



Powering the Future of Africa through Uninnovation

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To all involved, we extend our sincere gratitude.





Executive Summary

Africa's higher education institutions (HEIs) are uniquely positioned to drive transformative change, yet significant barriers hinder their capacity to serve as engines of innovation. This report, *Powering the Future of Africa through Uninnovation*, examines the systemic challenges that limit the potential of African HEIs, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa, to foster an innovation-driven culture. We define "uninnovation" as a holistic innovation culture within higher education institutions, especially universities that transform new knowledge created into innovative products on the market that transform lives". Based on insights gathered from a year-long engagement with six HEIs across three African countries under the UNI:NNOVATORS Startups in Residence Program, this report identifies key barriers and proposes actionable recommendations to enable HEIs to contribute meaningfully to Africa's economic and social development.

One of the most pressing challenges is the entrenched academic culture that incentivizes teaching and publications over innovation. In many African HEIs, faculty are rewarded based on the number of papers published rather than the societal impact of their research. This focus on academic output has led to a deep-rooted culture that prioritizes theory over practical application, limiting the translation of research into market-ready innovations. To shift this dynamic, HEIs must adopt new reward mechanisms that value commercialization activities such as prototype development, IP licensing, and spin-offs.

The report also highlights the lack of robust technology transfer systems within African universities. Many HEIs lack specialized technology transfer offices (TTOs), and research grants or intellectual property offices often assume these responsibilities without the required expertise. Well-resourced TTOs are critical for bridging the gap between academia and industry, providing the support needed to patent, license, and commercialize research outputs. Partnerships with organizations experienced in technology transfer can strengthen TTOs, providing the training and resources necessary to move research from academic journals to market solutions.

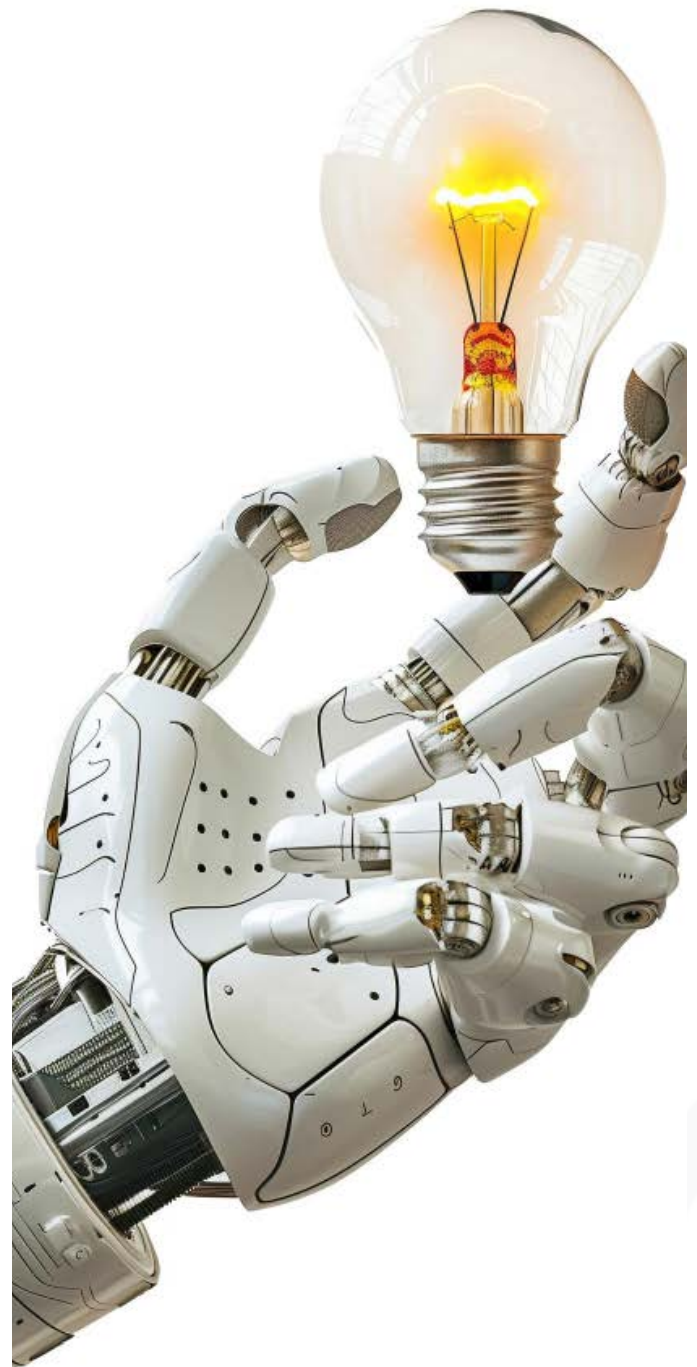
Industry engagement with HEIs in Africa remains limited, with corporations largely viewing universities as talent pools rather than innovation partners. This narrow view overlooks opportunities for R&D collaborations that could address industry-specific challenges while informing academic curricula. Governments must encourage industry-academia partnerships by offering incentives, while HEIs and industry players should collaborate on projects that enhance productivity and foster knowledge transfer. Facilitating these connections can help reshape universities into centers of innovation with tangible contributions to various sectors.

A lack of funding is a common barrier that prevents researchers and innovators from developing prototypes and minimum-viable products

(MVPs). Although some programs provide seed funding, the availability of funding for early-stage prototype development remains limited. Government-backed national innovation funds and partnerships with private-sector investors are essential to closing this gap, enabling HEI innovators to advance promising research into commercialized products. Organizations that specialize in supporting startups can play a crucial role in connecting academic innovators with the resources they need to create impactful solutions.

Finally, the “valley of death”—the challenging transition from MVP to market—poses a significant threat to the sustainability of academic startups. Many researchers lack the business expertise required to navigate this phase, leading to high failure rates. Entrepreneurship support organizations can bridge this gap by offering business development services, facilitating investment matchmaking, and helping academic startups establish partnerships with industry. Corporations, too, have a role to play by integrating innovations from HEIs into their business models through licensing agreements or spin-offs.

This report underscores the need for a paradigm shift in how African HEIs approach innovation, calling for a collective effort from governments, industries, and innovation support organizations to drive meaningful change. By addressing these challenges—mainstreaming an innovation-focused culture, strengthening technology transfer systems, fostering industry partnerships, bridging funding gaps, and supporting MVP-to-market transitions—African HEIs can become catalysts for progress, transforming research into solutions that power the continent’s future.



Introduction - The State of Africa

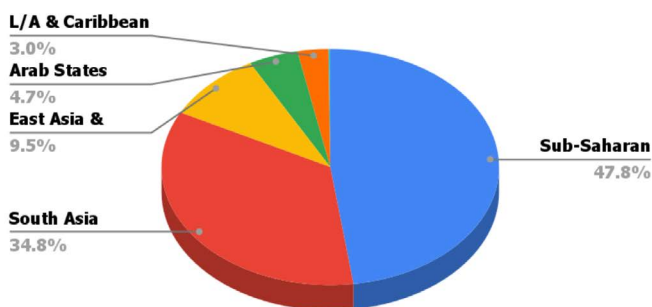
In May 2013, heads of governments across the 54 African countries came together at the African Union headquarters in Addis Ababa to adopt the 2063 agenda for the continent. This agenda set out an ambitious vision and goals that once achieved are believed will improve the standard of living for the continent's people and usher in sustainable prosperity. [The rationale for a 2063 agenda](#) even when a clear global agenda already exists is predicated on Africa's context and continental realities. The 17 sustainable development goals are set out as a global agenda to which Africa's contributions are critical for their achievement, however, a testament to the continent's leader's development aspirations is an agenda that reinforces Africa's goals and timeline.



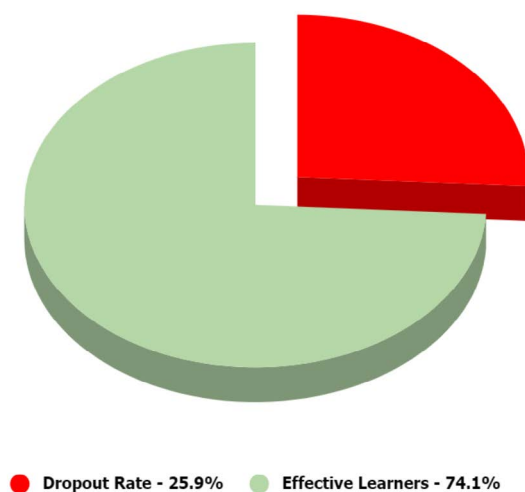
Africa is easily differentiated when one takes a look at global human development indices. As of 2023, 47.8 % of all poor people living in multidimensional poverty globally come from sub-Saharan Africa. 69 out of every 100 pregnant women who die during childbirth in the world are African women and in West and Central Africa, a child under the age of 5 dies every 17 seconds.

Five-year survival rates of women with breast cancer in Africa are just 40%, compared to over 90% in most high-income countries. When it comes to education, the out-of-school population in SSA increased by 12 million between 2015 and 2021. Africa will need at least \$194 billion annually to meet SDGs by 2030, even as the population growth shows no sign of slowing down at 3.8% by 2025. As the population grows in Africa, the demand for meager resources necessary for basic life conditions increases, worsening food security in the process. Almost 50% of harvested food is still lost to wastage and spoilage and harvest yields continue to decrease in most countries due to various factors. It's not just the demand for food that increases, population growth also means jobs get harder to find.

