A Comparative Study of University Education Between Africa and Europe: Perspectives from Lecturers with Cross-Continental Teaching Experience

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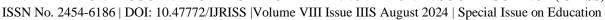## ABSTRACT

This study investigated and compared the nuances of university education in Africa and Europe through the perspectives of 100 lecturers who have taught in both continents. The research aimed at gaining insights into the unique characteristics, challenges, and opportunities inherent in higher education across these regions. The research objectives included to compare the curriculum design of university education between Africa and Europe, to compare the teaching methodologies of university education between Africa and Europe, to compare the institutional resources of university education between Africa and Europe and to compare student diversity of university education between Africa and Europe. By utilizing questionnaires tailored to eliciting detailed responses from experienced educators, the study examines key areas such as curriculum design, teaching methodologies, institutional resources, and student diversity. The questionnaire-based approach facilitated a qualitative analysis of the lecturers' perceptions, experiences, and observations, providing rich data for in-depth comparisons. The research design incorporates both closed-ended questions to gather quantitative data on specific aspects of university education and open-ended questions to capture nuanced qualitative insights and personal reflections. Through the analysis of survey responses, themes emerge regarding the structural differences in higher education systems, including funding and resources, academic standards, student engagement and diversity, and faculty development. Additionally, the study explores the impact of cultural diversity on teaching and learning experiences, highlighting the importance of inclusivity, cultural competency, and intercultural communication skills in a globalized academic environment. Lecturers observed differences in teaching methodologies, with African universities often using traditional lecture-based approaches and European universities adopting more interactive, student-centered methods. Lecturers highlighted the impact of globalization and internationalization on university education, including trends such as student mobility, cross-border collaborations, joint research projects, and the integration of global perspectives into curricula. Lecturers noted disparities in institutional resources between African and European universities, including funding, infrastructure, technology, and research facilities. The findings contribute to a deeper understanding of the strengths and challenges faced by universities in Africa and Europe, offering valuable implications for policymaking, curriculum development, and faculty training. The research also underscores the significance of cross-cultural collaborations and knowledge exchange in enhancing the quality and relevance of university education on a global scale.

INTRODUCTION

University education across continents reveals profound differences and intriguing similarities, particularly when comparing Africa and Europe. This comparative study, grounded in the perspectives of lecturers with

cross-continental teaching experience, aims to illuminate the diverse educational landscapes of these regions. Significant changes have occurred in African higher education over the past 20 years. Universities on the continent were scarce, insignificant, and exclusive institutions with the narrow mandate of developing cadres for the Africanization or assimilation of the self-governing state institutions in the 1960s and 1970s. In the 1980s and 1990s, when structural adjustment programs were at their most popular, they were viewed as expensive frivolities at best or as bulwarks of political unrest at worst. They are now recognized as crucial to the development of knowledge economies and societies, indispensable to the growth of human capital, and capable of transforming Africa's unparalleled youth bulge into a demographic transition Busia, K. A. (2023).

The higher education sector on the continent faces severe capacity shortages and difficulties that put its survival, sustainability, and ability to support the historic and humanistic project for democratic and development transformation on the continent at risk Zeleza, P. T. (2018). The six main capacity issues facing African higher education were distilled by Zeleza, P. T. (2018) and include organizational supply, funds, educators, scientific studies, outputs, and leadership. The sector's ability to aid in the creation of the internationally competent, inclusive, interconnected, innovative, effective, and viable democratic societies and states contemplated in the African Union's Agenda 2063, the United Nations' Framework for Action, and multiple National Visions depends on meeting these obstacles and fostering high-quality education.
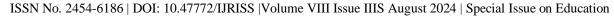
Africa therefore requires more universities. But to stop the slide toward declining quality, developments in both physical and technological infrastructures must be made in tandem with the expansion of the supply of educational establishments Mhlanga, D., & Moloi, T. (2020). Enhancing accessibility, equity, and affordability must also go hand in hand with it, especially for women and marginalized groups. In tertiary education, gender parity had been achieved globally by 2000 and was 1.10 in 2013. The only continent where gender parity has not yet been achieved is Africa. In 2013, its gender parity index was 0.85.

High-skilled professionals are in greater demand due to emerging global technological trends and the intensifying competition for innovation among nations and businesses. As a result, the value of higher education rises even further, and the role of universities in a creative economy is expanded. The competition between universities is escalating in the context of the globalization of the market for educational services; this is happening against the backdrop of general advancement and the complexity of higher education systems Carayannis et al (2022). In this regard, universities place a high priority on achieving (maintaining) leadership and ensuring competitiveness; this is increasingly reaching the global level and is a key factor in their sustainability. These issues establish the necessity of a proper comparative analysis that covers all areas and aspects of educational institutions' activities in order to identify leaders, the extent and parameters of differences between universities, assess competitive positions and advantages, etc.

