



Growth Options for Australian Higher Education in Africa

POLICY RESEARCH BRIEF

Honorary Professor Hamish Coates | Australian National University

Associate Professor David Mickler | Curtin University

Professor Christopher Isike | University of Pretoria



Australian
National
University



Curtin University



HE
FL



Executive Brief

- The emerging dynamics of Africa's higher education and research sector are diverse, complex and of global significance
- Australia's engagement with Africa in the higher education and research sector needs a rapid and large boost
- Through a targeted strategy that places higher education and research as a key pillar of engagement, substantial mutual benefits can be generated for both continents

"The emerging dynamics of Africa's higher education and research sector are of expanding global significance"

The emerging dynamics of Africa's higher education and research sector are of expanding global significance and are characterised by diversity and complexity across the continent's systems and cultures, substantial and rapidly growing demand for higher education, opportunities for impactful collaboration in innovative and comparative research, and opening to international partnerships under conditions of respect, equality and mutual benefit.

A range of international partners, including from established and emerging powers, have been deeply involved in Africa's higher education sector, yet Australia's interactions with Africa have been more limited in the face of Canberra's primary focus over recent decades on the Asia-Pacific.

In a rapidly changing global environment in which both geopolitical and higher education sector relationships are being recast, Australia should position higher education and research sector engagement as a central pillar of a new national strategy for Australia-Africa relations. Key opportunities for mutual benefit can be realised but doing so requires a strategic and sustained enhancement of Australia's knowledge and policy infrastructure.

Africa, Australia and Global Higher Education

Australia and Africa occupy increasingly important positions within the contemporary international system. Both possess substantial natural resources, strategic geopolitical significance, expanding regional influence, and growing roles in global governance. Yet despite these convergences, higher education collaboration between Australia and African countries remains comparatively limited. Why is this the case, and what pathways towards higher education collaboration and academic diplomacy can be pursued to foster knowledge-driven engagements between the two continents?

This briefing interrogates this paradox and explores pathways through which Australia–Africa higher education engagement might be expanded, institutionalised, and strategically aligned in the coming decades. It teases out insights for people in Australia, Africa, and broader international audiences by shedding light on the current multilateral state of sectoral play and on what is going on in Africa. The goal is to unite these lines of inquiry and offer insights into how these two continents might accelerate, align and augment shared higher education contributions.

We first contextualise the evolving landscape of African higher education and identify key regional hubs of institutional growth and research development. We then evaluate the current state of Australia–Africa engagement across diplomatic, economic, and educational domains. In the next section, we contextualise the argument for why, despite notable constraints, African higher education is flourishing in ways that can foster collaboration between the two regions. The following section builds on this to propose some strategic growth options for Australian higher education institutions and policymakers seeking to deepen engagement with African partners in ways that are sustainable, mutually beneficial, and geopolitically significant. The article concludes with suggested next steps for Australia to tap into the opportunities Africa offers for engagement. This can position higher education as a central pillar of a new national strategy for Australia–Africa relations.

Africa is a vast continent with a total land area more than four times the size of Australia, yet its great diversity means generalisations should be made carefully. Figure 1 shows a map revealing the major emerging higher education hubs as we detail below.



Figure 1: Africa with major higher education hubs

The continent is usually divided into northern, western, central, eastern and southern subregions, with its substantial global diaspora comprising Africa's 'sixth region'. The United Nations recognises 54 sovereign states which are characterised more than anything else by their diversity. Many Australians cannot place more than a handful at best. Africa has many of the world's poorest countries by GDP, many of the richest in terms of natural and human resources, and many rapidly ascending the income ranks. Demographically, there are over 1.55 billion people in Africa with around 60 per cent under 25 years of age. It is the world's fastest growing continent (Figure 2) with a forecast population of 2.5 billion in 2050 and is projected by the end of the century to rival Asia as the world's most populous region.

Many doctoral studies are required to design, articulate and sustain what is very likely the world's fastest growing higher education region. There are around 1,300 universities dotted across the African continent. Every country has universities, but higher education is increasingly concentrating in several hubs. Egypt and Morocco are notable higher education centres in the north, Senegal, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana and Nigeria in the west, Rwanda, Mauritius and Kenya in the east, and Botswana, and South Africa in the south. Relatively little is known in Australia about African higher education and its universities, compared with Europe, North America and Asia. Our analysis in this briefing focuses on eastern and southern Africa, which are likely of most immediate interest to Australia due to more favourable geography, language ties and connectivity.

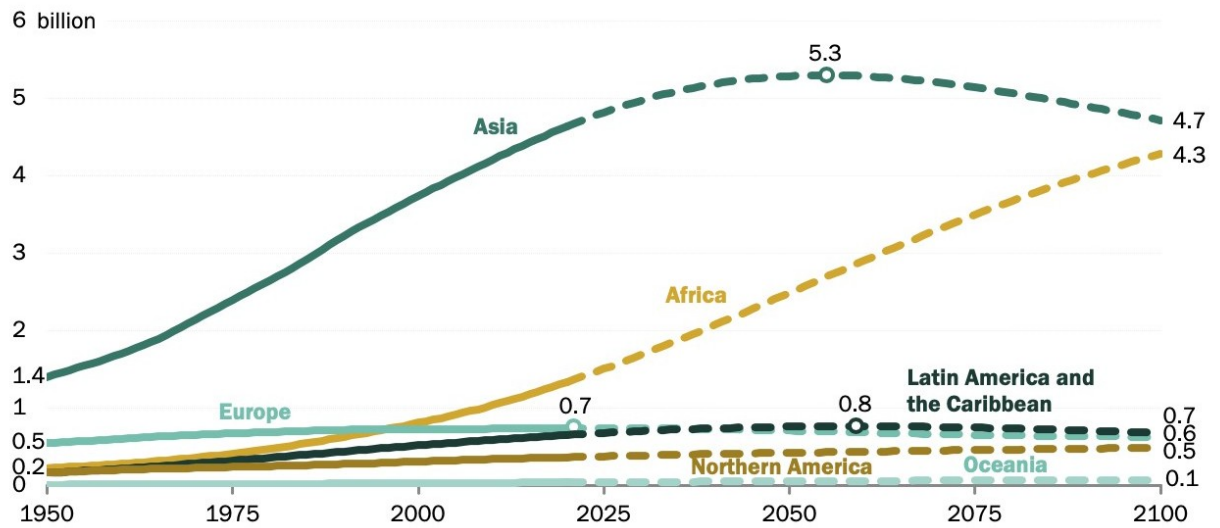


Figure 2: World population region growth projection, 1950-2100
Source: Pew Research Centre, 2019

There are around 100 public universities in the Southern African Development Community (SADC) region, and over 450 private institutions spread across the 16 SADC states. South Africa has the largest number of universities by far, including on the whole continent, followed by Zambia, Zimbabwe and Angola. Though small, the island nation of Mauritius is one of the wealthiest African countries per capita. With over one million people, it has at least 10 public higher education institutions and over 44 private, local, and international branch campuses.