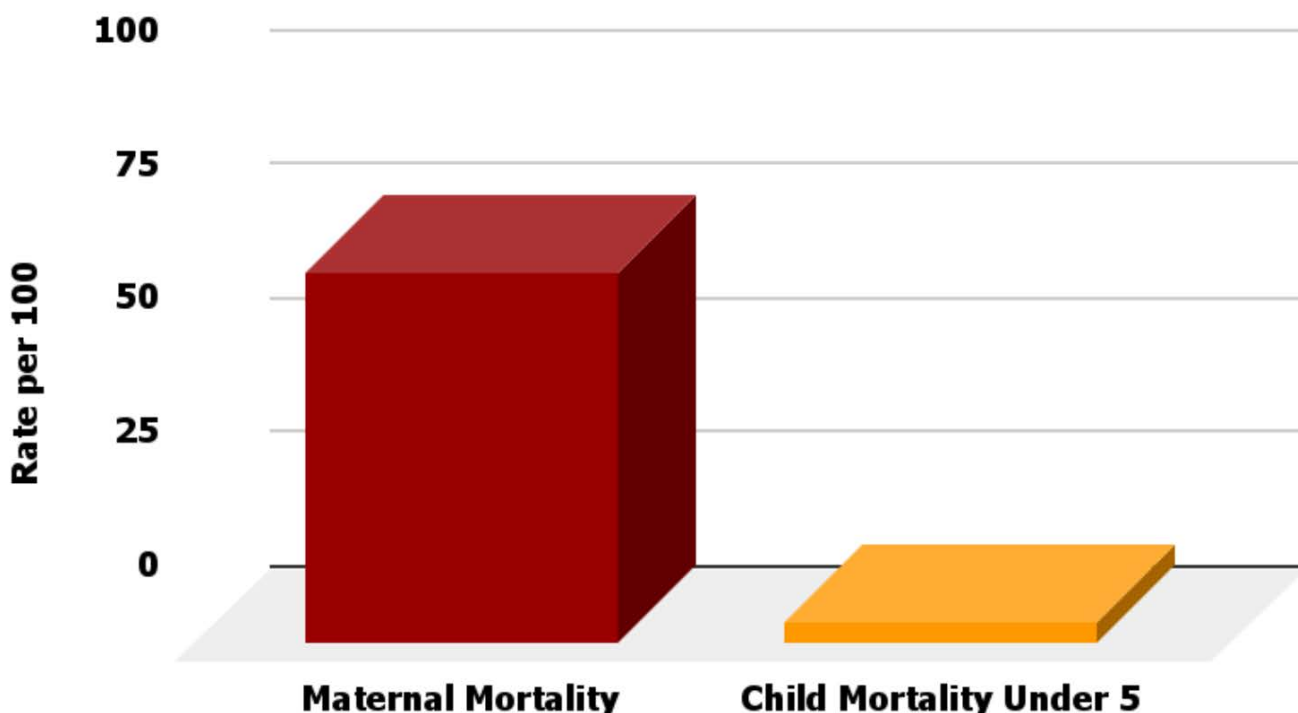
Africa's Multi-Dimensional Poverty vs Population



Drop out Rate vs Effective Learners in African School

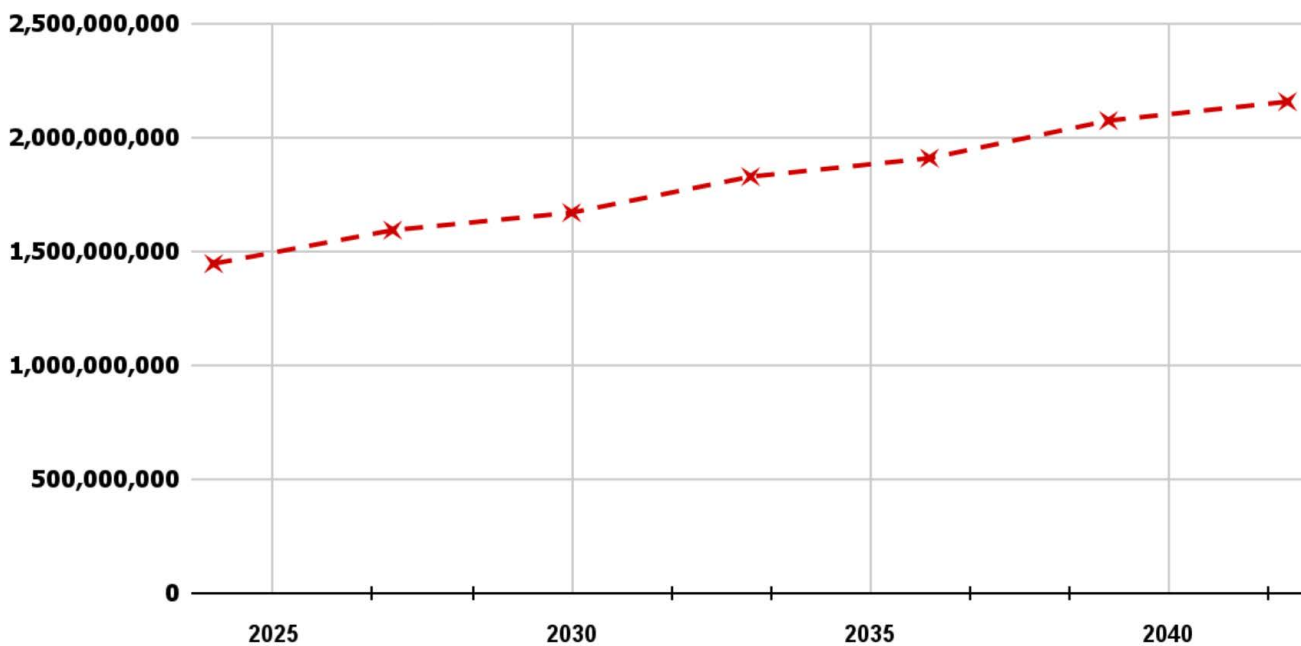


Maternal Mortality vs Child Mortality.



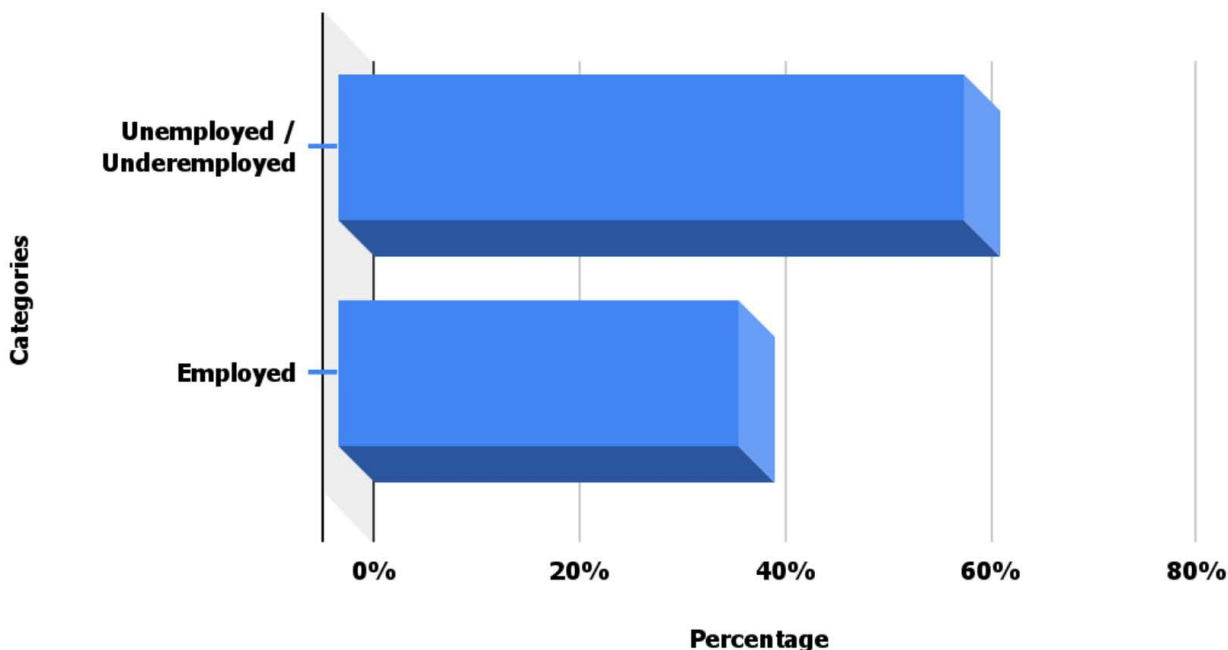
For instance, 61% of people aged 15 to 24 are unemployed in South Africa. This is not so far away from the story across the continent. For those who are underemployed, they do not work in decent jobs or take home decent wages.

Africa's Population Growth Forecast (2024 - 2042)



<https://futures.issafrica.org/geographic/regions/africa/#forecast>

Employment Landscape for South Africans Aged 15-24



Africa's low industrialization means more than 50% of consumer goods are imported from outside the continent and manufacturing contributes 12.8% to Africa's GDP. This translates to very weak trade ties with most countries trading more heavily with Europe and the West than with their neighboring countries. Even though a lack of industrialization also translates to low carbon emissions, Africa has been the sufferer in chief as a result of the climate crisis with very little to show for it in terms of climate adaptation ability or rapid response to the worsening conditions necessitated by climate change i.e drought, famine, floods, and other climate-induced natural disasters.



The AU 2063 Agenda

The humongous challenges for the continent are enough to tempt anyone to ask “What is the future of Africa?” especially as the rest of the world marches forward towards the fourth industrial revolution. The AU’s 2063 agenda aspires to answer the question with ambition and optimism. Africa in the nearest future is where “prosperity abounds for its people and the average African is able to self actualize”. By 2063, Africa intends to have reduced the poverty rate to less than 30% of the continent’s population, grown its industrial base to a 20% contribution to GDP, leveraged new technologies to drive a services industry with a 30% contribution to GDP, improved health and education indices to catch up with the rest of the world and ensure that the continent’s youth are engaged in productive work with decent jobs and decent wages.

The Agenda 2063 is clearly aligned with the sustainable development goals. Designed to be measured and reviewed every 15 years, with the next timeline in the year 2030, Africa’s progress for the SDGs and on its own agenda is still lagging.