Tools for monitoring and evaluating leadership performance are now necessary due to the need for benchmarking Compagnucci, L., & Spigarelli, F. (2020). Such tools exist now, with international university rankings being one of the most significant. Considering the context of the globalization of higher education, their significance has significantly increased. These positions represent the competitive edge, advantages, and global authority of the top universities by showcasing their potential and performance. The battle for positions in global rankings has evolved into one of the manifestations of university rivalry and gaining ground in these rankings is one of the ways to demonstrate the market's leadership for global educational facilities. Notwithstanding some skepticism, international university rankings are a frequently used tool in marketing and management that is objectively useful, adaptable, and virtually essential for a thorough and systematic correlation of universities Polyakov, M., Bilozubenko, V., Korneyev, M., & Nebaba, N. (2021).

Problem Statement

Despite the growing globalization of higher education, disparities persist between university education in

Africa and Europe, posing challenges and opportunities for academic institutions in both continents. While numerous studies have explored various aspects of higher education within each region separately, there remains a gap in understanding the comparative nuances and insights that can be gleaned from lecturers with cross-continental teaching experience. This study aimed at addressing this gap by conducting a comprehensive comparative analysis of university education between Africa and Europe, focusing specifically on the perspectives, experiences, and observations of lecturers who have taught in both regions. By examining the unique challenges, best practices, cultural influences, and pedagogical approaches encountered by these educators, this research seeks to provide valuable insights and recommendations for enhancing the quality, inclusivity, and global relevance of university education in both Africa and Europe

Research Objectives

1. To compare the curriculum design of university education between Africa and Europe
2. To compare the teaching methodologies of university education between Africa and Europe
3. To compare the institutional resources of university education between Africa and Europe
4. To compare student diversity of university education between Africa and Europe

Theoretical Framework

Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT)

This framework, developed by Vygotsky and further elaborated by Engeström Cong-Lem, N. (2022) to emphasizes the role of cultural and historical contexts in shaping educational practices. CHAT can be applied to analyze how cultural factors influence teaching methodologies, curriculum design, and student-teacher interactions in universities across Africa and Europe.

Cross-Cultural Competence Theory

Drawing from theories of intercultural communication and competence, this framework explores the knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary for effective interaction and collaboration across cultural boundaries Chen, X., & Gabrenya Jr, W. K. (2021). It can inform the analysis of how lecturers with cross-continental teaching experience navigate cultural differences and promote inclusive learning environments.

Comparative Education Framework

This framework focuses on comparing educational systems, policies, and practices across different countries or regions Connelly, M., & Xu, S. (2020). It can guide the comparative analysis of university education in Africa and Europe, considering factors such as curriculum models, funding mechanisms, quality assurance systems, and access to higher education.

Globalization and Higher Education Framework

This framework explores the impact of globalization on higher education, including trends such as internationalization, mobility, knowledge exchange, and the influence of global networks and partnerships Tight, M. (2021). It can guide the analysis of how universities in Africa and Europe adapt to global trends and challenges in the education sector.

Key Differences in Curriculum Design

In Europe, many universities adopt a modular curriculum structure that allows students to choose from a range of elective courses and customize their academic paths Busia, K. A. (2023). This flexibility enables students to pursue interdisciplinary studies and tailor their learning experiences to their interests and career

goals. In contrast, African universities may have more rigid curriculum frameworks with limited flexibility in course selection, although this is changing in some institutions.

European universities often emphasize a balance between theoretical knowledge and practical skills development. Many programs include hands-on learning experiences, internships, and industry collaborations to prepare students for the workforce. In Africa, there may be a stronger emphasis on theoretical learning, although efforts are being made to incorporate more practical components into curricula Evans et al (2021).

Due to Europe's international outlook and diverse student body, curricula often incorporate global perspectives, cross-cultural understanding, and opportunities for international exchanges or study abroad programs. African universities are increasingly recognizing the importance of global competence and are working to internationalize their curricula through partnerships and collaborations with institutions worldwide Busia, K. A. (2023).

European universities often collaborate closely with industry partners to ensure that curricula are aligned with current market needs and industry trends. This collaboration enhances graduates' employability and readiness for professional roles Carayannis et al (2022). In Africa, there is a growing emphasis on developing curricula that are relevant to local industries and economies, fostering entrepreneurship, and addressing societal challenges Evans et al (2021). Some African universities integrate indigenous knowledge systems and local perspectives into their curricula, acknowledging the importance of preserving and promoting cultural heritage. This inclusion adds depth and diversity to academic programs, providing students with a holistic understanding of their cultural heritage and societal context.