"Higher education is booming in Africa. Millions of young people are flowing into rapidly proliferating programs. Investors are crowding in from around the world to construct institutions, research, ventures, precincts and even cities."

Higher education is booming in Africa. Millions of young people are flowing into rapidly proliferating programs. Investors are crowding in from around the world to construct institutions, research, ventures, precincts and even cities. Fresh PhDs are nurturing new kinds of curriculum, governments are innovating regulatory and funding approaches, and graduates are advancing economies through step-change transformations. Pressure, opportunity, brilliance and contradiction abound, as do unavoidable problems. An avoidable problem is that one of the world's great higher education systems, Australia, is almost nowhere to be found.

What, then, can be done? What might help propel the Australia-Africa relationship? Traditionally, Australia looked to find higher education partnerships in the United Kingdom, the Anglosphere, and other rich countries. After decades of sniffing and tyre-kicking Asia changed all of this, ushering in a massive era of expansion fuelled by Asian international student tuition fees and domestic institutional growth. Australia's relationship with Asia keeps maturing, with many countries in the region now having larger economies and higher education systems. It is time for Australia to look to Africa, like many Asian, European and American countries and institutions are already doing, to sustain high-growth and high-impact international research and education collaboration.



Current Higher Education Ventures

What is the current state of play? What foundations exist relevant to the growth of higher education? We take a broad view here, focusing on practicalities, histories, political engagements, and higher education collaborations.

Practicalities are likely more easily overcome than more complex matters. It is hard for Australian and Africans to meet each other. There are only three direct flight routes and around 10 weekly flights between Australia and Africa, compared with around a dozen routes and 60 weekly flights to the United States, and 20 routes and 100 weekly flights to China. While there are wars, instability and genuine security concerns in several African countries, this cannot account for almost all news stories being negative when fed to Australian audiences. Australian school curriculum lacks substantive focus on Africa and, like the books available in libraries, tends to focus on colonial history. Clearly, adjusting many of these matters is relatively straightforward and would do much to open channels for engagement.

Australia has been historically connected to Africa through British colonial and later Commonwealth ties, fighting wars on African soil in Sudan, South Africa, and across North Africa on behalf of its obligations to Empire before aligning with Western interests on the continent during the Cold War and decolonisation. In recent decades, the anti-Apartheid movement, counter-terrorism concerns, diaspora connections, and natural resources have all attracted Australian interest in Africa, as has obtaining Africa's support for Australian objectives in multilateral fora. Yet, despite these links, Africa has remained at the margins of Australia's foreign policy and higher education strategy, with relatively limited engagement compared to the deep relations built with countries and societies in the Asia-Pacific over the last half-century.



A few key points render the dearth of current national engagement and, also, opportunities for growth. For example, the Australian government currently has no coherent national strategy for engaging Africa and there is limited regular bilateral contact at the Ministerial and Head of Government levels. Successive Australian governments have declined to establish a national Australia-Africa Council to coordinate key stakeholder interest across sectors, including business, higher education, NGOs, and diaspora organisations. Australia only has nine Embassies/High Commissions across the whole of Africa, located in Pretoria, Harare, Port Louis, Nairobi, Addis Ababa, Cairo, Abuja, Accra and Rabat. It is one of the lowest diplomatic commitments in the OECD and G20. The Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade maintains a very modest annual budget for bilateral sub-Saharan Africa engagement of around AU\$15 million. Outside the mining sector, bilateral trade and investment between Australia and African countries remains limited and underdeveloped. Clearly, there is much opportunity for growth, and the higher education and research sector presents an obvious area in which to scale up engagement.

Collaboration in the higher education and research sector has mirrored government-to-government relations in remaining relatively underdeveloped. For Australian universities, which have become structurally incentivised to recruit Asian international students at volume to achieve financial sustainability, the realisation of massive student recruitment and transnational education opportunities across Asia has limited the Australian sector's

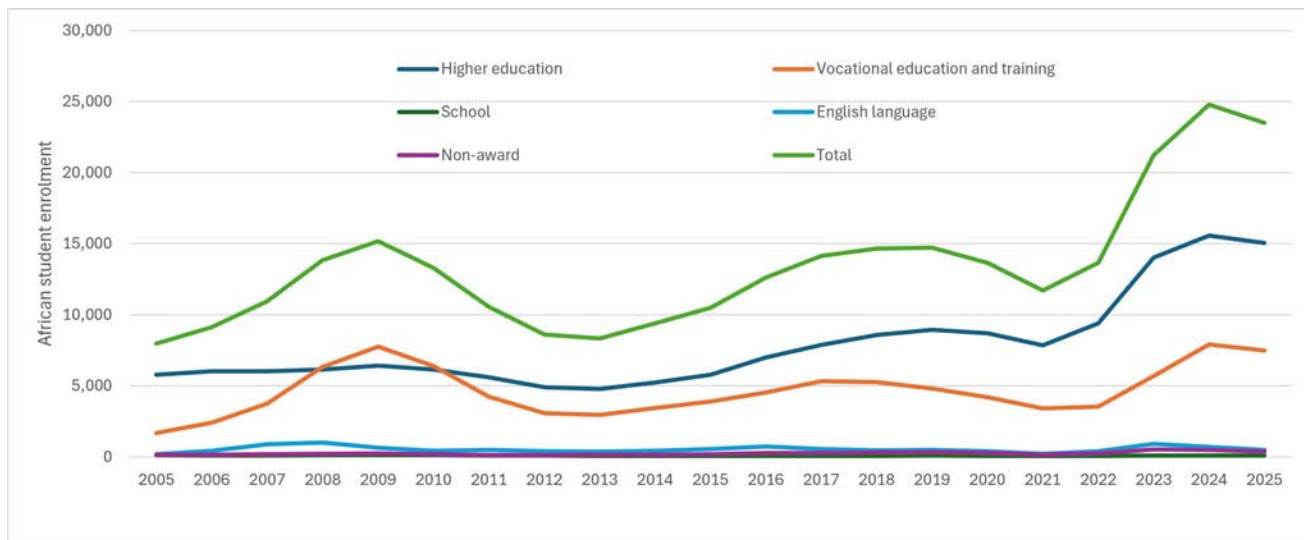


Figure 3: African students studying in Australia by subsector, 2005-2025

Source: <https://www.education.gov.au>

engagement with African higher education. This is reflected in the scarcity of deep connections and a limitation in funding schemes that could incentivise greater exploration of partnerships and student pipelines.