2023 Agenda	Agenda 2063
SDG 1: End poverty in all its forms everywhere	Goal 1: A high standard of living, quality of life and well-being for all citizens Goal 2: Environmentally sustainable and climate-resilient economies and communities
SDG 2: End hunger, achieve food security and improve nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture	Goal 3: Healthy and well-nourished citizens Goal 5: Modern agriculture for increased productivity and production
SDG 13: Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts	Goal 7: Environmentally sustainable and climate-resilient economies and communities.
SDG 16: Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels	Goal 11: Democratic values, practices, universal principles of human rights, justice and the rules of law entrenched. Goal 12: Capable institutions and transformed leadership in place. Goal 13: Peace, security and stability is preserved Goal 14: A stable and peaceful Africa. Goal 17: Full gender equality in all spheres of life. Goal 18: Engaged and empowered youth and Children.
SDG 17: Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development	Goal 19: Africa as a major partner in global affairs and peaceful coexistence Goal 20: Africa takes full responsibility for financing her development.

Source: Africa Sustainable Development Report



Innovation as a Leveller

Since Robert Solow's "A Contribution to the Theory of Economic Growth" in 1956, innovation, especially technological innovation, has clearly stood out as a critical factor for economic development for any society. Following George Solow's work is Joseph Schumpeter's identification of the role of entrepreneurs as merchants of innovation and critical to a society's ability to be able to channel the power of technology and innovation into prosperity opportunities for themselves and also for society in the process. Indeed, for most of the continent's ambition for development, Africa must turn to innovate her way out of its myriad of challenges and wicked problems.

The first industrial revolution powered Britain and the West through mass production bringing with it new jobs and a path out of poverty. The second industrial revolution improved on the earlier technology of steelmaking and with it the enablement for other innovations - railroads, air brake systems, and increased mobility and trade. The third industrial revolution is considered a significant shift from analog electronic technology to digital technology. During the first and second industrial revolutions, only Western Europe and the USA were able to maximize the gains. By the third industrial revolution, global wealth increased tenfold, and development spread to much of the world.

Here is an excerpt from [Mohajan Haradhan's paper](#) about the first industrial revolution

“

Before the 1st Industrial Revolution in Britain, most people lived in small villages. They traveled on foot or by horses through small paths. Illness was common because of inadequate food, poor hygiene, use of polluted water, and non-existence of the sewage system. As a result, life expectancy was very short. About 80% of people worked in small agricultural farms in rural areas and the rest 20% people lived in small towns. The villagers worked from sunrise to sunset. Very few people worked in manufacturing, mining, and trade units.

While one can argue about whether Mohajan's description of life before the first industrial revolution in Britain mirrors life today in most of rural Africa, more than ever before, Africa has the chance to power its future through even more powerful technologies evolving in the fourth industrial revolution. With the advancement of technologies in the digital era i.e IoT, Artificial Intelligence, Blockchain, other technologies like nanotechnology, 3D printing, and biotechnology, and the interwoven nature of these technologies, and the abundance of a youth population that can be creative and innovative, Africa's odds for meeting its 2063 agenda appears better than most continents in the past grasping for development. For Africa to leverage its massive youth population and the evolution of these technologies for development higher education institutions will have to play a critical role.



Higher Education Institutions as a Critical Pillar for Agenda 2063

The journey of innovation begins with knowledge creation, either through the discovery of new laws, interactions, properties, or characteristics of nature, the world of existing processes, or the association of two or more existing knowledge bases for new functions and capabilities. However, the translation of innovative technology, products, methods, tools, or processes into the improvement of life conditions and the adoption of the innovation in a sustainable manner requires entrepreneurs whose relevance in society has been stated above through Schumpeter's work.

Universities as being critical to entrepreneurship and being entrepreneurial themselves is a relatively new concept. Higher Education Institutions have contributed to and continue to contribute to both new knowledge creation

through cutting-edge research and the making of entrepreneurs in no small measure. There is no debate about the university's role in creating new knowledge and research. There also appears to be no debate about the impact of research and development on the overall economic development of a society. In fact, the impact that the setting up of a university has on its immediate geographical region - usually as a supplier of human capital and basic research is already established (Audretsch and Lehmann, 2005). The redefinition of the university's role in society as critical to entrepreneurship and innovation came as an overwhelming response to the Bayh Doyle Act in the United States when universities found a new mission - transferring knowledge from the universities to the market. This led to the coinage of the word "entrepreneurial universities".

The concept of an entrepreneurial university revolves around the formation of spin-offs, which are business ventures stemming from the commercialization of knowledge. University spin-offs (USO) are largely described as new start-up firms established by a researcher which can be an individual student or faculty member. The USOs are founded in the university based on academic research to commercialize innovative ideas. In other instances, research commercialization involves close partnerships and collaborations with industry players usually through R&D agreements or intellectual property licensing agreements. In fact, the advancements in technology across various industrial sectors are owed to this relationship - from the military to agriculture to manufacturing to the knowledge economy powered by digital technologies.

The triple helix model first conceptualized by [Leydesdorff and Etzkowitz](#) articulates further the relevance of linkages as crucial to innovation systems, including the bi-directional relationship between industry and academia as two of the three pillars of the triple helix (the third being government) in driving the innovation capacity of any society.

Here is an excerpt from Mohajan Haradhan's paper about the first industrial revolution

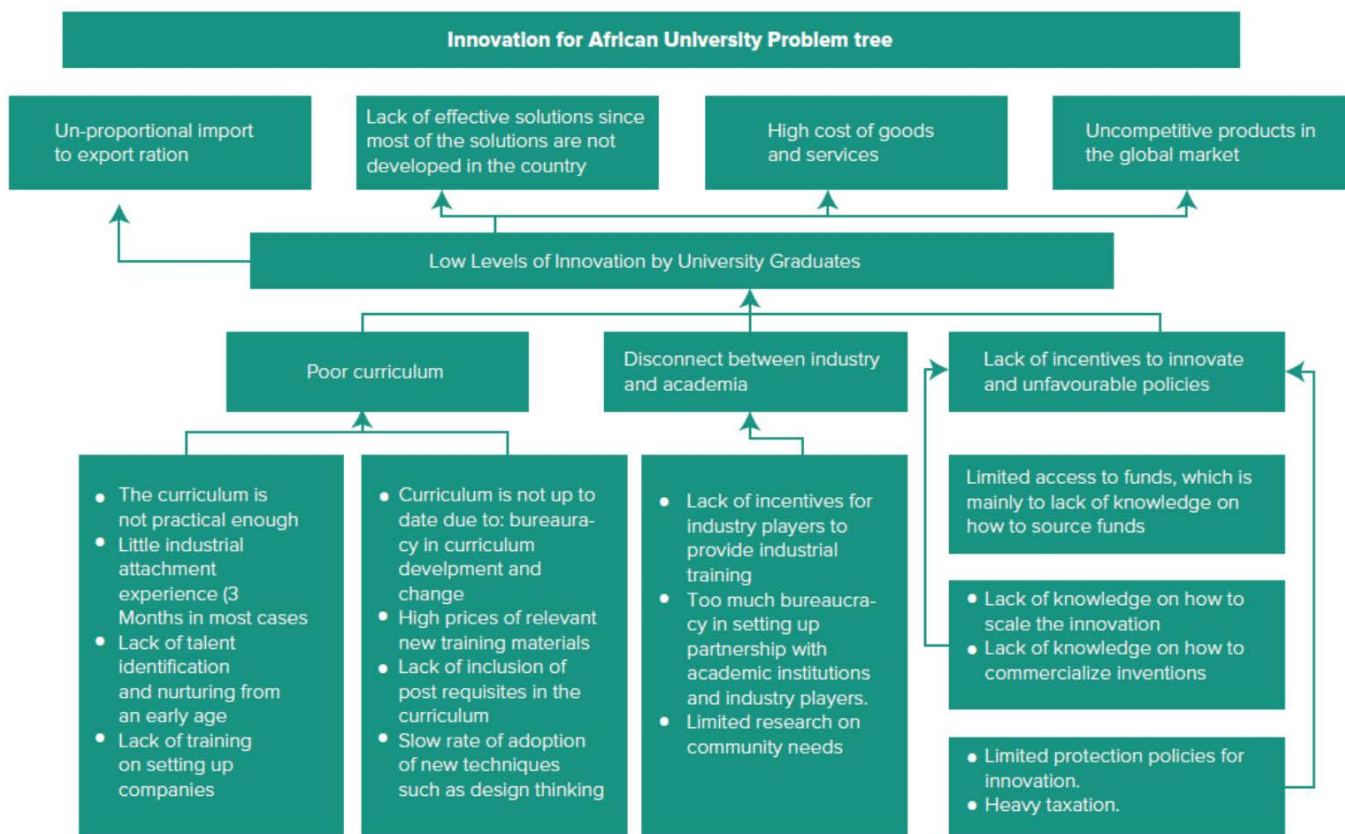


Entrepreneurship & Innovation in Africa's Higher Education Institutions

Having established the role that entrepreneurship and innovation play in fostering economic development in any society and the role that higher education institutions play in fostering entrepreneurship and innovation, we now turn to assessing the state of entrepreneurship and innovation in Africa's higher education institutions.

The African Union through its Department of Education Science, Technology, and Innovation has recognized the importance of higher education institutions in achieving the AU vision for Africa and has established the Pan African Universities as a strategic response to this. According to the website, "The Pan African University was conceptualized in 2008, as part of the implementation of the Plan of Action for the Second Decade of Education for Africa, to support the revitalization of higher education in Africa, and contribute to the achievement of the vision of the African Union".

However, in research conducted by Co-Creation HUB, with a focus on assessing how well African universities are fostering entrepreneurship and innovation, only a few universities are able to respond to the demand for this new role in society. Below is a problem tree that emerged from this research detailing the challenges with innovation within African universities.



Adapted' British Council Innovation for African Universities(IAU) Diagnostic & Mapping Report, Co-creation Hub (2022).

University curriculums taught to students are just not practical enough for students when they graduate and get employed. The experience students have from industrial attachment is also very little - 3 months at the most and at times, no experience at all. Students are therefore not exposed to the required knowledge for them to innovate. Beyond these, a strong bureaucracy within the universities not only hampers any efforts to change the curriculum so that it's up to date, it also slows the rate of adoption of new techniques, like design thinking.

