

# POLICY BRIEF

## BUILDING FOUNDATIONS OF INCLUSION & PROGRESS: UNDERSTANDING GENDER EQUITY FOR HIGHER EDUCATION STAKEHOLDER RELATIONS IN AFRICA

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### Executive Summary

This policy brief summarizes the gender equity component of the applied research undertaken in 2012 during the third component of the *Strengthening Higher Education Stakeholder Relations in Africa* (SHESRA) Project. The policy brief presents the emerging themes of a participatory study with 23 member institutions and posits that the state of gender equity in African higher education remains a significant sustainability issue, compounded by persisting confusion around gender terminology and the challenges associated with investigating the topic within the higher education sector. It should be noted that through the SHESRA partnership with the AUCC, this study is the Association of African Universities' first attempt to conduct a representative investigation of female representation and gender equity with its vast and growing membership base of more than 278 universities. While the study is not intended to be an exhaustive account of gender equity issues affecting higher education institutions in Africa – including specific narratives of discrimination and violence – it began to make the connection between issues of gender equity and the sustainable development of ethical partnerships with external stakeholder communities. The themes of this study, the documented challenges, and recommendations proposed will serve as a preliminary policy advocacy tool to assist universities in creating the *conditions for equity* in their local environments and spheres of influence.

### Background: Women in higher education & information needs

Global inequity between the education of men and women has been internationally recognized as a human rights and development challenge for several years. This recognition has been manifested through several international accords, including the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (1979); Education for All (1990); the Beijing Platform for Action (1995); the Dakar Framework for Action (2000); the Commonwealth Plan for Action for Gender Equality (2005-2015); regional protocols such as the African Union's Gender Policy (2009); and sub-regional protocols such as the Southern African Development Community's (SADC) Protocol on Gender and Development (2008-2015). Most notably, the international community met at the Millennium Summit of the United Nations in 2000 to adopt the United Nations Millennium Declaration (Resolution 55/2) in September 2000 and subsequently the 8 Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

MDG 2 specifically targets basic education by committing member states to "achieve universal primary education" by 2015, whereas MDG 3 commits member states to "promote gender equality and empower women". Despite reports of progress towards Goals 2 and 3 in terms of primary and secondary education in developing regions, global progress is not being realized in tertiary education – particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa as seen in the region's worsening Gender Parity Index for gross enrolment in tertiary education between 1999 and 2010 (see Figure 1).

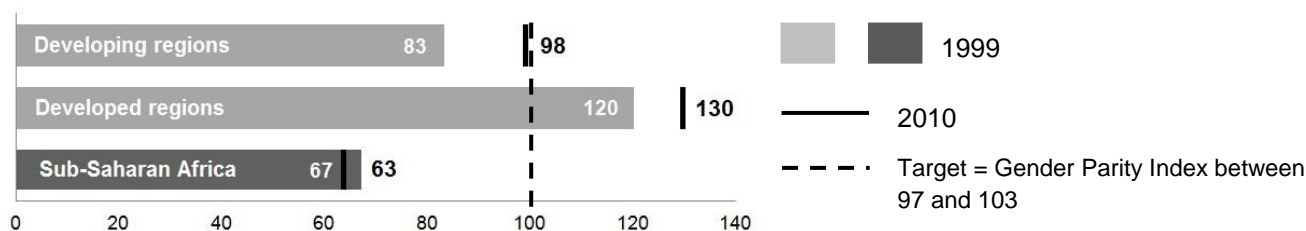


Figure 1: Gender Parity Index for gross enrolment ratios in tertiary education (United Nations, 2012)

In this case, the Gender Parity Index is measuring female school enrolment ratio in relation to male school enrolment ratio. The index figures represent the number of females per 100 males; therefore any index lower or higher than 100 indicates a gendered gap in tertiary enrolment.