The current multilateral relationship is littered with evidence of disengagement. For instance, the flagship New Colombo Plan (NCP) does not include African countries as destinations for outbound Australian students, limiting mobility, exchanges, and understanding among the next generation. A relatively small number of students from African countries study in Australia, with Kenya being the largest at around 11,000 students. Figure 3 reveals that the overall number of African international students studying in Australia is small, totalling just 23,502 enrolments (in 2025, China was 168,000 and even Nepal was 59,000). Despite this, education-related travel is the top Australian services export to Africa, valued at AUD 1.44 billion in 2024. There is no major dedicated government-funded research collaboration scheme and there has been limited direct engagement between the Australian Research Council (ARC) and counterpart funding councils in Africa, stunting opportunities to build research partnerships between individuals and institutions. There have only been two major examples of Australian branch campuses operating in Africa. Between 2001 and 2019 Monash University operated a campus in South Africa, while in 2018, Curtin University opened a campus in Mauritius, building on a TNE partnership with Charles Telfair Education since 2004.

While operating at the margins, there have been notable successes in Australia-Africa higher education partnerships. These signal foundations and options for a scaling up of engagement:

"There have been notable successes in Australia-Africa partnerships..."

- The Australia Africa Universities Network (AAUN) was established in 2012 and now has 29 member universities, 11 from Australia and 18 from Africa. The independent institutional network operates an annual research partnership seed grant (having now funded over 75 research teams), has built an early career researcher cohort, delivers the Emerging Leaders in Australia-Africa Diplomacy (ELAAD) Program, and hosts prominent high-level forums and associated workshops each year across both continents
- The Indian Ocean University Network (UNIOR), established under the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) in 2024 and now containing 13 member universities from Australia, Africa and Asia, provides another platform to promote student exchanges, joint education programs, research collaboration, and academic diplomacy, in turn building understanding of the cultural and scientific connections among the peoples and countries of the region.
- The Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research (ACIAR), funded by the Commonwealth government, has maintained a substantial Africa program, and was recently granted a further AU\$76 million by the government to expand its research partnership work on climate responsive agriculture into West and North Africa.

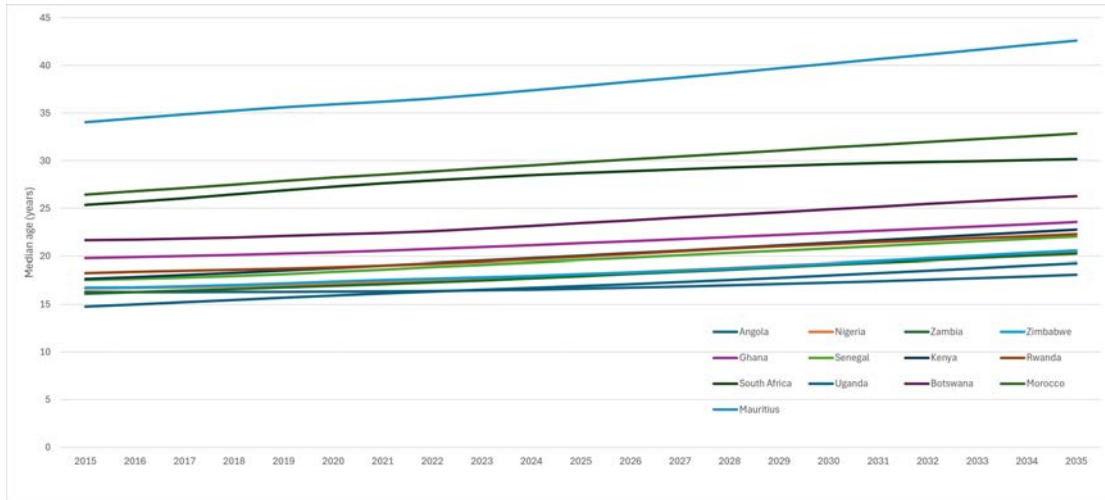


Figure 4: Median age, 13 selected African countries, 2015-2035
Sources: World Bank (2025); UNESCO Institute for Statistics (2025)

- The Australia Awards Africa scheme, funded by the Australia Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, delivers a relatively modest but highly impactful program of individual postgraduate scholarships for Australian universities (currently 45 scholarships per year for Africa), and short courses delivered by Australian institutions (currently four per year for Africa, respectively on financing climate action, trade facilitation, mining governance, and countering terrorism and violent extremism, with 25 participants per course). A number of African countries are also eligible for the Australia Awards Fellowships scheme which facilitates customised fellowship programs for individuals or cohorts from Africa to visit Australia to collaborate with Australian counterparts.
- A number of small Africa-focused centres and research groups have been established at Australian universities, including La Trobe University (institute), University of Western Australia (centre), University of Melbourne (research group), Australian National University (research group), University of Newcastle (centre), Curtin University (centre), Murdoch University (research group), and RMIT University (centre). While these platforms have played important roles in raising the profile of African higher education and research in Australia, their funding has been limited and unstable, and of the formally established platforms only the centres at Curtin University and RMIT university remain in 2026.

Africa is Booming

Even as countries across Africa are building their higher education systems, there is lots of activity underway. Obviously, visiting African universities and talking with students, leaders and employers is the best way of discovering what's happening. To launch broader dialogues, we articulate broader pictures. African countries are moving down the path of constructing information on their national higher education systems. Major institutional databases tell billions of stories. For current purposes, we focus on a handful of emerging higher education centres.

Africa has a large and growing number of young people, unlike most other parts of the world including Asia. Estimates place as many as 700 million people under 20 years of age. Figure 4 shows the median age is around 20 years for 13 countries with developing higher education systems, with the exception of Mauritius. Figure 5 reveals that population growth is above the replacement value of 2.1 and stable. Africa will have young people needing higher education for the foreseeable future.

Economically, African countries are developing in ways that spur demand for higher education. Figure 6 shows that employment in the services sector is growing in most countries. In many instances, African countries appear to be skipping from agricultural to services economies, zooming through traditional forms of industrial transformation.