Aside from the issue of poor curriculum, the lack of incentives on the part of industry to provide industrial training coupled with the bureaucracy within HEIs before partnerships can be established continue to fuel the disconnect between academia and industry. This is manifested in the information asymmetry on community needs that the industry intends to serve and the research areas that the academia is focusing on. More so, several obstacles that need to be overcome further reduce the incentive to innovate - limited access to funds for student entrepreneurs, lack

of knowledge on how to scale innovation, lack of knowledge on commercializing inventions, haphazard intellectual property environment, and unfavorable government policies.

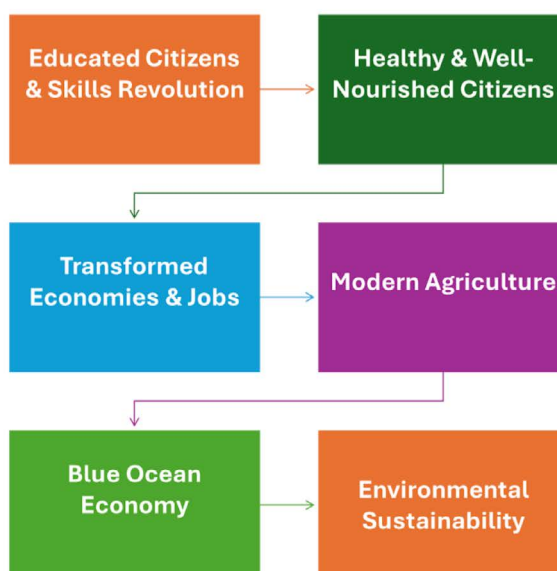
In another research conducted in collaboration with authors from DeMontfort University and led by Prof Muyiwa Oyinlola titled “[Entrepreneurship and innovation in Nigerian universities: Trends, challenges and opportunities](#)”, Entrepreneurship education in Nigeria’s universities - Africa’s largest economy - is still at a nascent stage. Despite the provision by the National Universities Commission allowing universities to provide at least 30% of unique curriculum to their students, engagement in the entrepreneurship curriculum by students is largely theoretical, and entrepreneurial aspirations by students are still largely pursued through self-learning. The paper’s findings within four highly rated universities across both northern and southern Nigeria suggest that “the enactment of the NUC policy on entrepreneurial education is currently haphazard and inefficient”.

Ongoing research regarding industry-academia relationships and how that translates into the commercialization of research output from the universities across several sectors also indicates very low output. While universities do not lack several memoranda of understanding signed with lots of private sector companies, this has failed to translate into commercialized research output or successful R&D partnerships. Amongst the several factors stated as impediments to research commercialization is the lack of capacity to facilitate these partnerships both within academia and industry. Partnerships have largely taken the form of career fairs, and the establishment of laboratories and in some cases, innovation hubs. R&D partnerships have however been far in between.

HEI's Role in Powering the Future of Africa

Aspiration 1 of the AU's Agenda 2063: The Africa We Want document focuses on achieving a prosperous Africa based on inclusive growth and sustainable development. The goals tied to the fulfillment of this aspiration range from ending poverty and inequality to job creation and expansion of access to sanitation, water, energy social welfare, health care, and education underpinned by science and technology to increase productivity through industrialization and manufacturing to modern agriculture and food security to managing biodiversity and fighting the climate crisis.

Aspiration 1 of Agenda 2063: Goals for Africa's Future High Standard of Living & Well-being



Goals Tied to Aspiration 1 of the Agenda 2063 for Africa.

1. A high standard of living, quality of life, and well-being for all - ending poverty, inequalities of income and opportunity; job creation, especially addressing youth unemployment; facing up to the challenges of rapid population growth and urbanization, improvement of habitats and access to basic necessities of life – water, sanitation, electricity; providing social security and protection;
2. Well-educated citizens and skills revolutions underpinned by science, technology, and innovation - developing Africa’s human and social capital (through an education and skills revolution emphasizing science and technology)
3. Healthy and well-nourished citizens - expanding access to quality healthcare services, particularly for women and girls;
4. Transformed economies and jobs - transforming Africa’s economies through beneficiation from Africa’s natural resources, manufacturing, industrialization, and value addition, as well as raising productivity and competitiveness
5. Modern agriculture for increased proactivity and production - radically transforming African agriculture to enable the continent to feed itself and be a major player as a net food exporter;
6. Blue/Ocean Economy for accelerated economic growth - exploiting the vast potential of Africa’s blue/ocean economy;
7. Environmentally sustainable climate and resilient economies and communities - putting in place measures to sustainably manage the continent’s rich biodiversity, forests, land, and waters and using mainly adaptive measures to address climate change risks

If Africa must achieve the majority of these goals within the chosen period, new thinking, new approaches and massively leveraging research and technological innovation will be needed in such a manner that the continent can creatively engage its high youth demography. This spotlights the critical role that higher education institutions need to play for these goals to be reached.

Case Study Mix 1 - Maternal Mortality & Ductal/Lobular Carcinoma

Two leading contributors to the deaths of women in Africa are maternal mortality during childbirth and breast cancer. Africa has the highest mortality rate for cancer in the world and the continent accounted for 70% of the world’s maternal mortality deaths in the world in 2020 according to the World Health Organisation.

While a lot of factors add up to these high mortality rates, the issue of access to affordable care for the average African woman when diagnosed with breast cancer ranks high on that list. As of 2023, the treatments that a woman will go through require payments of up to N400,000 per session in Nigeria - more than 13 times the minimum wage in the country at the time. These high costs are largely due to non-reusable biopsy devices used for treatment. This prevalent situation is similar for most African countries.

As part of the UNI:NNOVATORS Startups in Residence Program, CcHUB supported Daniel Osifuwa who had lost a close relative and a close friend to late breast cancer detection and inability to afford care in both situations, Daniel who had a bachelor's background in Metallurgical and Material Engineering and was a Biomedical Engineering Masters Student at the University of Ibadan at the time, built a prototype for a reusable core needle breast biopsy device with a disposable coaxial needle. This innovative approach simplifies the breast biopsy process and reduces contamination risks associated with these procedures during breast cancer care. Daniel's prototype was 3D printed at the Pan African University of Life and Earth Science (PAULESI) which CcHUB had also set up and operationalized for 18 months. Daniel has now been admitted to a PhD program at the university to continue to advance his research while running his company.

Another Master's Student who joined the UNINNOVATORS program was Adenike Adeoye, a student of the Pan African University of Life and Earth Sciences who had just been admitted when CcHUB completed its operationalization contract at PAULESI. Adenike had lost a close friend during childbirth. While many efforts in improving access to healthcare during pregnancy continue to build up on the continent, lots of pregnant women in rural Nigeria still lack the information and the knowledge to access care and connect to healthcare centers in emergency situations. Her proposed startup name was [ConnectCare](#). In Kenya, another team led by Victor Owino from the University of Nairobi had also applied to the program together with his team with a proposed startup named [Care Connect](#). Both teams were tackling the same problem - how might we leverage digital technologies and digital connectivity to provide pregnant African women with the critical information they need and the community they need to successfully see out the 9 months of their pregnancy?

[Goal 3](#) of Aspiration 1 is focused on expanding access to quality healthcare services, particularly for women and girls. These research-based innovations that are being supported to go to

market are critical to achieving this goal and many more of such innovations exist within higher education institutions that are lying in wait as publications in hard-cover paperbacks.

Case Study Mix 2: Modernizing Agriculture and Fighting Climate Change

Agriculture still forms the bulk of the individual endeavor or means for Africans to feed themselves with the sector [employing at least 65%](#) of the labor market on the continent. Yet, Africa still suffers from food security issues with [216 million African children being malnourished](#) - largely due to hunger. To worsen matters, the climate crisis has impacted and continues to negatively impact the agricultural sector, rendering most farmlands flooded or dried up in drought.

[Goal 5 of Aspiration 1](#) is focused on radically transforming African agriculture to enable the continent to feed itself and be a major player as a net food exporter. Three student teams supported in the UNINNOVATORS Program exemplify how research-based innovations from higher education institutions can provide solutions that contribute to this continental goal.

Kambakekua Ngaiuane is an undergraduate studying Computer Science at the University of Namibia in Windhoek. As the daughter of a farmer who suffers from the lack of knowledge on what to grow and when due to changing climate conditions and inconsistent famine in Namibia, Kambaekua picked up interest in learning AI development skills in a bid to support farmers like her father with insights analyzed from satellite data and weather data. Kambaekua's AI seeds are now finalizing their MVP development after going through a series of human-centered design sprints and on-the-ground research with farmers.