Education for women in Africa has faced a hard tide with a history of conservative patriarchal customs, the elitist residual heritage of colonialism, and tribal cultures that have contributed to the marginalization of females in higher education and education planning (Anzia, 2007; Mama, 2003). International organisations have made various attempts to numerically capture and quantitatively research gender inequity in African higher education using a combination of different measurements. However, the reality of the data environment is that this information is not consistently available even within the United Nations system and at best, policy-makers rely on estimation procedures characterized by irregular national census data collection and low levels of national birth registration completeness. Other research has focused on *qualitative* trends in higher education such as pedagogical development, institutional cultures, and female experiences from the early post-colonial era in the 1960s up to date. Editors of such publications consistently note that the depth of the problems caused by inequalities in education and knowledge production in Africa necessitate the continuation and expansion of this case study work to respond to a severe absence of representative data (Mama & Barnes, 2007).

This applied research study is premised on the notion that for African universities to effectively maximize their engagement with a full diversity of external stakeholders and to sustainably contribute to the continent's development as enablers of change, there is a need to understand the *socially constructed relationships between men and women* (gender) within the higher education sector. The underlying purpose of this study was to investigate the internal state of gender equity within universities and the internal conditions that enable or challenge ethical and sustainable partnerships with stakeholder communities. In particular, there was an identified need to explore the basic state of female representation (staff and students); governance mechanisms that guide institutional planning; policy development; pedagogy and learning strategies; and institutions' readiness to systematically understand and respond to gender issues.

## Methodology

Through the situational analyses of member universities, the study explored university capacity for the internal conditions and practices recommended by the AAU Gender Toolkit (2006) towards the development of sustainable external relationships. Quantitative and qualitative information was gathered through 5 data collection phases that included the following: (1) the development of a working definition of gender equity; (2) the administration of a survey questionnaire for institution leaders (Rectors, Vice-Chancellors, and Presidents); (3) a pilot survey questionnaire for institution staff at the managerial level (Deans, Directresses, Directors); (4) one pilot external stakeholder survey targeting groups with an interest in women and development ; and (5) a review of policy documents provided by participating universities.



## What is gender equity?

A review of gender equity literature in Africa and the AAU Gender Toolkit was conducted for the development of an appropriate working definition of gender equity in the context of African higher education. *Gender equity* can be considered a component of gender equality that recognizes that many societies are organized in ways that make it difficult to organize and plan for simple and mechanical equality in inputs and quantities of resources. Regardless of the differences in the gender divisions of labour, resources, opportunities, treatment, potential and other factors, the *rewards* accruing to men and women for similar work, skills, and knowledge should be of the same quality and reflect the inputs they have contributed. Gender equity can be considered a policy concept which places emphasis on the redistribution of resources between women and men in a way that addresses the asymmetries in investment and capacities of women and men. Gender equity strategies are those that recognise that in order to promote equality between women and men – *within* and *through* education – special measures may be required to redress prior inequalities that have constrained women's access to and utilization of resources on an equal basis with men. It should be noted that the meaning of basic terms like women's rights, gender equality, and *gender equity* vary in interpretation and application across different African countries. Furthermore, the relevance of national gender commitments and goals built around these concepts is not always well connected to planning activities in different sectors, including the African higher education sector. Within the context of higher education in Africa and for the purposes of this study, gender equity was conceptualized as the equitable (or fair) access and enjoyment of higher education opportunities/benefits by both men and women.

## Results

A total of 23 member universities representing all regions of Africa participated in the leadership survey, including 7 Anglophone universities, 6 Francophone, and 10 bilingual universities (Anglo-Franco, Anglo-Arabic, Franco-other). The pilot survey targeting Deans and Directors within the same participating universities investigated the efficacy, logistics, and basic themes related to the collection of sex disaggregated data and conditions at the faculty level. This pilot management level survey also collected additional perspectives on university policy and activities to probe important lines of inquiry for future faculty-level research. Six Deans or authorized representatives from 4 universities participated (2 bilingual Anglo-Franco, 2 Anglophone). The pilot external stakeholder survey collected qualitative perspectives from a pool of 5 external stakeholder organizations to understand how their motivations for partnerships aligned with university motivations, and what they consider the challenges and opportunities of working with universities to be.