"Economically, African countries are developing in ways that spur demand for higher education..."

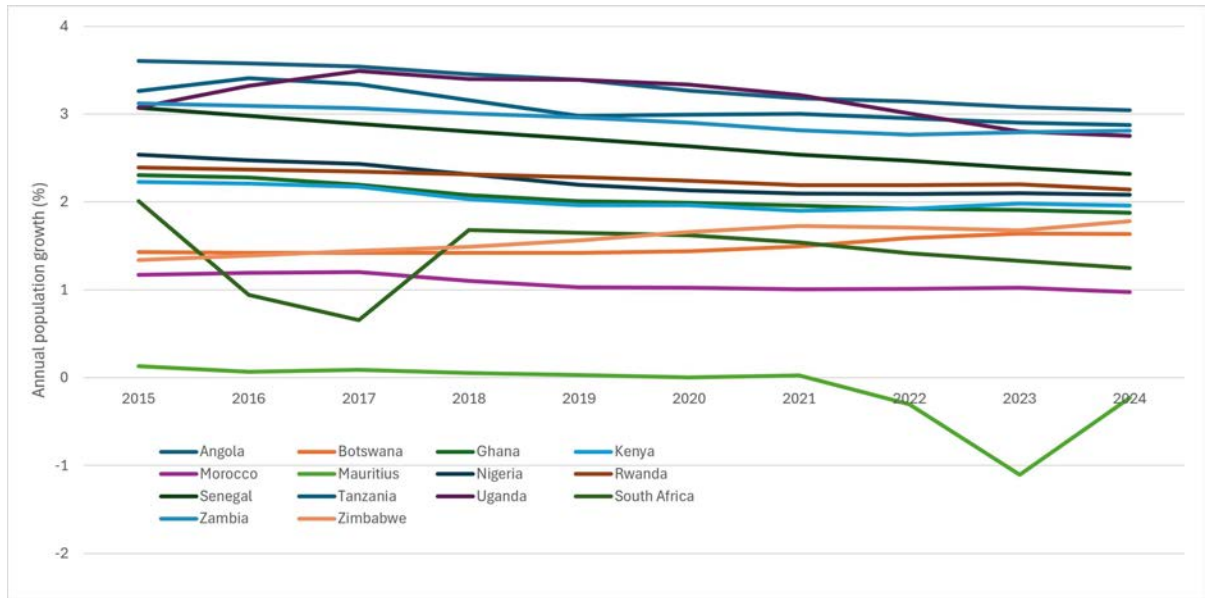


Figure 5: Annual population growth, 13 selected African countries, 2015-2024
Source: World Bank (2025); UNESCO Institute for Statistics (2025)

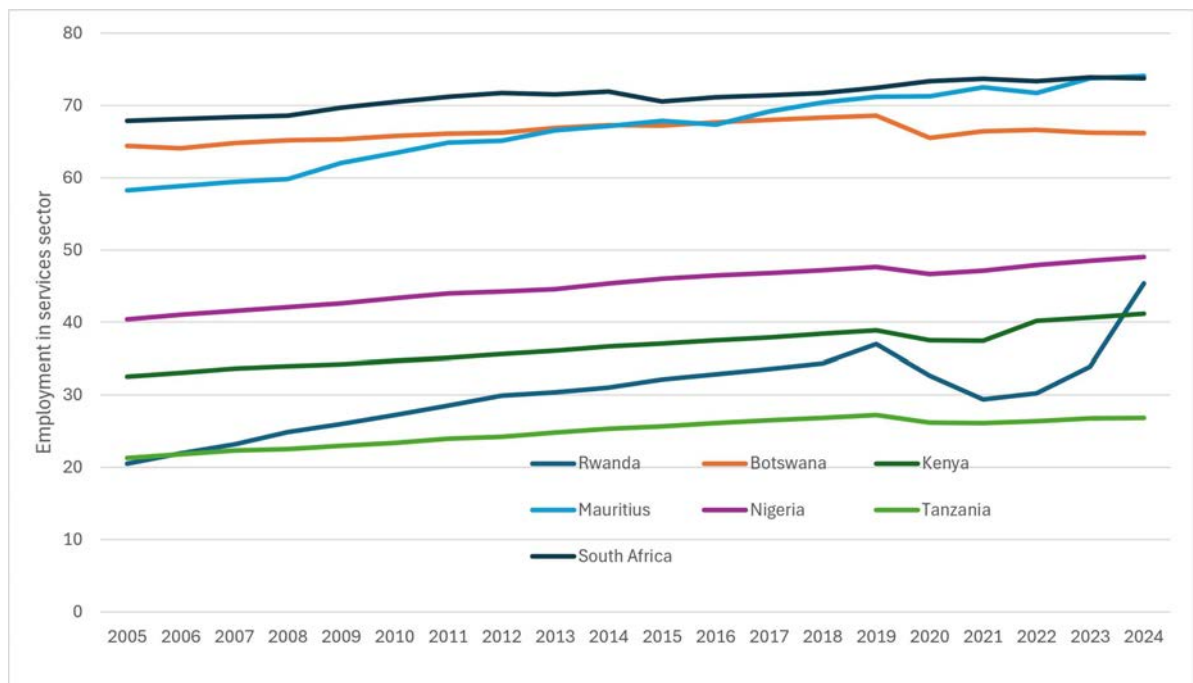


Figure 6: Service sector employment, 7 selected African countries, 2005-2024
Source: World Bank (2025); UNESCO Institute for Statistics (2025)



National investment in tertiary education remains relatively low, despite current and increasing demand. Figure 7 reveals that many countries invest less than one per cent of GDP into tertiary education. By comparison, OECD countries invest around 1.4 per cent of GDP (OECD, 2024). Of course, finance is cultural. Just as has happened in Asia, Africa may find novel ways to fund higher education, leveraging policy and finance instruments different to those found in established Global North contexts.

Few African countries remit data to international agencies on their gross expenditure on research and development (GERD). Of those which do, Figure 8 shows that none meet the African Union's benchmark of one per cent. Average GERD for OECD countries is approximately 2.7 per cent of GDP (OECD, 2025). Similarly, the count of researchers inhabitants is low. As a point of reference, the value for Australia is 4,500 in 2020. Developing detailed metrics would be prudent.