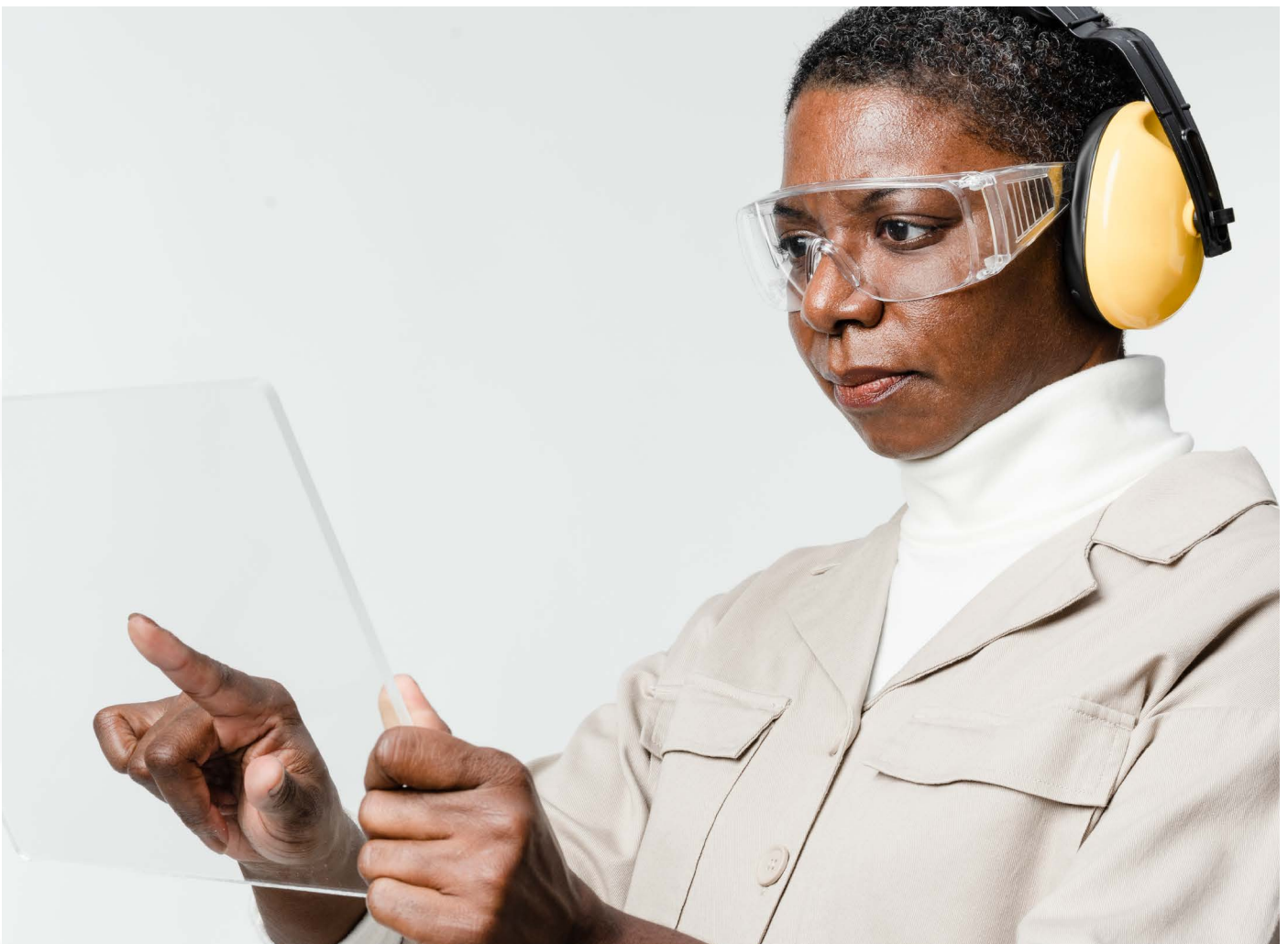
Elijah Chepkwon Cheruiyot, a student of Riara University in Nairobi, Kenya is also the child of a farmer in rural Kenya. As a kid, he had picked up an interest in gadgets and tools. As a computer

science student, who has seen how farming can be dependent mostly on basic knowledge and trial and error when it comes to irrigation, fertilizer application, and the like, Elijah successfully built an IoT-based prototype for smart farming ensuring that modern farmers can have access to complete information about their farm including soil conditions, humidity, temperature, nitrogen content and useful information that informs the smart deployment of resources for agricultural productivity.

Taiwo Yussuf from the University of Lagos while interning at a renewable energy company considered the lack of access to energy and the expensive costs for renewables to most Nigerians at the bottom of the pyramid, especially farmers. It is a known uncomfortable fact that up to 50% of harvest in Africa, especially for fruits and vegetables go to waste in Africa in post-harvest losses due to a lack of cold storage

facilities and lack of access to grid power. As part of participating in the program, Taiwo, together with his team, built a prototype refrigeration device that uses captured CO2 as refrigerants for rural farmers who don't have access to electricity through the grid. Through their novel product, Taiwo's company is both reducing carbon emissions and solving post-harvest losses in Africa's agriculture value chain in a manner that farmers can afford.

Africa is faced with many challenges and a very clear picture of what a desired future could look like has been put forward and agreed to. As technology evolves globally, we must do more than announce this vision, we must resource the application of technology and research-based innovation from our higher education institutions to proffer solutions to these challenges and support their transition into the market for mass adoption.



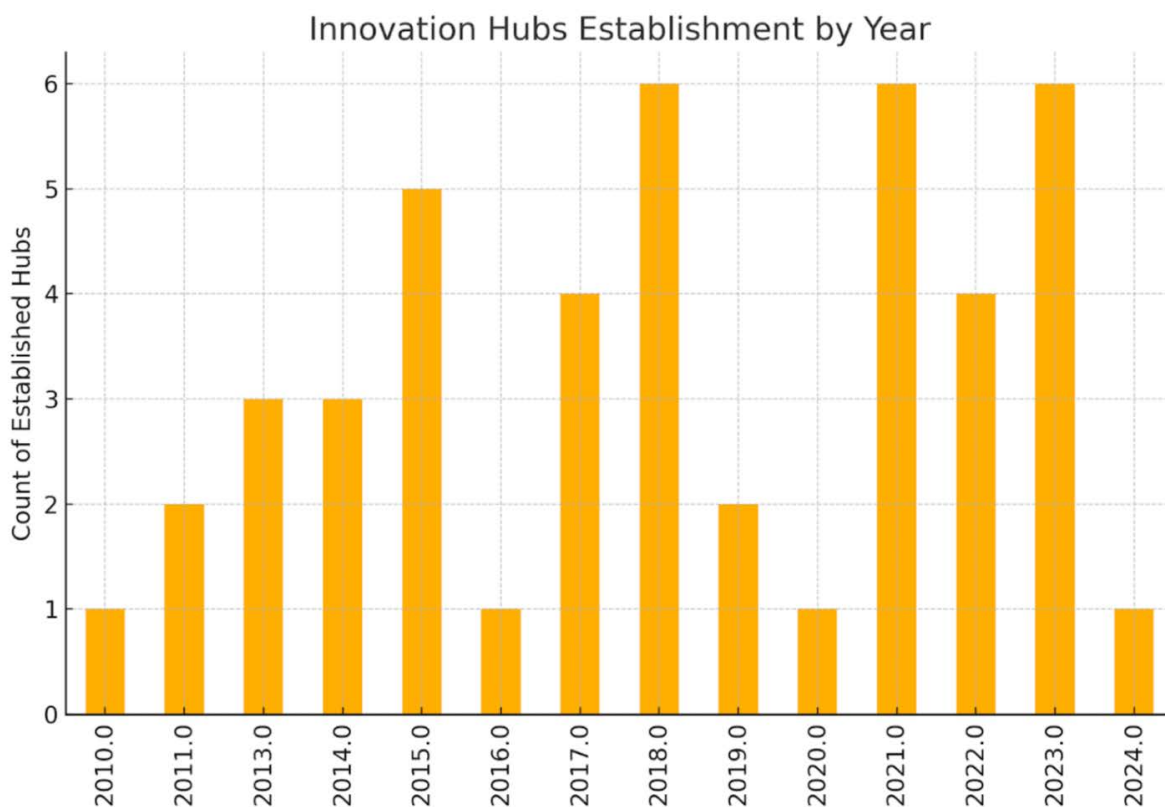
Bridging Critical Gaps in HEI Innovation

Support for higher education especially regarding entrepreneurship and innovation in Africa has taken a number of different approaches in the past. This support provided by a varying number of institutions and partnerships has attempted to change the narrative in a number of different ways - (i) setting up university-based technology incubators (ii) entrepreneurship and innovation support programs and (iii) building communities and HEI ecosystems.



Establishment of University-Based Technology Incubators (UBTIs)

The establishment of innovation hubs and centers of excellence in higher education institutions on the continent is an increasing trend within the HEI Innovation ecosystem. [Of the 100 top-ranked universities](#) on the continent, 58% have established innovation hubs in their campuses. In the last six years alone, 25% of the top 100 have established innovation hubs.



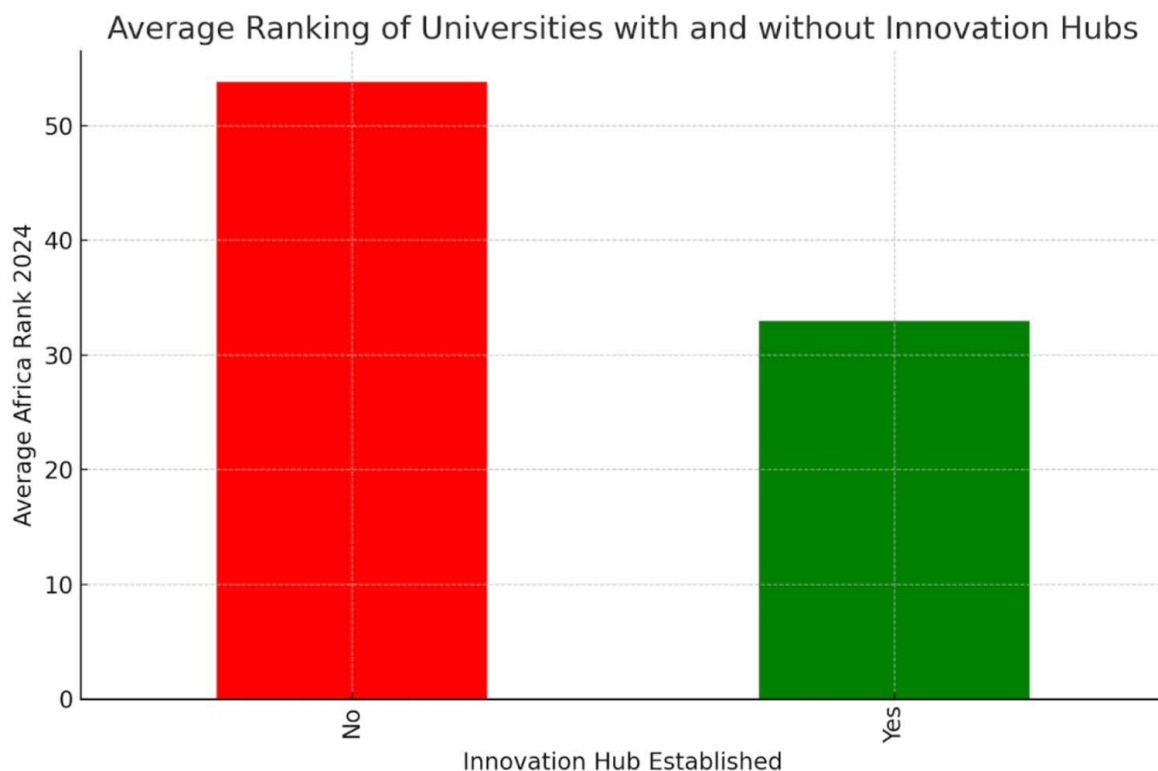
Source: CcHUB HEI Innovation Research - Establishment of innovation hubs by highly ranked universities in Africa by year.

