

The PASET Regional Benchmarking Initiative to Strengthen African Universities



An Africa-led initiative to bridge the skills gap in Applied Sciences, Engineering, & Technology

BACKGROUND

Sub-Saharan Africa has experienced remarkable GDP growth in the last decade. However, it lacks the highly skilled human capital, especially in the fields of Applied Sciences, Engineering and Technology (ASET), needed to take this growth to the next level. In particular, the continent's higher education institutions need to do more to equip the nearly 11 million graduates entering its job markets each year with these skills.

To meet this demand, governments and institutional leaders must begin to monitor improvement in Africa's higher education institutions and analyze the factors explaining their performance and gaps. However, as seen by Figures 1 and 2, African universities lack a comprehensive management Information systems (MIS), and there is lack of capacity at both institutional and national levels to do so. Bridging this gap requires comprehensive data on indicators such as the quality of learning and teaching, program relevance, labor market outcomes of graduates and research, among others.

To help tackle this need, the Africa-led Partnership for skills in the Applied Sciences, Engineering and Technology (PASET) launched the **Regional Benchmarking Initiative** for Sub-Saharan African universities in 2015. The initiative helps African universities and countries develop

institutional and system level performance indicators respectively and comprehensive frameworks to compare themselves with regional as well as global peers.

PASET was formed in 2013 by African governments in collaboration with the World Bank. It invests in the creation of a skilled workforce in Africa to maximize returns on domestic and foreign investment in key economic sectors, and to increase the capacity of universities and research centers to generate knowledge relevant to regional development challenges.

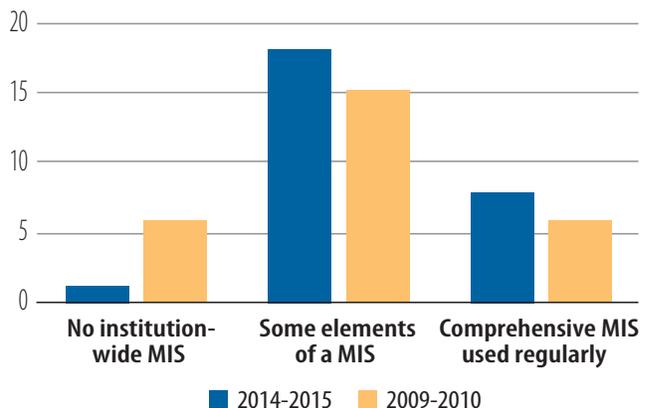
The Regional Benchmarking Initiative will be anchored in an Africa-based center, which will provide capacity-building and technical assistance to African higher education institutions and national tertiary education agencies to develop their own benchmarking systems. Since its launch, over 50 universities from more than 20 African countries, as well as national agencies, regional and sub-regional organizations have participated in its initial exercises and workshops. It has helped 31 universities measure 66 key performance and health indicators like their proportion of women undergraduates; academics with doctoral degrees; graduates employed within 6 months of graduating, and academics involved in technology transfer activities.

Figures 1 & 2: Sample results from the report of PASET's 2016 Regional Benchmarking pilot exercise evaluating 31 African universities

LACK OF DATA

Low Response Rates (31 universities)

- 48%** Proportion of institutional budget spent on technology transfer activities
- <49%** Proportion of students graduating on time
- 36%** Graduates employed as professionals within 6 months of graduating
- 36%** Proportion of graduates from the lowest two income quintiles



WHAT IS BENCHMARKING?

Benchmarking enables a structured sharing of data and good practices on institutional and system strengths and weaknesses. In this context, benchmarking can help Applied Sciences, Engineering and Technology (ASET) universities across Africa choose comparator institutions as well as indicators through a comprehensive analytical framework, and learn from good practices in Africa and elsewhere in the world.

Unlike global university rankings, which lead to a 'race to the top', benchmarking is tempered learning: its main goal is to improve diagnosis of areas for improvement and orient the design of specific interventions to help universities reach their performance potential. In contrast to rankings, benchmarking can allow much more meaningful comparisons among similar institutions across countries at the same stage of development.

BOX 1: CHINA'S BENCHMARKING SYSTEM AS AN INSPIRATION

In 1998, the Chinese government's decision to develop world class universities to serve the country's fast-growing economy led to the development of a hallmark benchmarking system. To guide its efforts to upgrade the quality and relevance of its programs and strengthen its research capacity, Shanghai Jiao Tong University (SJTU) relied heavily on benchmarking to identify areas for improvement that guided its successive strategic plans. In recognition of SJTU's pioneering work on benchmarking, the Ministry of Education entrusted it with the task of developing a global ranking that would allow Chinese universities to measure their progress in their search for academic excellence. This is how the Academic Ranking of World Universities, which relies exclusively on publicly available information and statistics, came into being.

Under the PASET Benchmarking initiative, an internationally recognized methodology developed in partnership with the SJTU Center for World-Class Universities is being adapted to the African context in close consultations with relevant regional and national stakeholders

HOW DOES IT WORK?

