers need "industry-ready" graduates with degrees in technical, knowledge-based fields. Unfortunately, most African universities today are [failing](#) to produce these types of graduates.

One solution proposed by some African governments to overcome this financial challenge is drastic tuition hikes, which have been met with resistance by students. In South Africa in 2015, for example, proposed tuition increases of between 10 percent and 12 percent sparked [massive student protests](#). Students [complained](#) their schools were underfunded and understaffed, despite increased government funding and their high tuition rates.

African Universities' Research Capacity

Universities provide more than a higher education for students—they also [contribute](#) valuable research to governments and the private sector, which makes it possible for their countries to compete effectively in an increasingly sophisticated and globalized world. African universities today, however, have limited research capacity as evidenced by their [low output](#) of academic publications in peer-reviewed journals. (Only one African country, South Africa, is among the top 50 countries globally in terms of research output; fewer than 10 African countries are in the top 100.) This deficiency is primarily the result of tight budgets that provide [little administrative support](#) to faculty to cover the costs of their research. Often the most qualified researchers [leave their positions](#) in African universities to pursue better paying jobs abroad. A similar problem affects students. As one [source](#) asserts, "about ten per cent of every cohort of Sub-Saharan Africans with graduate degrees emigrates, leaving a comparatively low number of researchers in most African countries."

Yet Africa is arguably one of the most complex continents socially, economically, and politically, and in great need of applied research to address the multitude of challenges it faces. One [study](#) of qualitative data available for analysis of Africa-specific issues found a significant dearth of local, regional, and national level data, due in large part to the low capacity of African research institutions to collect it. The study recommends strengthening the indigenous capacity of these institutions to collect local data and suggests that doing so will enable them to advance fields of research pertinent to Africa's social, economic, developmental, and security challenges.

Online/Distance Learning—A New Approach to Higher Education

In an increasingly internet-connected Africa, online learning has become a popular alternative for students who may not have the resources or access to a traditional university. Open Educational Resources (OER), and specifically Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs), are examples of the types of educational resources available to anyone with internet access. The [World Bank](#) has sponsored projects to accelerate youth employment in Tanzania through MOOCs by training students in market-relevant IT skills. Similarly, the [African Virtual University](#) (AVU) is a pan-African effort to create an open and affordable distance-learning institution to serve the African continent. Such innovative approaches to the delivery of higher education may provide affordable education and marketable skills to Africans who do not have access to brick-and-mortar institutions.

Looking Ahead

The challenges that have plagued African universities over the last several decades will continue to exist, and will be amplified as a massive youth bulge ensures the continuation of high enrollment rates. The importance of modernizing Africa's higher education system is widely recognized. Public-private partnerships may be one way to overcome the challenge of

limited government funding available to public universities. The [African Network of Scientific and Technological Institutions](#) and the [African Higher Education Summit](#) are just two examples of collaboration and dialogue among like-minded partners seeking to advance the goal of modernizing Africa's higher education system. In addition, African universities will need to consider reorienting their curricula to focus on programs that will be applicable in a knowledge-based global economy and produce appropriately skilled graduates for 21st century jobs. Online learning through MOOCs or virtual universities has the potential to be transformative in the delivery of such skills to students with limited means. It does not, however, address the gap in African universities' low research capacity and limited ability to undertake research in academic fields relevant to their national development.

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Filipe Jacinto Nyusi, president of Mozambique, here speaks during the 71st session of the United Nations General Assembly, Wednesday, Sept. 21, 2016, at U.N. headquarters. (Source: AP Photo/Frank Franklin II.)

Background

Mozambique is a [low-income](#) country located in southern Africa with a population of 28 million. The FRELIMO and RENAMO parties have a long history. The two parties fought a brutal 16-year civil war that left close to a [million](#) dead. The war ended in 1992 with the signing of the Rome peace accords. FRELIMO won elections in 1994 and has continued its ballot success since. After two decades of relative peace under FRELIMO's rule, a rise in political violence beginning in 2013 has [threatened](#) renewed conflict in Mozambique.