European universities often prioritize research and innovation, with curricula that encourage critical thinking, problem-solving, and research skills development Carayannis et al (2022). African universities are increasingly investing in research and innovation initiatives, although funding and infrastructure constraints may impact the extent to which these aspects are integrated into curricula.

TEACHING METHODOLOGIES

According to Pedagogical Tradition, in many African countries, traditional teaching methods may emphasize rote learning, memorization, and teacher-centered instruction Fafunwa et al (2022). However, there is a growing recognition of the need for learner-centered approaches that promote critical thinking, problem-solving, and active engagement Evans et al (2021). European universities often prioritize student-centered learning, interactive teaching methods, and inquiry-based approaches. Lecturers encourage students to question, analyze, and apply knowledge, fostering independent thinking and lifelong learning skills.

Access to technology and digital resources can vary widely across African universities Lembani et al (2020). While some institutions have integrated technology into teaching, others may face challenges related to infrastructure, connectivity, and digital literacy. European universities generally have advanced technology infrastructure and leverage digital tools extensively in teaching and learning. This includes online platforms, multimedia resources, virtual labs, and interactive learning environments.

Traditional assessment methods in Africa often include exams, quizzes, and essays that measure students' knowledge retention Evans et al (2021). There is a growing emphasis on alternative assessment strategies, such as project-based assessments, portfolios, and peer evaluations. Assessment in European universities may incorporate a mix of written exams, presentations, group projects, and practical demonstrations. There is a trend towards authentic assessments that evaluate students' abilities to apply knowledge in real-world contexts.

Classroom dynamics in African universities may be influenced by cultural norms such as respect for authority and hierarchical structures. Lecturers often play a central role in leading discussions, while students may be more reserved in expressing opinions Evans et al (2021). European classrooms tend to be more participatory, with lecturers facilitating discussions, group work, debates, and collaborative projects De Wit, H., & Altbach, P. G. (2021). There is an emphasis on fostering a supportive and inclusive learning environment where students actively contribute to knowledge creation.

Institutional Resources

Many universities in Africa face challenges with limited funding and financial resources. Public universities may rely heavily on government funding, which can be inconsistent or insufficient. Private universities often depend on tuition fees and donations Mhlanga, D., & Moloi, T. (2020). European universities generally have more stable funding sources, including government grants, research funding, endowments, and tuition fees. Some countries have dedicated funding mechanisms for higher education, ensuring adequate resources for teaching, research, and infrastructure development De Wit, H., & Altbach, P. G. (2021).

Infrastructure varies widely across African universities. Some institutions have modern facilities, well-equipped laboratories, and state-of-the-art classrooms. However, others may lack adequate infrastructure, including outdated buildings, limited access to technology, and insufficient research facilities Motala, S., & Menon, K. (2020). European universities typically have modern and well-maintained infrastructure, including lecture halls, laboratories, libraries, student centers, and recreational facilities. Investments in infrastructure support teaching, research, and student services Carayannis et al (2022).
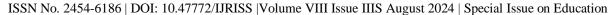
Technology integration in African universities is improving, but challenges such as limited internet connectivity, outdated equipment, and digital literacy barriers persist Kibuku et al (2020). Some institutions prioritize technology-enhanced learning, e-learning platforms, and digital resources Lembani et al (2020). European universities are at the forefront of technology integration, with advanced IT infrastructure, high-speed internet, digital learning platforms, online libraries, and virtual collaboration tools Carayannis et al (2022). Technology supports blended learning, distance education, and research activities.

Research funding in Africa may come from government grants, international partnerships, industry collaborations, and philanthropic organizations. Research facilities vary by institution, with some universities investing in specialized labs and research centers Fafunwa et al (2022). European universities receive significant research funding from national agencies, the European Union, industry partners, and competitive grants Carayannis et al (2022). Research facilities include cutting-edge laboratories, research institutes, technology parks, and innovation hubs.

Student diversity

African universities attract international students from other African countries and around the world, fostering cross-border collaborations and cultural exchanges Lembani et al (2020). Internationalization initiatives promote diversity and global perspectives. European universities are major destinations for international students seeking high-quality education and global opportunities. International student communities contribute to cultural diversity, internationalization efforts, and academic excellence De Wit, H., & Altbach, P. G. (2021).

Students in Africa often have strong cultural identities rooted in their ethnic heritage, traditions, beliefs, and customs. Cultural diversity enriches the learning environment and promotes cross-cultural understanding Motala, S., & Menon, K. (2020). European students also have diverse cultural identities shaped by national,

regional, and ethnic affiliations. Cultural exchanges, multicultural events, and diversity initiatives contribute to a vibrant and inclusive campus environment.