The main objectives of the Regional Benchmarking Initiative are to:

1. Develop institutional and system level benchmarking tools useful in the African context and easily adaptable by African universities and national tertiary education agencies. This will also include piloting an innovative graduate tracer study tool.
2. Train and build capacity in interested African universities, national tertiary education agencies and sub-regional organizations to effectively collect, manage and analyze institutional and national level system data, and use the results of benchmarking to assess and improve the

performance of the institutions under their purview.

3. Create the capacity within an interested African institution or organization to host the Regional Benchmarking initiative and provide relevant training and technical assistance at the regional level (Box 2).

The benchmarking initiative will be closely integrated with other national and regional level initiatives supporting higher education capacity building in Africa, such as the World Bank's Africa Centers of Excellence¹ project and national quality assurance schemes, working together to achieve the same goal: the strengthening of quality and relevance of African institutions.

¹ See <http://www.aau.org/ace/> and <http://ace2.iucea.org/>.

BOX 2: A REGIONAL HUB FOR DATA COLLECTION & ANALYSIS

Through a competitive selection process, an African institution will be chosen to serve as a Regional Hub for Data on African Universities. Its staff will be trained by global experts convened by the PASET Secretariat at the World Bank. This hub will:

- Serve as the central location to collect, store, verify and analyze relevant data from national agencies as well as the universities themselves.
- Carry out regional level benchmarking on a regular basis and regularly update the methodology, including the student surveys, industry surveys and graduate tracer study tool.
- Provide technical assistance on benchmarking to the institutions, national higher education agencies, and regional/sub-regional organizations.
- Publish studies and data-based reports on a regular basis.

An Advisory Board will support and advise the center and its partners. A sustainable financial model, a combination of donor funds and fees collected from participating institutions will be developed.

WHO WILL BENEFIT?

The benefits of benchmarking reach far and wide.

The following are its key beneficiaries:

- **African universities** shall benefit by having access to detailed data from comparable universities and gaining an analytical framework to (1) evaluate the evolution of their own performance and its determinants over time, as well as relative to similar institutions nationally and regionally and even beyond the region; (2) identify areas of strengths and weaknesses; and (3) assess the determinants of known performance gaps. Ultimately, they would be able to steer a course for addressing existing bottlenecks and make improvements. Although the initiative, in line with PASET's objectives, targets ASET-focused universities, it is open to all interested universities in Sub-Saharan Africa.
- **Students and their families** would gain a more reliable and meaningful source of information about the performance of universities that they are interested in.
- For **policy-makers**, benchmarking is a powerful tool to analyze the results of comparisons among

all the institutions that already receive or could become eligible to receive government funding. In addition, they would gain valuable information to compare similar institutions across African countries, monitor their progress, plan investments based on performance gaps, and take corrective measures in quality assurance and financial incentives systems. The national agencies in charge of quality assurance in higher education will be enlisted to help drive national efforts.

- **Employers** would gain a more objective idea of the results of the national and regional educational institutions from which they recruit. This information can also help them identify universities they want to work closely with for curriculum enhancement, applied research and technology transfer.
- Last but not least, **the donor community** will gain a unified framework to measure and compare the performance of the various institutions that they support and assess progress over time.

BOX 3: PARTNERING WITH THE PRIVATE SECTOR

Since the industrial and service sectors are direct consumers of the graduates of higher education institutions, they should be involved in shaping these graduates' education. Engaging with industry is critical in improving the quality and relevance of higher learning as well as the employability of graduates. The benchmarking exercise will engage with companies across Africa, Chambers of Commerce from interested African countries, and other relevant regional private sector groups. These actors will be able to:

- Contribute to industry surveys and provide input into the pilot graduate tracer study tool.
- Work with the Regional Hub to develop incentives for universities that participate in benchmarking regularly. Participate in benchmarking capacity building workshops where relevant results and reports on higher education institutions will be shared.

THE WAY FORWARD

Based on lessons learnt from the exercises so far, the next steps for the initiative include:

- **Strengthening the current benchmarking tool** and developing additional useful components such as a national system level tool, an industry survey, a data verification process and piloting a graduate tracer study tool.
- **Formally enrolling African universities and National Agencies** to participate: Commitment letters will be requested from Heads of African universities and National Agencies that would like to be involved in the benchmarking exercise and capacity building workshops going forward. The workshops will introduce participants to managing their data properly and using the benchmarking

results constructively for diagnosis, strategic planning and improvement. Further, capacity-building exercises will ensure sustainability of the initiative.

- **Selecting & training a regional hub** to provide technical assistance: Facilitate a call for proposals to establish a center that can provide technical assistance on benchmarking to higher education institutions and national agencies (see Box 2).
- **Developing partnerships:** The donor community and interested private sector groups (see Box 1), including partners from fast-growing economies like Korea, China, Brazil, and India will be targeted to engage in knowledge-sharing activities, provide financial and other in-kind assistance to support the initiative.

For more information, please contact the PASET Secretariat (pasetafrika@worldbank.org)