Our analysis shows a clear trend between university rankings and the presence of innovation hubs even though the establishment of innovation hubs is not one of the criteria used in ranking the institutions. Universities with innovation hubs have a higher average Africa rank (33) compared to those without hubs (53.8) and the ranks among universities with hubs are clustered towards the top, with a median rank of 25, while those without hubs have a broader range, with a median rank of 76.

The [Science, Technology, and Innovation Strategy](#) of the African Union updated in 2024 identifies four pillars for successful implementation of the strategy; (i) infrastructure development (ii) enabling environment (iii) technical competencies, and (iv) innovation and entrepreneurship. The establishment of innovation labs and spaces is mentioned under the infrastructure development pillar and the

innovation and entrepreneurship pillar.

To this end, the African Union has funded the establishment of incubation centers of excellence in pan-African universities across the continent. Beyond funding the infrastructure set up within these pan-African universities, the AU has also funded the operationalization of these centers of excellence - with an objective to fund innovators and support research commercialization along critical sectors.



Source: CcHUB HEI Innovation Research, Times Higher Education Rankings

Case Study: PAUSTI, PAULESI & PAUGHSS

Pan African University of Science, Technology and Innovation

In 2021, iHUB Nairobi was awarded the consultancy to build, set up, and operationalize the PAUSTI Center of Excellence domiciled at the Jomo Kenyatta University of Agriculture and Technology in Kenya. Over the course of 18 months, iHUB built a state-of-the-art Center of Excellence that hosted students, faculty, and researchers from within the PAU and JKUAT for various innovation programs, community events, career fairs and supported 38 different innovators from different departments building innovative solutions for clearly defined problems in agriculture, healthcare, nutrition, circular economy amongst others. [A showcase of these innovations](#) is made available on the CoE’s YouTube channel. After an extension for

6 months was granted to complete a second cohort incubation program, iHUB handed over the CoE to the PAU’s administrators.

Pan African University of Life and Earth Sciences

Also in 2021, CcHUB was awarded the consultancy to build, set up, and operationalize the PAULESI Center of Excellence domiciled at the University of Ibadan in Nigeria. For 18 months, CcHUB worked with the PAU’s administrators to build and set up the CoE and support innovators with solutions in the life and earth sciences - from circular economy to inclusion-focused innovation

in sports to robotics. A playlist of prototypes is also available on a dedicated YouTube channel for the CoE where these innovative solutions are showcased. Since the completion of the project, collaboration on innovation-focused projects has continued between CcHUB and the PAULESI CoE leadership. This collaborative spirit has also extended beyond CcHUB to other partners to ensure a continuity of projects and active engagements at the hub both with students and researchers within PAULESI and the University of Ibadan where the PAU is domiciled. In the last 12 months, more than \$50,000 has been deployed within the PAULESI CoE from CcHUB collaborative projects within the CoE ensuring that it remains beneficial to student researchers and faculty. In total, more than \$50,000 dollars have accrued to the organization since CcHUB handed over the CoE through program partnerships with the British Council, and GIZ amongst others.

Pan African University of Governance, Humanities and Social Sciences

In 2022, a consulting company was awarded the consultancy to also build, setup, and operationalize the PAUGHSSS Center of Excellence domiciled at the University of Yaounde, Cameroon. Not much is known about the CoE and the impact of its innovation-focused programs or whether the CoE continues to function as there is very little digital footprint of activities done at the center and within the university community.

Entrepreneurship & Innovation Support Programs

Beyond setting up innovation hubs, innovation support programs within higher education institutions to support innovation capacity strengthening, research commercialization or entrepreneurship education has also continued to increase. These programs have been funded through either official development assistance from development partners with a mandate of supporting economic development through higher education or government-mobilized support or efforts of innovation intermediaries

or in some instances funds provided by the university to students or researchers.

Case Study: NUST PiP, KNEIL's Masterplan, CcHUB's UNINNOVATORS

NUST Practical Innovation Program

Having popularized the Innovation, Creativity, and Entrepreneurship course within its student base, the Namibia University of Science and Technology in 2024 went beyond offering entrepreneurship education to its students and engaged three partners - DEMOLA from Finland, CcHUB Africa, and Impact Tank locally in Namibia to implement a four days boot camp that engaged its 550+ students registered for the course in the practical components on innovation creativity and entrepreneurship. The students, grouped into teams, focused on building an innovative product or a business idea - using human-centered design principles picked up during learning sessions - that tackled critical problems in Namibia and the southern African region. In four days, the student teams built low-fidelity prototypes solving critical problems in sectors such as modern irrigation for smart use of water, digital transformation for SMEs, poverty alleviation social innovation tools, digital health records for patients and doctors, artificial intelligence use cases for education, employment entertainment amongst others.

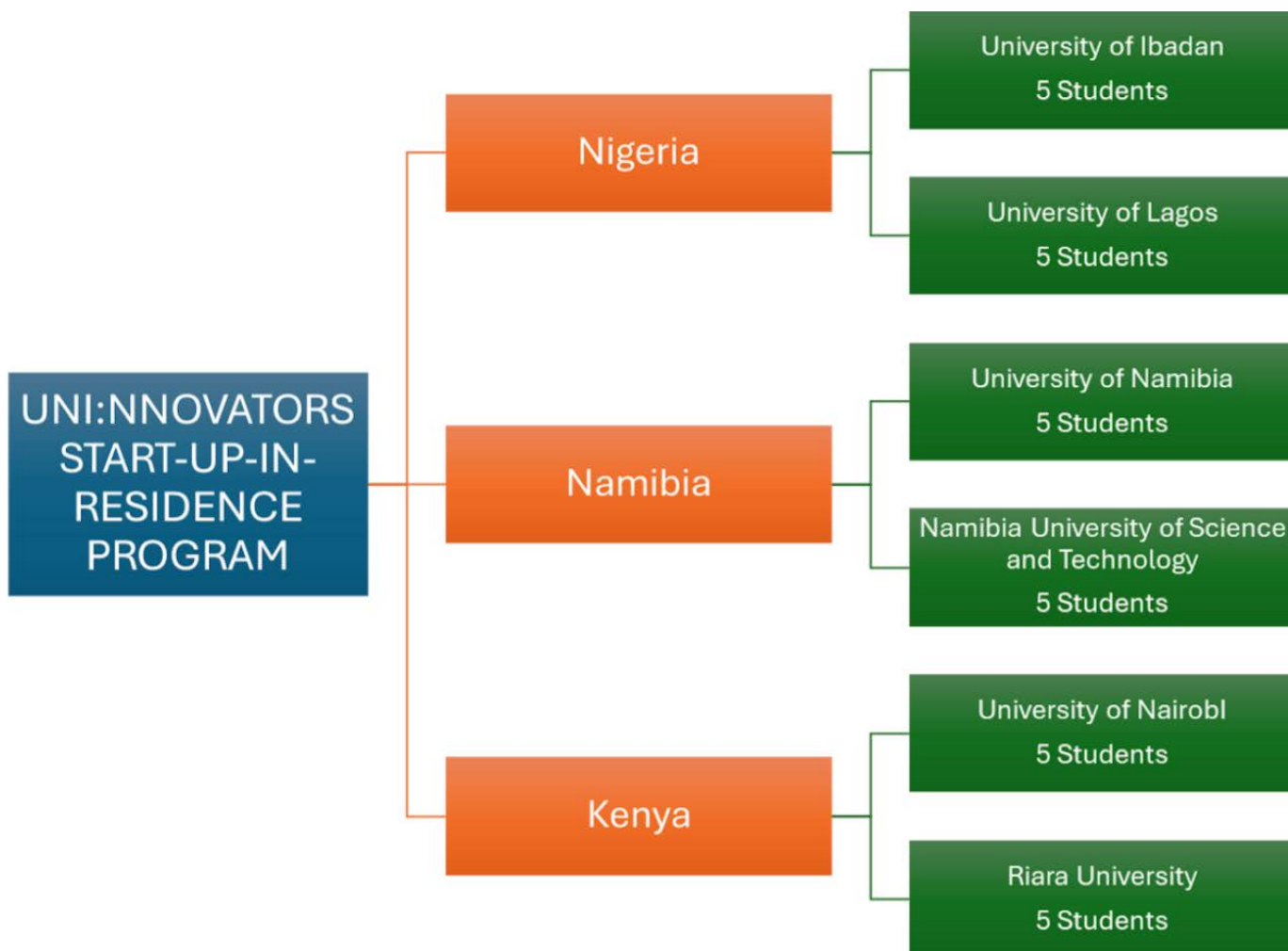
KNEIL's Masterplan for HEIs

As part of support gained from the British Council, the Kenyan Innovation Agency, KENIA, provided institutional strengthening support to higher education institutions, setting up in the process the Kenyan Network of Entrepreneurial Institutions Leaders. The network consists of a select 14 higher education institutions in the first instance whose leaders have committed to transforming their institutions into entrepreneurial institutions with a focus on fostering innovation and mainstreaming research commercialization within their universities. Beyond setting up the network, KENIA has also mandated each of the

institutions to draft a master plan and strategy for achieving stated goals within the next couple of years in alignment with their vision of becoming entrepreneurial institutions. In 2024, iHUB as a founding non-university member of the network has contributed to strengthening the master plans for members of the KNEIL network, especially for Riara University - a private university in Nairobi.