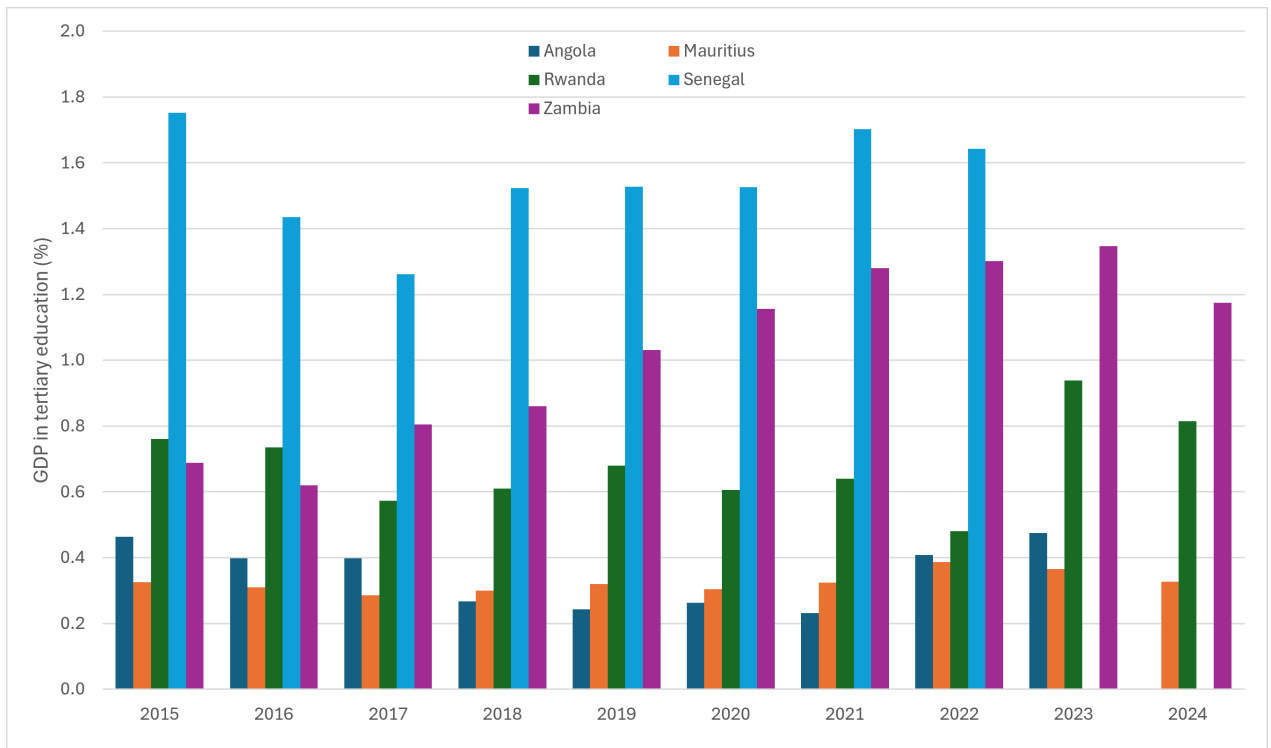


Figure 7: GDP in tertiary education, 5 selected African countries, 2015-2024
Source: World Bank (2025); UNESCO Institute for Statistics (2025)

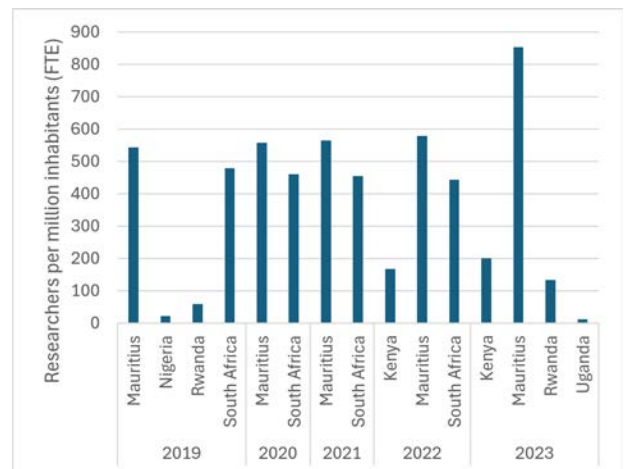
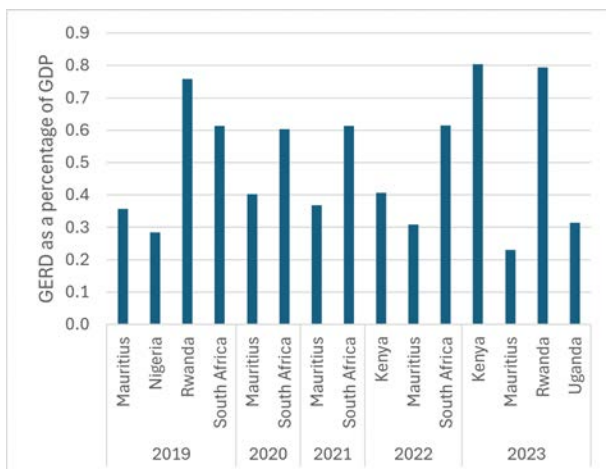


Figure 8: GERD and researcher per million, 4 selected African countries, 2019-2023
Source: World Bank (2025); UNESCO Institute for Statistics (2025)



Likewise, the number of tertiary teachers is low. Figure 9 shows large variation among sampled countries. In comparison, as of 2025, Australia's tertiary education sector employed approximately 262,000 people.