From 2013 to late 2016, a [series](#) of skirmishes took place between RENAMO fighters and the FRELIMO-led government. As [covered](#) in previous [editions](#) of *Africa Watch*, these incidents of political violence included attacks on police stations, military outposts, and key transport routes such as highways and railways. [Dozens](#) have been killed in the fighting, which has included [assassinations](#) of officials in both parties. Up to 15,000 people have been displaced. Dhlakama and his supporters cite a number of [grievances](#) against the FRELIMO government, including unequal sharing of state resources, unfair electoral laws, and a lack of sufficient integration of former RENAMO combatants into the military. Dhlakama's RENAMO fighters are made up of approximately 800 former guerillas who were not disarmed after the civil war.

Elections, Ceasefires, and Political Deals

After RENAMO boycotted local elections in 2013, RENAMO and the FRELIMO government agreed on a [number](#) of political agreements and cease-fires before the 2014 national elections. These deals included a few key concessions by the government, such as a revamped electoral commission with more opposition members represented. In the 2014 elections, FRELIMO again prevailed, although by a less convincing margin than in past contests. FRELIMO's Nyusi [won](#) 57 percent of the vote, while RENAMO's Dhlakama took 36 percent (another opposition party leader, Daviz Simango of the MDM [Movimento Democrático de Moçambique], came in at 6 percent). FRELIMO captured 144 seats in parliament (down from 191), while RENAMO increased its share from 51 to 89 seats (MDM won 17). Despite their increased seats in parliament, Dhlakama and RENAMO disputed the results, [claiming](#) fraud and electoral irregularities. Violence continued, and a series of negotiations that came to include international representatives from South Africa, Botswana, Tanzania, the European Union (EU), and the Vatican [failed](#) to bring about a lasting agreement between RENAMO and the government.

Indefinite Cease-fire

International negotiators departed Mozambique in December 2016 largely empty-handed, but domestic mediation efforts continued. In late December 2016, a weeklong cease-fire was [announced](#) after a phone call between Nyusi and Dhlakama. That arrangement was renewed twice, each time for 60 days. On May 4, 2017, Dhlakama [announced](#) the indefinite truce, saying that the deal marked the "beginning of the end of war" in Mozambique. While many details of

the cease-fire remain unclear, one of the major components is the removal of government forces from areas surrounding Dhlakama's base in Gorongosa (Dhlakama [asserts](#) there are more than 26 government bases in the region). The removal of troops has [reportedly](#) already begun, and Dhlakama maintains that he has a "verbal agreement" with Nyusi that this action will be completed by the end of June this year. Two centers, located in Maputo and Gorongosa, have been established to monitor the cease-fire. The centers are staffed by both RENAMO and government forces.

Dhlakama appears to have shifted his confrontational and violent strategy largely due to concerns from the business community, [acknowledging](#) "I have changed my strategy because I was listening to people, particularly some business people who were afraid." In his public comments Dhlakama signaled that the truce is aimed at bringing lost investment back to the country, [saying](#) "peace is becoming effective peace. The truce is more to reassure Mozambicans, business people, intellectuals and foreigners, that Mozambique now has another image, an image of peace, tranquility and of a country that has all the conditions for investment."

While Nyusi's calculus for agreeing to the cease-fire is less clearly discernible, FRELIMO's upcoming leadership conference in September—where the party will select its leader—appears to have played a role, as a peace deal would [bolster](#) his hand ahead of the conference. Other factors that likely helped push Nyusi to the bargaining table include Mozambique's [declining](#) economic fortunes and FRELIMO's diminishing political dominance.

Conclusion

Given past violations of cease-fires between FRELIMO and RENAMO, it is uncertain whether the latest truce will hold in the long term. That said, the announcement of the indefinite cease-fire and the cessation of hostilities since January 2017 is an encouraging sign that both parties may finally be willing to negotiate in good faith. The prospects for long-term peace in Mozambique might be increased if regional and international entities supported the latest cease-fire and urged the parties to strive for a comprehensive agreement that addresses outstanding issues and that includes effective monitoring and enforcement arrangements.

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