## Emerging Themes & Conclusions

### *i. Imbalances in vertical & horizontal representation*

The development of sustainable and equitable partnerships requires appropriate human capital within universities and the basic presence of individuals who have the ability and willingness to follow-through with social change within the institutional culture. Female representation was observed to be unbalanced in the vertical hierarchy of the university as shown in Figure 2. Although there was a general imbalance of male and female academic staff, imbalances were more noticeable in certain faculties/academic units, demonstrating a horizontal imbalance by discipline. Across the 23 universities sampled, the subject areas that consistently had less than 20% female representation amongst teaching staff were faculties of technology, studies of the built environment (architecture, engineering, road/building construction), natural sciences, business-related studies (economics, public administration, and commerce), and development studies.



Figure 2: Average female representation in the university hierarchies (October 2012)

| Type of internal stakeholder                      | % of female representation |
|---|----------------------------|
| Enrolled students                                 | 38%                        |
| Non-academic staff (Administrative/support staff) | 42%                        |
| Academic (teaching/research) staff                | 22%                        |
| External partnerships planning unit *             | 42%                        |
| Research & development planning unit *            | 30%                        |
| Governing body for institution-wide decisions     | 16%                        |

*Note: 4 of the 23 universities did not have a research & development planning unit. Two universities did not have external partnership planning units, while 2 other universities indicated that they did not have such a unit because partnerships are made by the Rector's office and at the faculty level.*

## **ii. Differing institutional cultures & inconsistent data collection practices**

Some universities demonstrated an institutional awareness of inequality and inequity between men, women, and other groups within their environments, and gender-responsive strategies through organizational structure, policy, or a combination of both. Differing ideas about higher education and citizenship in institutional cultures have resulted in varying orientations to what constitutes the notion of equity and how unequal representation should be addressed. For example, *equity* in the South African context has included the consideration of *race* as well as gender divisions in terms of restricted access and benefit to education, due to the historical discrimination on the basis of race and language within the apartheid education system. As part of one of the strategic thrusts of the Institutional Transformation Plan of the University of Johannesburg, the Transformation Office prepares a regular “Culture Index” by conducting a Culture Survey every 3 years to determine if transformation interventions are working. Whereas at Addis Ababa University, officials identified that there existed a need to institutionalize women and gender issues, and created the Gender Office in 2008 that represents the University’s contribution to national strategies that stem from the 1993 National Policy on Women.

Different institutional cultures also translated into different data collection practices; a barometer for the level of recognition of gender equity within the sample of institutions studied was the essential practice of monitoring disaggregated student attrition (the number of male and female students dropping out or not completing their studies). The general practice of monitoring student attrition was not universal for the universities studied and attrition numbers were not consistently collected by sex: of the 15 universities that reported the collection of attrition data, only 13 reported that it is disaggregated by sex.

## **iii. Enabling environments: differing national gender agendas & conditions**

The extent to which institutions can sensitively respond to unequal representation and participation, and inequitable education outcomes is affected by the national socio-political environment in which they operate. The reality in many of the African countries studied is that there exist different enabling environments for gender equity in all sectors. In short, not every country has a national gender policy that is being actively implemented in the education sector as that of the Government of Ethiopia, a national Gender Audit Methodology such as that produced by the Government of Rwanda, or the requisite legal basis for the education of young women that feed into universities. The realities raise important discourses to reflect on as universities engage stakeholders: *who is the source of change?* Are universities *influencing* or *following* government and social policies? To what extent can universities autonomously set their own agenda and to what extent do they rely on external stakeholders (both public and private)? How do the factors of autonomy and actions of external stakeholder influence equity in higher education? Only 3 universities in the study reported that state funding was *not* a major source of funding for their operations during the period of 2006-2011, suggesting that many institutions (whether officially public or private in status) are financially accountable to the state and its policies to some extent.