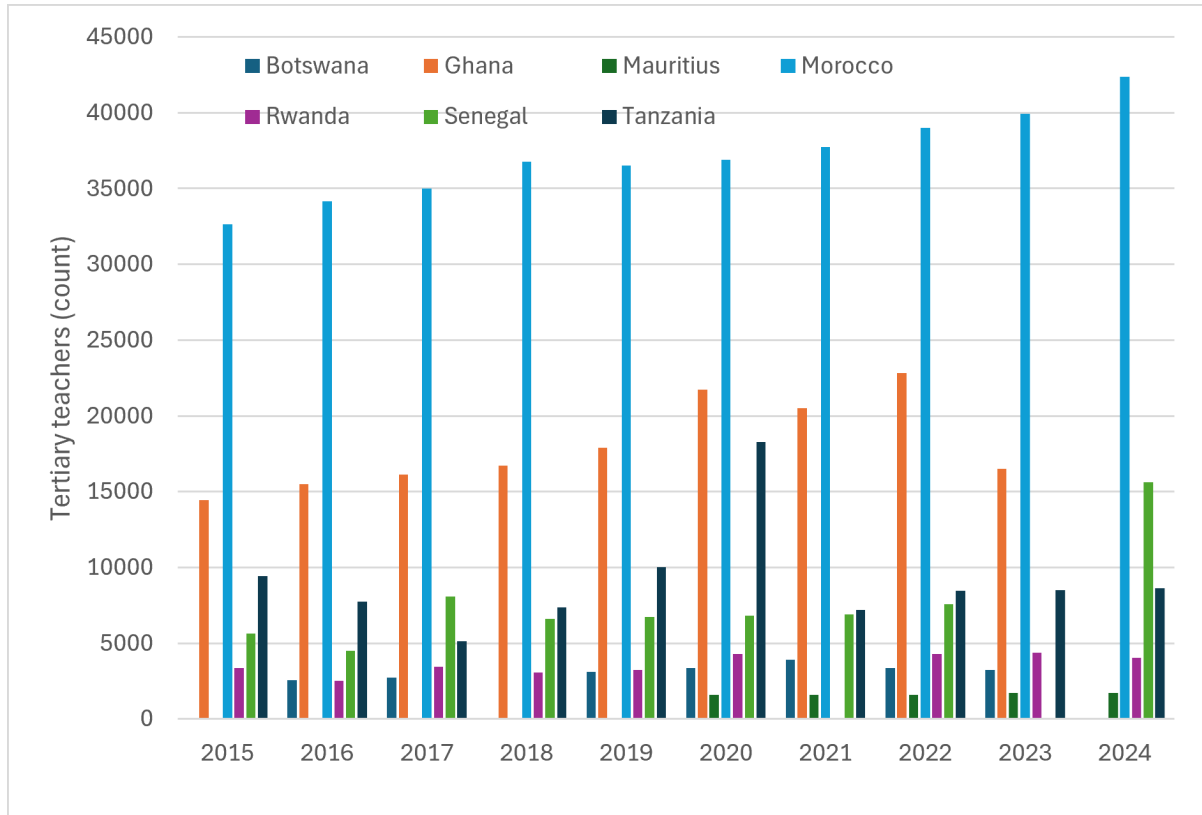


Figure 9: Tertiary teachers count, 7 selected African countries, 2015-2024
Source: World Bank (2025); UNESCO Institute for Statistics (2025)

Figure 10 shows that despite lack of public investment and few teachers, tertiary enrolment is low but tends to be growing. Still, participation falls short of the global average of 40 per cent, revealing growth opportunities.

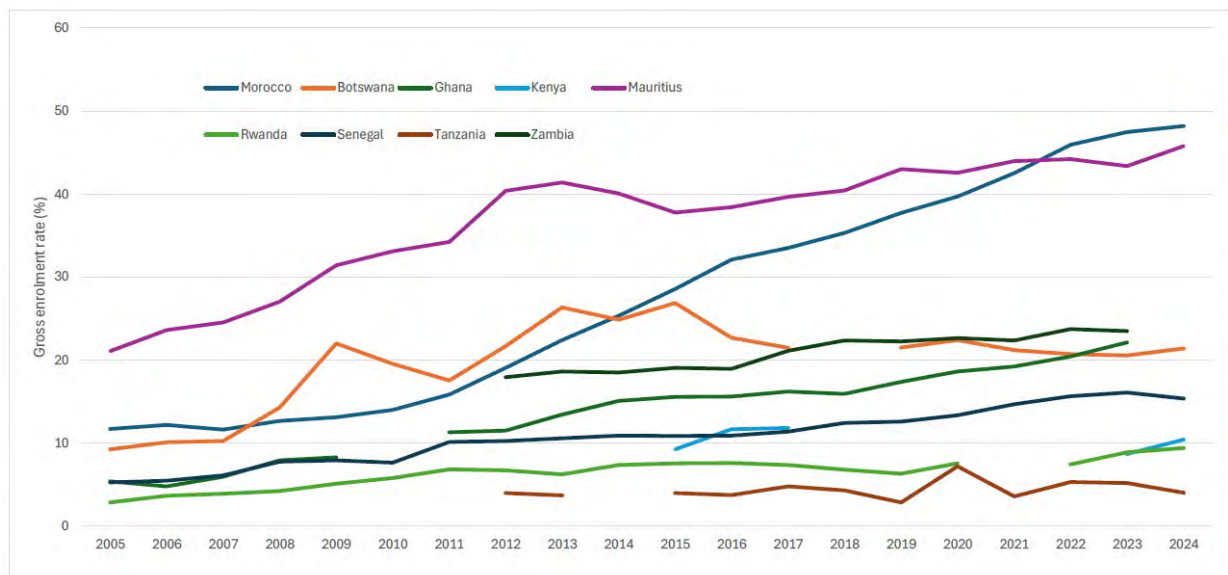


Figure 10: Gross enrolment rate, 9 selected African countries, 2005-2024
Source: World Bank (2025); UNESCO Institute for Statistics (2025)