In Africa, students come from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds, ranging from urban, middle-class families to rural, low-income households Mhlanga, D., & Moloi, T. (2020). Economic factors can influence access to education, academic performance, and opportunities for advancement. Similarly, students in Europe come from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds, including affluent families, working-class communities, and marginalized groups. Efforts are made to promote social inclusion and provide financial aid, scholarships, and support services to students from disadvantaged backgrounds De Wit, H., & Altbach, P. G. (2021).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The questionnaire-based approach facilitates a qualitative analysis of the lecturers' perceptions, experiences, and observations, providing rich data for in-depth comparisons. The research design incorporates both closed-ended questions to gather quantitative data on specific aspects of university education and open-ended questions to capture nuanced qualitative insights and personal reflections Fife-Schaw, C. (2020).

Through the analysis of survey responses, themes emerge regarding the structural differences in higher education systems, including funding and resources, academic standards, student engagement, and faculty development. Additionally, the study explores the impact of student diversity on teaching and learning experiences, highlighting the importance of inclusivity, cultural competency, and intercultural communication skills in a globalized academic environment.

FINDINGS

Lecturers observed differences in teaching methodologies, with African universities often using traditional lecture-based approaches and European universities adopting more interactive, student-centered methods. However, they also noted a shift towards innovative teaching practices in both regions, driven by the need to enhance student engagement and learning outcomes. Lecturers noted that cultural influences significantly impact curriculum design in both Africa and Europe. African universities may prioritize local knowledge, indigenous perspectives, and cultural relevance in curricula, while European universities emphasize global perspectives, interdisciplinary learning, and critical thinking skills.

Lecturers highlighted the diverse student populations in both Africa and Europe, emphasizing the importance of inclusivity initiatives such as cultural competency training, support services for marginalized groups, and strategies to promote intercultural understanding among students. There is no genuine competitive research funding in Africa and the universities lack the capacity to undertake research. There is also no clear roadmap of research policies for staff and students in Africa on how to pursue research. The supervisors have not shown the capability to undertake independent research. The government has not played a role in funding research in universities.

Lecturers noted disparities in institutional resources between African and European universities, including funding, infrastructure, technology, and research facilities. While European universities generally have more robust resources, efforts are underway in both regions to optimize resource allocation and enhance support for teaching and research activities.

Lecturers highlighted the impact of globalization and internationalization on university education, including trends such as student mobility, cross-border collaborations, joint research projects, and the integration of global perspectives into curricula. Both regions are actively engaging in internationalization efforts to

enhance academic quality and relevance. The faculty student ratio for the undergraduate class should be around 1-150 students. A class will have a main lecturer together with teaching assistants to facilitate learning. For the graduate students the ratio is around 1:15. The class will also have the main lecturer together with teaching assistants.

CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

In conclusion, while African and European universities exhibit distinct characteristics in their teaching methods, curriculum design, and resource allocation, both regions are making strides toward addressing challenges and improving educational quality. Efforts to enhance inclusivity, increase research capabilities, and engage in internationalization are central to advancing higher education in both contexts. Based on their experiences and observations, lecturers proposed recommendations for improving university education in Africa and Europe. These recommendations may include enhancing funding mechanisms, investing in faculty development, promoting research collaboration, strengthening partnerships with industry and government sectors, fostering cross-cultural understanding, and adopting best practices from each region to enrich teaching and learning experiences.

For Universities in Africa to rate highly and enhance the best quality for students to solve societal problems, research is key. Both lecturers and students should be actively in research to solve the current predicaments. The universities ought to build capacity to undertake research. The teaching staff should publish at least three papers a year and this should be the basis for promotions by the human resource office. The government should use universities as a decisional making tool and thus provide enough funding for research in universities. There should be sufficient African Quality Journals that Africans should publish their work.

A university that is well managed will attract international students and faculty. The international students bring diverse culture that is essential for cohesive learning in a university. The international faculty should be reputable with PhDs and have great publications. The quality and standards of education should be high enough to attract the best students across the world and at the same time attract employers to hire brilliant students. This can be achieved by creating a culture of honest desire to do great things in society.

The faculty to student ratio for undergraduates should be 1:150 students. The lecturer should be assisted by teaching assistants. To be a highly top-class university, all lecturers in a university should have a PhD. One lecturer should be able to supervise 4 PhD and 4 master's students per year. The lecturer should be available to meet 2 students every week to spearhead and fasten the research process. The dissertation for the master's students should take 4 to 5 months to complete.

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