#### iv. Development of responsive institutional policies, strategies, & practices

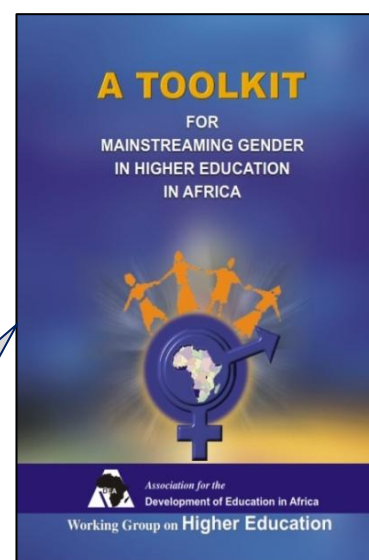
The implementation of sensitive practices that change institutional activities (including both internal and external stakeholder relations) requires a formal commitment and systemization of efforts by institution decision-makers. All 23 participating universities indicated that their institutions are committed to the equitable access and enjoyment of higher education opportunities/benefits by both men and women (the definition of *gender equity* in the context of higher education). However, 8 of them reported that this commitment is not formally expressed by the institution in any way. The remaining 15 institutions reported that their commitment to gender equity was formally expressed to varying degrees, most commonly through human resource management policy, student enrolment policy, and strategic plans.

In this way, institutional policy approaches to gender equity fell along a spectrum, with some integrating female enrolment targets into strategic plans and others taking a more *transformative* approach to agenda setting. While only 2 universities had developed a gender equity policy, some universities indicated that they were currently developing key policy instruments to this effect, with at least one university confirming it was in the process of developing a policy on gender equity. Stand-alone gender equity policies are emerging

as effective tools to formally communicate standards for female representation and participation by higher education institutions. However, a participant who responded on behalf of a Tanzanian university which reported the establishment of such a gender equity policy raised discontent with the attitude that the establishment of a policy will sufficiently solve gender equity. She stated:

**“women need more than a policy to excel.”**

The *Toolkit for Mainstreaming Gender in Higher Education* (2006) is an excellent resource for information on gender terminology, concepts, and reflective questions for university staff. For a free copy of the Toolkit and more information, visit [www.aau.org](http://www.aau.org).



#### v. Unique perspectives from management

Despite the small size of the sample for the management pilot survey (6 Deans/Directors), the preliminary findings produced should not be overlooked as the respondents were found to have significant insight on the evolution of their institutions: the respondents had all spent a notable number of years working within their respective institutions (average 20 years). In terms of the vertical representation of female staff within the academic units sampled, the positions of female academic staff read like a pyramid, with women disproportionately over-represented in administrative functions (average female administrative/support staff proportion across the sampled units was 61.6% in 2011) with smaller numbers of female lecturers that lessened with each seniority level. There were interesting similarities and discrepancies noted between the responses of Deans working at the same university, and between the Deans' responses and those of their institution leaders. These discrepancies were around the type of disaggregated student data collected at the Faculty level, policy awareness, and the intended outcomes for future external partnerships. Deans and Directors indicated that the intended outcomes of future partnerships would centre around the creation of educational and professional development opportunities for staff and students, as well as the sharing of research expertise. Institution leaders shared management's primary interest in the creation of educational/professional development opportunities, but favoured the securement of financial



support as the second most important intended outcome of future partnerships. These similar and divergent expectations for future partnerships have gender equity implications.

#### ***vi. Challenges of partnering with African universities***

Through a pilot survey, five higher education stakeholder organizations with an interest in women and development in Africa (at the local, national, and international level) described the opportunities and challenges of partnering with African universities. The stakeholders' interests with regards to building future partnerships with universities aligned with those identified by the universities themselves – a positive point. However, the external stakeholders also identified several foreseeable challenges of collaborating with African universities at the local, national, and international level. The five challenges identified have connections to gender issues and included the creation of possible conflicts of interest when working with faculty members and students in unauthorized ways; unclear communication channels and distance; different standards for research and service ethics; corruption and political instability within universities; and a lack of information capacity.