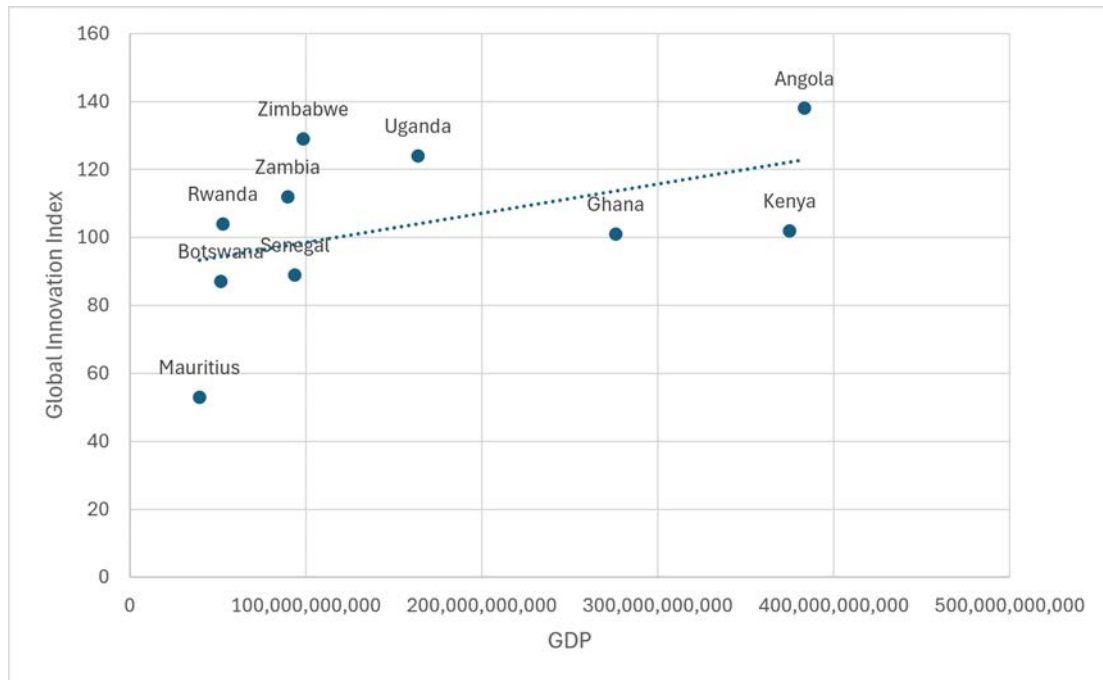


Figure 11: GDP and global innovation index, 10 selected African countries, 2005-2024
Source: World Bank (2025); UNESCO Institute for Statistics (2025)

The Global Innovation Index provides a useful benchmark of R&D contribution. In this index, Australia ranked 22 of 139 countries, whereas Mauritius was the highest African country at rank 53 followed by Botswana and Senegal under 100, with the other selected countries ranging between 101 and 138. Delving deeper, Figure 11 shows which countries relative to GDP are performing above and below expectation with respect to global innovation index scores.

"Australia allocates 45 scholarships to talented Africans compared with tens of thousands from China..."

The demographics of Africa will shape the world for the next 50+ years. This presents a substantial challenge and opportunity to Africa and the world. Access to quality higher education and employment will generate the demographic dividend that will drive Africa's growth. Australian universities could play a leading role in educating African students in the coming decades. Africa has a wealth of resources, not all of it monetary. It makes sense for Australian universities to invest in cultivating African talent. Such investment may take the form of what universities in Australia call 'in-kind' outlays, through to financial investments in transnational ventures. There are hundreds of millions of people needing education, and few institutions to contribute. Right now, Australia allocates a paltry 45 scholarships to highly talented Africans, compared with many tens of thousands of scholarships from China. As decades of such investment in Asia have shown, returns are enormous, multiplicative and enduring.

Growth Options for Australia

Higher education in Africa is alive, in demand, and growing. It seems inevitable that engagement will grow from the low base, and that the decades to come will likely look different. We contend that it is time for Australia to stand back, take a global view on the higher education proposition, and put an array of emerging Africa offers on the table, offers which look beyond the balance sheet at much more substantial value creation. We sketch the rudiments of what might shape up as a five-year Africa strategy.

Research collaboration is a natural option for collaboration. Australia can invest in research education and the research workforce. Africa is building advanced research infrastructure and capability, working from a low base and with different cost structures. Networks like the Australia Africa Universities Network (AAUN) can help facilitate access to diverse data sets and unique geographical contexts. Partnerships with African universities can be viewed through the lens of science diplomacy, using academic collaboration to tackle shared scientific and socio-political problems, such as food security, climate change and regional stability.

There is ample scope for Australian universities to build physical and intellectual infrastructure in Africa. Africa needs more campuses. Australia has fantastic architects, builders and flexible know-how on how to run universities. Building in Africa is affordable compared with Australia. Working from a regional hub to frame an Africa-wide education offer presents attractive returns. The construction of Kigali Innovation City is a case in point.

Australian higher education can switch more partnership development into Africa, leveraging proven capability to tackle regional challenges. As African partnerships grow and youth talent is mobilised, Australia will be well-placed to benefit from the social dividend. Many African countries are building a middle class. By 2050, one in four people on earth will be African. Partnering with African universities allows Australian institutions to tap into a burgeoning demographic of young, ambitious students and researchers. Of course, Africa offers huge cultural and academic enrichment opportunities for Australia, just as Asian cultures have in recent decades.

The rest of the world is already active in Africa. Major and emerging powers are investing in African higher education partnerships. Australia is largely absent, and will miss out on being part of the continent's growth story if it does not engage quickly, carefully, and with consistent resources committed. Australian providers can position themselves strategically in important global education markets, seizing early- rather than late-adopted opportunities. Fostering genuine academic ties takes time, and will benefit from action.

"The rest of the world is already active in Africa. Major and emerging powers are investing in partnerships..."

Australian higher education needs diversification. In chasing foreign tax-free tuition cash, Australia has likely built the most commercial and academically fragile higher education system in history. Asia is huge, but the world is bigger. Australia would do well to look west as well as north. Major economies in Asia have mature higher education systems and declining populations. The synergies which flourished in recent decades seem difficult to sustain. To further mature its higher education system Australia should keep diversifying and look to forge future-ready ties with Africa.

Australia's population has developed on the east coast, diminishing our broader role as an Indian Ocean power. Yet Australia and Africa share Indian Ocean connections, seasons, and many natural opportunities. As southern hemispheric societies, Australia and Eastern/Southern African countries share similar geologies and natural environments, as well as shared stewardship of the Indian Ocean region (maritime security, climate, migration, trade, disaster response). This creates options for research collaboration using comparative analysis, regional student mobility and shared regional identities, and linking research, education and policymaking through science diplomacy.

As we noted at the outset, Africa is complex, diverse and vast. Sophisticated engagement is required, going well beyond superficial business development. This takes time, and different kinds of expertise. Australia must engage with Africa and African higher education according to a set of principles, including understanding and sensitivity to contexts such as colonialism, the movement for African agency, histories of human and natural resource extraction and exploitation, cultural diversity, and indigenous knowledges. Appreciation of these ways of knowing and being can distinguish Australia's attractiveness as a partner to African governments and institutions (as opposed to the often more transactional or neocolonial approaches of other countries), and can also enrich Australia's own knowledge of related themes and dynamics.



Governments regulate and fund higher education, but ultimately it is universities which must create and carve out important opportunities. Since the mid-1990s, Australia's tertiary education sector led development of one of the world's most internationalised educational systems. While Australian government foreign policy interest and activity in Africa lags, Australia's higher education sector can play a leading role in building understanding, connections and soft power between the continents, in a similar way to that of the Australian mining and energy industries.

With so much room for growth it is hard to know where to stop with ideas and start with construction. Governing Australia-wide investment is key. One very concrete means is to establish an Australia-Africa Council, mirroring structures already in play for other countries and regions. Figure 12 depicts how this might look, making space to land many ideas we advocate in this briefing and connecting authorities and stakeholders in ways required for development.