CcHUB's UNINNOVATORS

As part of the mission of CcHUB's HEI Innovation practice to foster a culture of innovation within higher education institutions on the continent, CcHUB - Africa's largest pan-African innovation center equally co-funded holistic program with Make IT in Africa supported by GIZ and the German Development Cooperation BMZ to implement the UNINNOVATORS Startups in Residence program.



The program supported 30 academic innovators from 6 higher education institutions in 3 African countries - Nigeria, Kenya, and Namibia - on the continent to develop innovative prototypes tackling problems across five focus areas. These sectoral focus areas include agriculture, energy, healthcare, circular economy, and water and sanitation. Over 12 months, selected academic innovators which included masters and PhD researchers and exceptional undergraduate students went through various phases of direct innovation support which included a design sprint phase, a research fellowship in partnership with a European university - Charite University, Berlin, and a knowledge exchange program to innovation enablers in Berlin, business formalization processes and a go-to-market incubation phase that included seed funding to build minimum viable products for their companies.

Other Notable Interventions

The Innovation for African Universities Programme by the British Council provided funding for universities and innovation intermediaries to implement projects that directly provided various kinds of innovation support for researchers, academics, innovation managers, and students. This program also worked directly with higher education institutions in the United Kingdom and fostered partnerships and learnings from the UK's innovation ecosystem and the roles that HEIs played.

Development Institutions like the African Development Bank and the UK's Foreign and Commonwealth Development Office have also consistently invested in innovation capacity-building programs for innovation managers and leaders of academic institutions. The RISA Fund has also focused on the commercialization of innovations from within universities and supporting intellectual property management structures through the Research to Commercialisation (R2C) Project, implemented by Viktoria Ventures.

Building HEI Innovation Ecosystems

Another emerging trend is the cultivation of strong innovation ecosystems focused on shaping narratives, fostering collaborations, and strengthening systems that support innovation journeys from research output or business ideas to products on the market. This cuts across a variety of focus areas especially as it relates to the actors with the social capital to influence change. These focus areas range from strengthening intellectual property management systems and policy both within academia and government to industry-academia collaboration on research and development projects/agreements and licensing intellectual property to fostering a stronger network of researchers for collaboration and capacity intervention purposes.

Case Studies: WIPO's IP Sessions, CcHUB's SUPARTECH Program, Regional RIMA Conferences

WIPO's IP Sessions

As earlier established, the enactment of the Bayh Doyle Act in the United States opened up a wave of incentives for universities to leverage the intellectual property assets owned by the university to be commercialized for the benefit of academic innovators. This necessitated the establishment of robust property rights policies that guaranteed the right rewards for innovators driving even further innovation and ultimately economic growth and advancement. In Africa, continuous calls continue to be made for the establishment of robust intellectual property protections to ensure that innovators within higher education institutions can benefit from their intellectual and innovative engagements kickstarting in the process the virtuous cycle that ultimately ends in economic growth and advancement for African society.

The African division of the World Intellectual Property office has continued to partner with entrepreneurship organizations and higher

education institutions to drive awareness of IP policies both within the university and within governments to ensure that internal policies are robust but also that IP for innovative research and products are adequately protected across the continent. Intercontinental partners like the Karlsruhe Institute of Technology have also worked with CcHUB's HEI Innovation Practice to drive awareness around IP topics within HEIs and academic innovators bringing their continental expertise to bear on how to advance and strengthen institutions.

CcHUB's SUPARTECH Program

Industry-academia linkages are one of three bi-directional interactions critical to the triple helix model for innovation to thrive in the national systems of innovation literature. As detailed above, challenges still exist in facilitating research and innovation-focused linkages between academia and industry, especially in critical focus areas where research and development are critical for new solutions to emerge. In early 2024, CcHUB's HEI Innovation practice began the pilot for the Startup University Partnerships for Advancing Research, Innovation, and Technology in Africa Program - SUPARTECH Program which focuses on facilitating research and development linkages between startups in critical research heavy sectors such as energy, healthcare, agriculture and biotech with university research groups with technical capacity that can meet these research and development needs. With the establishment of a close-knit community of

practice for academic researchers and innovators within these focal areas, the program identifies startups and research groups that could benefit from a mutual partnership. The pilot program has successfully facilitated a research and development agreement between the African University of Science and Technology's Battery Research Group and Zenoswap, a renewable energy startup in Nigeria, guaranteeing in the process, access to research output from the university to improve on their MVPs, landed assets for the mass production of their main product and access to pilot communities for the deployment of their projects within which the community is based.

Regional RIMA Platforms & Events

As research and innovation ecosystems have evolved in the past couple of years, academic researchers have set up research and innovation management associations that provide opportunities for networking, collaborating, and learning amongst researchers in the region. Notable among these groups are the West Africa Research and Innovation Management Association (WARIMA) and the South Africa Research and Innovation Management Association (SARIMA). Through consistent engagements via workshops (both physical and virtual) and conferences, these associations have created robust platforms for peer-to-peer learning and research collaborations. However, more efforts continue to be required to mainstream the culture of innovation through research within the institutions where members belong.



Crossing 7 Mountains

To ensure that higher education institutions are able to play this critical role of powering the future of Africa in line with stated goals and aspirations, there is a need to pay attention to solving and overcoming barriers that may pose a challenge to this reality.



1. Innovation Culture within HEIs

Higher Education Institutions in Africa, and especially sub-Saharan Africa are incentivized for teaching and publications and not necessarily innovation or innovative research. As faculty in most HEIs are rewarded for the number of publications published and not the impact of research translated into the market, a deep culture focused on teaching and writing is already

entrenched. This is evident in most disciplines and poses a barrier to mainstreaming a culture of innovation.

A criterion for higher education institutions that we worked with in the UNI:NNOVATORS Startups in Residence Program was the presence of an innovation hub on the university's campus.

While this was met, only one of the 6 universities on campus were students familiar with the innovation hub or center. This is even particular as most participants were already in their final year or already doing a postgraduate degree in the same university where they enrolled for their undergraduate program.

Mainstreaming a culture of innovation would require changing reward mechanisms for academia within higher education institutions on the continent to include indicators such as commercialized prototypes, IP licensing to Industry, or even spinoffs created or supported, together with already established incentives for publications and knowledge contributions to literature. Our libraries and shelves are rich with literature, but it's time to focus on translating knowledge into innovations that shape our future. Africa doesn't need more papers; it needs more progress.

2. Technology Transfer Management

While we can already establish that there are no issues with literature publishing research in our higher education institutions, it is clear that African HEIs do not have the capacity for technology transfer as most HEIs either do not have these offices set up or have set up departments and directorates that manage research grants and funding. In some other universities, intellectual property management offices and research grant offices are mandated with technology transfer within the university.

Well-staffed and well-resourced Technology Transfer Offices (TTOs) are critical to Africa's aspirations if we must leverage innovation to solve most of our critical problems.

3. R&D Culture within Industry

As we focus on improving innovation culture within our HEIs, we must also improve mainstream research and development culture within Africa's large corporations and position universities as

the centers where this knowledge creation and innovation development process must emerge from. Universities and other higher education institutions are largely perceived as talent development centers where corporations look to employees and nothing more. Challenges such as industry-relevant curricula are largely quoted as problems for why graduates are unemployable. While this is largely true, industry players miss the opportunity to engage with universities based on research and development agreements focused on their industry challenges which then impacts the curriculum being taught in schools.

We must reshape the narrative around our universities as just graduate-producing institutions but problem-solving and innovation centers able to impact on overall productivity of various industrial sectors.

4. Industry-Academia Linkages

Our fourth mountain is the dearth of linkages between industry and academia. This is largely connected to the earlier point on R&D culture within the industry and the overall perception of HEIs on the continent. Existing linkages have therefore focused on infrastructure development e.g. sponsoring innovation hubs set up, or career fairs. To buttress this point, 5 of the 6 universities we worked with in a program had direct financial support from various industry corporations to build and set up their innovation hubs. This has however not translated into any research and development agreements or collaborative projects. Academia-industry linkage has been shown to contribute economically and socially to development outcomes. From 1996 to 2013, it was found that [academia-industry patent licensing contributed up to \\$1.18 trillion to US gross industry output and up to 3,8324,000 jobs](#)

As part of ongoing research, we can deduce that this is also owed to a lack of capacity in handling research-related industry-academia partnerships on both ends. There is a dire need for capacitating higher education institutions and industry players, including startups building

various technological innovations in handling and executing fruitful partnerships. Beyond capacitating stakeholders for linkages, African governments must incentivize these partnerships, measure indicators that point to impactful innovations, and reward these engagements either through fiscal incentives or match-funding such initiatives..

5. Intellectual Property Management

To ensure that innovators and researchers are encouraged beyond academic career incentives for innovative research and commercialized products, intellectual property regimes both within the university, within the regions, and on the continent have to be robust and implementable. While most universities have varying policies on intellectual property in their institutions, researchers are mostly not aware of these policies, are finding it difficult to apply the policies to their innovative endeavors, or are outrightly not following the university's policies.

Beyond the universities, African countries also have weak IP policy environments and systems where innovation claims filed either as copyrights, trademarks, or patents are both too costly and mostly unenforceable. This leads most innovators to consider the Western filing of patents and innovations.

6. Funding for MVP Development

By far the most relatable mountain that requires crossing to researchers and innovators within academia is the unavailability of funding for translating a research output into a working prototype that can be showcased to potential investors or industry players with interest in the sector. At CcHUB's HEI Innovation Practice and with support from partners like the African Development Bank, GIZ, and British Council amongst others, we have provided seed funding for the development of more than 40 prototypes

of research-based innovations across 10 universities. In the UNI:NNOVATORS Program, this extended to business formalization support and bank account openings for the spinouts.