#### ***viii. Logistical & ethical challenges of gender equity research in higher education***

To better understand the future of gender equity in higher education, the findings and scope of this study must be contextualized within the realities of the research environment. During the collection of primary and secondary data, several methodological and logistical challenges were encountered limiting the completion of a truly representative study of the AAU's 278 member institutions (membership total as of October 2012). These limitations included: the availability of sex disaggregated data; balancing the sophistication of information needed with an unfamiliarity of gender issues; dynamic socio-political environments that prevented or limited institutional participation (e.g. strikes and conflict); and the sensitive, potentially damaging nature of some lines of inquiry associated with male and female relations in university settings.

## **Future Opportunities & Recommendations**

The magnitude and diversity of higher education institutions in Africa and their unique challenges demand much more thorough research on the topic of gender equity. The following are opportunities and recommendations for future gender equity research and policy advocacy:

### ***University-led situational analysis***

As demonstrated by the thorough and insightful Gender Baseline Survey and Audit of the National University of Rwanda in 2010, universities are in the best position to appropriately consult stakeholders within their institutional culture and outside community. Adopting leadership roles for the pursuit of localized gender equity research would enable universities to develop their own concept of gender equity and ethics; improve data collection at the institutional and faculty level; investigate internal issues that are *highly* sensitive in nature (e.g. sexual harassment, “sexually transmitted grades”, student prostitution, HIV/AIDS); and support institutional awareness and ownership of any subsequent policy initiatives or relationships. Whether this necessitates the creation of gender specific *academic* units; gender specific *administrative* units; improved internal monitoring of university populations; increased staff development and training; the integration of gender equity into planning procedures; or the development of transformative equity policies, *universities must lead* with internal reflection to maximize their capacity to work sustainably with external partners.

### ***Collaborative research between multinational organizations***

There is still a significant lack of quantitative, sex-disaggregated data which limits the ability to conduct longitudinal analysis and macro development planning. Future collaboration and



data-sharing between national governments, UN agencies (e.g. UNESCO), the World Bank, the International Association of Universities, the Association of African Universities (AAU), and its member institutions would enable all stakeholders to better understand the long-term challenges and opportunities around gender equity in education. With over 950 recognized institutions of higher education located in 51 different African states in 2010, this constitutes a major opportunity for collaboration where national capacity is limited.

### ***Assessing the capacity for pedagogical innovation***

The Institution Leadership Survey indicated that very few universities had distinct programmes of study dedicated to gender topics and the pilot Institution Dean/Director/Directress Survey suggested that academic teaching units rely on individual faculty members to integrate gender as sub-topics in course material (e.g. law courses) or other programmes of study (e.g. law programmes). More information is needed on what learning formats are most effective for men and women and the advancement of equity, and the gender implications of alternative learning formats that foster experiential learning (e.g. internships) and improve employment post graduation.

### ***Cross-cutting research to broaden our understanding of gender equity***

Although gender equity is often misconstrued as “women’s issues” as noted by the literature, university respondents, and external stakeholders, there is much to be gained from re-examining the issue from different feminist perspectives, including the “ethic of care”. Through the broad lens of the ethic of care, gender equity in higher education can be conceptualized to include research and planning that responds to ethical standards, conflict and violence, disability and discrimination, environmental stewardship, and exploitation affecting men, women, and children.

### ***Research with the private, public, and NGO sectors***

Universities hold the leadership responsibility to look for partners, wherever possible, who are interested in investigating gender equity issues to enhance equitable development in a broader sense. However, one of the current limiting factors of this process is the multiplicity and lack of knowledge on different women’s rights and interest groups. During the course of this study, it was common to uncover new, relevant stakeholders that specialize in gender relations and who could be effective partners for member universities. Examples include the Africa Women Lawyers Association, the Women’s Coalition of Zimbabwe, and Make Every Woman Count. Further research led by the AAU with different sectors has the potential to build a visible network of social justice stakeholders for university-industry interaction and also for the development of partnerships between *all* stakeholders.

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