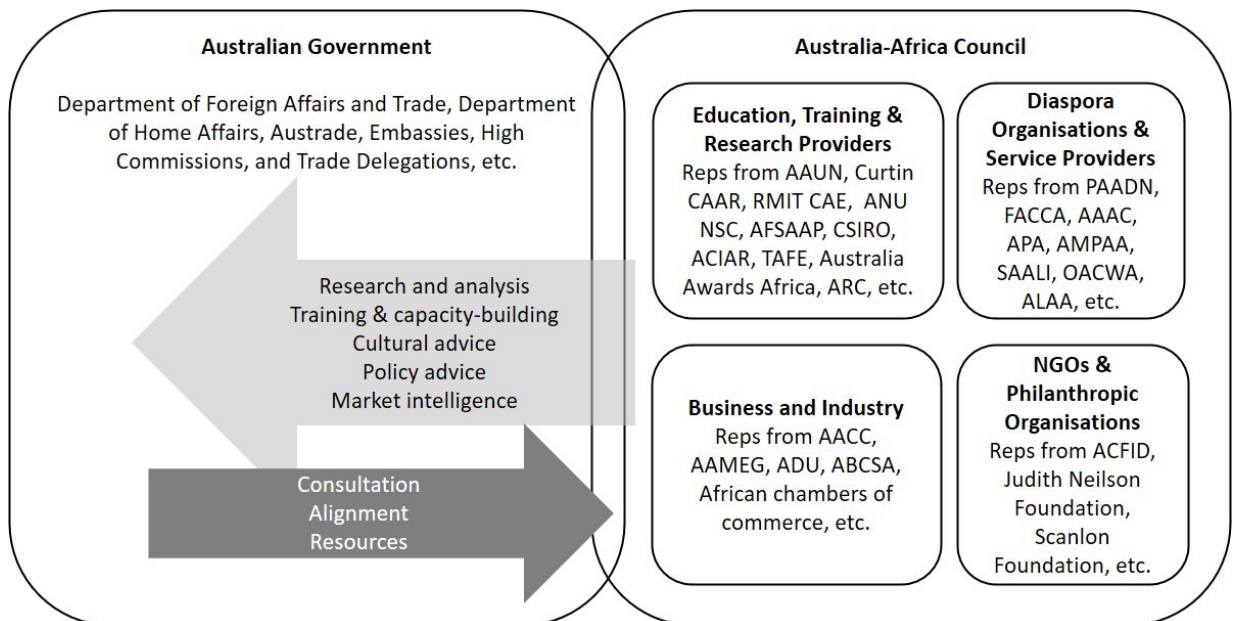


Figure 11: Australia-Africa Council model

Taking Next Steps

Australia won't know until the 2050s if African higher education is doing what Asia did in the mid-1990s, but it sure feels that way. Executives in established regions say the same things of Africa today as their predecessors did of Asia in the 1990s: 'hard to get visas', 'no money', 'infrastructure grumbles', 'integrity issues', 'limited flights', 'scary'. Impressions or realities? Is Australia yet to realise Africa's potential? Africans themselves think so, and just like their Asian counterparts are finding smart ways to leap ahead.

"African universities offer a wealth of untapped potential, specialized expertise, and strategic advantages..."

African universities offer a wealth of untapped potential, specialised expertise, and strategic advantages that can significantly enrich the Australian higher education and research sectors. As Australia looks to diversify its international partnerships, African institutions provide more than just student recruitment opportunities. They offer unique research environments and a diversified exchange of knowledge.



Well-rehearsed tactics can be implemented to activate the above options. Generating dialogue—the purpose of this briefing—is an excellent first step, and precursor to building communities which can progress agendas. These communities, which are likely audiences for this briefing, include higher education institutions and stakeholders, business, the African diaspora, and established networks, programs, and centres of excellence.

Such momentum, which Australia can be excellent in producing, can accelerate next-stage liaison through conferences, research, and academic exchanges. Such ventures then move into more substantial study tours, academic programs, institutional partnerships, built campuses, professional connections, and professional graduates. Kind of a dating game. Time for Australia to make the next step.

To be sure, these are not the comfort zones of risk-averse managers. But they are the essence of higher education. And Africa is not the huge risk it once may have been perceived as, especially relative to many other parts of the world.



Resources

African Union (2024). Science, Technology and Innovation Strategy for Africa 2024. Accessed from: https://au.int/sites/default/files/newsevents/workingdocuments/33178-wd-stisaenglish_-_final.pdf

Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT). (2026). Foundations, councils and institutes. Accessed from: <https://www.dfat.gov.au/people-to-people/foundations-councils-institutes>

Fozdar, F., Prout-Quicke, S. & Mickler, D. (2022). Are Africans in Australia a Diaspora?, *Diaspora Studies* 15(1), 1-31.

Higher education Council (HEC) (2026). Higher Education Sector Strategic Plan (HESSP) 2025-30. Accessed from: <https://www.hec.gov.rw>

Mickler, D. & Pijovic, N. (2015). Engaging an Elephant in the Room? Locating Africa in Australian foreign policy, *Australian Journal of Politics & History*, 61(1), 100–120.

OECD (2024). Education at a Glance 2024. Paris: OECD.

OECD (2025). OECD Main Science and Technology Indicators. Paris: OECD.

Pew Research Centre (2019). World's Population is Projected to Nearly Stop Growing by the End of the Century. Accessed from: https://www.pewresearch.org/shortreads/2019/06/17/worlds-population-is-projected-to-nearly-stop-growing-by-the-end-of-the-century/ft_19-06-17_worldpopulation_population-growth-africa-projected-remain-strongpng/

UNESCO (2025). Transforming knowledge for Africa's future. Accessed from: <https://>

UNESCO Institute for Statistics (2025). Statistics Data Browser. Accessed from: <https://databrowser.uis.unesco.org/browser>

World Bank (2026). World Bank Open Data. Accessed from: <https://data.worldbank.org>
www.unesco.org/en/articles/transforming-knowledge-africas-future-2

Contact

Honorary Professor Hamish Coates, hamish.coates@anu.edu.au

Associate Professor David Mickler, d.mickler@curtin.edu.au

Professor Christopher Isike, christopher.isike@up.ac.za



Higher Education
Futures Lab

www.hefl.net

Crawford School of Public Policy
The Australian National University
132 Lennox Crossing
Acton ACT 2601