There is a huge gap in funding available for innovators to build out a minimum viable prototype and this needs to be addressed, most especially at a governmental level. Industry players can also fund these initiatives, especially relating to innovations that impact their bottom line.

7. Valley of Death - MVP to Market

The valley of death is largely the period in the lifecycle of a startup where most startups fail. For academic innovators and inventions, getting a functioning minimum viable product to market is a huge valley of death for most innovations. This is a clear challenge that we continue to grapple with in the programs that we have executed to support innovation from higher education institutions. In the critical instances where we've seen innovations built and clearly with the potential to change lives and disrupt industry sectors, it's been a challenge to see the innovations become successful businesses.

We have therefore introduced hands-on support to include business formalization, bank account opening, and investment mixers, both locally and internationally as part of activities that beneficiaries of our programs have access to. More however needs to be done, including - providing access to enough funding for promising prototypes beyond the seed stage to prove product-market fit and enabling industry offtake of innovations into existing business models or outright spin-outs backed by corporations.



Recommendations

To ensure that higher education institutions (HEIs) in Africa can power the continent's future, several barriers must be addressed. One of the most significant challenges is the entrenched culture within many HEIs, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa, that incentivizes teaching and publications over innovation and research commercialization. Faculty members are often rewarded for the number of academic papers published rather than for translating research into market-ready innovations. This focus on academic output has led to a disconnect between research and real-world application, contributing to a deep-rooted culture that prioritizes theory over practice.

Changing this requires a fundamental shift in how academic performance is measured. Governments, working closely with universities, must create new reward structures that encourage not only publications but also research outcomes that can be commercialized. Faculty members should be recognized for their work in producing commercialized prototypes, licensing intellectual property (IP) to industry, and supporting spin-offs that emerge from their research. This approach would provide the motivation needed to shift focus from simply filling libraries with papers to driving progress through practical innovation. Africa does not need more academic papers—it needs more tangible solutions that address its challenges and contribute to its growth.

In this effort, entrepreneurship support organizations can play a pivotal role. These

organizations have the expertise to work with universities to design frameworks that prioritize innovation and track commercialization metrics. They can also help bridge the gap between academia and industry by facilitating partnerships that transform research into impactful, market-ready products. This shift will not happen overnight, but by involving organizations skilled in innovation transfer, African HEIs can start laying the groundwork for a more innovation-driven academic culture.

Another critical challenge is the lack of robust technology transfer mechanisms within African universities. While many HEIs excel at producing research, few have the capacity to move these innovations into the marketplace. In some institutions, technology transfer is managed by research grant offices or IP management departments, which often lack the specialized skills needed to handle technology commercialization effectively. As a result, groundbreaking research remains confined within academic walls, unable to benefit the broader society.

To address this, organizations with expertise in technology transfer should collaborate with universities to build well-resourced and well-staffed Technology Transfer Offices (TTOs). These offices would serve as the critical bridge between academic research and industry application, helping researchers navigate the complex process of patenting, licensing, and commercialization. These organizations can also

offer training to university staff, ensuring that TTOs are equipped to handle the challenges of taking research from the lab to the market. Additionally, they can provide access to networks of investors, legal experts, and industry partners who can further support the commercialization process.

The lack of research and development (R&D) culture within African industry is another challenge that must be addressed. Large corporations often view universities as talent pipelines, rather than as centers for innovation. This narrow view overlooks the potential for universities to contribute significantly to industrial growth through research partnerships. Industry players frequently criticize university curricula for being disconnected from real-world needs, leading to graduates who are deemed unemployable. While this criticism is valid, it misses the larger opportunity: universities and industries can work together to co-create solutions through R&D collaborations that address industry challenges and inform the curriculum.

To foster these collaborations, governments must incentivize R&D partnerships between industry and academia. Tax incentives, grants, and innovation funding schemes can encourage industries to invest in joint research projects with universities. Innovation support organizations can serve as facilitators of these partnerships, helping identify areas where academic expertise aligns with industry needs and brokering R&D agreements. By fostering a culture of co-creation between HEIs and industries, these organizations can help reshape the narrative around universities from talent factories to innovation hubs capable of solving pressing industrial challenges.

The challenge of bridging the gap between academia and industry also highlights the need for stronger linkages between the two. While some progress has been made—such as companies sponsoring the creation of innovation hubs on university campuses—these initiatives have often failed to translate into meaningful

research and development partnerships. A more strategic approach is needed, one that goes beyond infrastructure development and focuses on building capacity for both academia and industry to collaborate effectively.



One key step is capacitating both sides for meaningful partnerships. Innovation support organizations can offer training programs to equip university staff and industry leaders with the skills needed to engage in productive R&D collaborations. These organizations can help universities better understand industry needs and priorities, while also helping companies navigate academic research processes. By facilitating these connections, they can help ensure that partnerships result in tangible innovations that benefit both sides.

In addition to improving partnerships, addressing the funding gap for translating research into market-ready products is crucial. For many innovators within academia, the unavailability of funding to develop minimum viable prototypes (MVPs) is a significant barrier. While some initiatives, such as the CcHUB's HEI Innovation Practice, have provided seed funding for academic innovators, there remains a significant shortfall in the funding needed to move research from the lab to the marketplace.

Governments must step in to fill this gap by establishing national innovation funds that support early-stage prototypes. However, entrepreneurship support organizations can manage these funds and offer additional support, such as mentoring and investment readiness programs. These organizations can also help secure private sector investment, ensuring that academic innovators have access to the resources they need to develop MVPs that can attract industry interest and investor backing.

The journey from MVP to market—often referred to as the “valley of death” for startups—

is another significant hurdle for academic innovators. Even when a promising prototype is developed, many startups fail to secure the funding and partnerships needed to bring their product to market. This is particularly true in academic settings, where researchers may lack the business acumen required to commercialize their innovations.

Entrepreneurship support organizations can provide critical assistance to HEI innovators during this phase by offering business development services, facilitating investment matchmaking, and mentoring academic startups. These organizations can create platforms where academic startups can connect with investors and industry partners, helping them secure the resources they need to navigate the valley of death. Furthermore, they can work with corporations to facilitate the offtake of academic innovations into existing business models or support spin-offs backed by corporate partners.

By addressing these key challenges—mainstreaming innovation culture, strengthening technology transfer systems, fostering industry-academia partnerships, filling funding gaps, and supporting startups through the valley of death—African higher education institutions can become engines of innovation that drive the continent's socioeconomic progress. With the support of entrepreneurship and innovation organizations, HEIs can transform their research outputs into solutions that not only address Africa's challenges but also position the continent as a leader in global innovation.



Conclusion

Africa missed out on the first, second, and third industrial revolutions and has largely evolved as consumers of the technology and innovation that is powering societies and improving living conditions. Beyond just being consumers, innovation has also focused on majorly solving the challenges prevalent in these societies leaving Africa behind in the process. Africa still battles with diseases like malaria and typhoid - diseases known to be prevalent in tropical geographical areas.

While the wastage of processed food is a surplus problem in the West, Africa still struggles to save 50% of its harvest before even getting into the value chain. While progress is being made through various interventions, it has become really clear that Africa must pursue a path of science, technology, and innovation to improve living conditions for its 1.4 billion people just like other societies have.

Above all, enabling the transformation of HEIs into innovative and entrepreneurial institutions contributing to the overall innovation ecosystem and prosperity in Africa will require working directly with innovation intermediaries and experienced innovation support organizations. With over 14 years of supporting innovators to

build tech startups and innovative organizations that continue to impact various sectors and a track record of supporting higher education institutions to plug into this ecosystem and play a critical role, CcHUB stands out in this regard, amongst a host of other organizations.

As opposed to traditional management consultants, innovation intermediaries and Entrepreneurial Support Organisations versed in academic research and the knowledge of how innovation births prosperity in societies are required for this transition. The job to be done will be to ensure that universities can transform their structures, systems, and processes to embrace this role, build their capacity to deliver, and ultimately catalyze innovation that changes African society for the better.

Finally, the role that our higher education institutions have to play in pursuing this path cannot be overstated and must not be underestimated. African leaders must understand this, adopt this as a national philosophy for development, continuously restate the role that academia has in this approach, and deploy resources accordingly.



About CcHUB

Co-Creation Hub is the largest innovation hub in Africa. In 2010, we started out as Nigeria's premier innovation centre dedicated to accelerating the application of social capital and technology for economic prosperity in Nigeria. We have since grown our physical presence to five cities (Lagos, Abuja, Ijebu-Ode, Kigali and Nairobi) across Africa and we work closely with stakeholders - including entrepreneurs, civil society organizations, government and private sector to identify and nurture novel solutions to social challenges in Africa.






In February 2019, Co-Creation Hub opened a Design Lab and Research & Development Centre in Kigali, Rwanda focused on innovating for social impact. Our Kigali Centre collaborates with global stakeholders to explore the application of technology to solve Africa's systemic problems in public health, education and governance. In September 2019, we acquired iHUB in Nairobi, Kenya. This expansion plan was intentional in realising our vision to be Africa's foremost innovation centre.

Since establishment, CcHUB has supported the development and launch of more than 650 innovative technology startups solving social challenges in Nigeria and Kenya in areas including budget transparency, physical fitness, education, fintech, healthcare delivery and sustainability. Some enterprises that we have supported include BudgIT, Grid, Doctoora, Wecyclers, LifeBank, Treplabs, Lara.ng, Apprue, Crop2Cash, Curacel and more.

HEI Innovation Practice is a division of CcHUB focused on the mission of fostering a culture of innovation within higher education institutions in Africa and developing their capacity to contribute to economic prosperity. This mission is carried out through (i) nurturing the growth of student and academic innovators with cutting-edge know-how to solve complex problems through innovation (ii) reshaping the perception of HEIs and their role in society, positioning them as key drivers of economic development through innovation (iii) advancing the capabilities of HEIs to contribute to the emerging innovation ecosystem in Africa, and (iv) building the capacity of African HEIs to participate in collaborative research projects with local and international partners

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