

Internationalization of African Higher Education Institutions: Emerging Trends and Evidence from Extant Literature

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ABSTRACT: The internationalization of higher education has become an important priority for universities around the world as institutions seek to strengthen their academic standing, expand research opportunities, and engage more effectively in an increasingly interconnected global environment. Across Africa, higher education institutions are actively embracing internationalization through a range of initiatives aimed at improving teaching and learning, enhancing research capacity, increasing institutional visibility, and fostering global partnerships. This article reviews existing literature on the internationalization of African higher education institutions, focusing on key trends, driving forces, opportunities, and challenges shaping the process. Drawing on evidence from scholarly publications, policy documents, and institutional experiences, the review highlights major dimensions of internationalization, including student and staff mobility, international research collaborations, curriculum reform, transnational education, digital engagement, and regional cooperation. The findings suggest that African universities have made notable strides in expanding their international presence and strengthening global academic networks. However, progress continues to be constrained by challenges such as limited financial resources, unequal partnership arrangements, brain drain, and fragmented policy frameworks. This discussion argues for a context-sensitive and inclusive approach to internationalization that responds to the unique realities of African higher education while promoting equitable, sustainable, and mutually beneficial global engagement.

KEYWORDS: Internationalization, Higher Education, African Universities, Globalization, Academic Mobility, Research Collaboration, International Partnerships.

1. INTRODUCTION

The growing interconnectedness of economies, societies, and knowledge systems has transformed the landscape of higher education, making internationalization an increasingly important aspect of university development worldwide (Jane Knight, 2004; Hans de Wit et al., 2015). In an era characterized by rapid globalization and the cross-border flow of ideas, talent, and technology, universities are no longer operating solely within national contexts (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2009). Instead, they are becoming active participants in global networks of teaching, research, innovation, and knowledge exchange (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2021). As a result, internationalization has evolved from a peripheral activity to a strategic priority, enabling institutions to enhance academic quality, strengthen research capacity, improve global competitiveness, and expand their international visibility (Knight, 2004; de Wit et al., 2015).

Within the African context, the pursuit of internationalization has gained considerable momentum over the past two decades (Teferra & Knight, 2008; Materu, 2007). Governments and higher education institutions across the continent increasingly recognize the importance of global engagement in advancing institutional development and contributing to national and regional socioeconomic goals (African Union, 2015; UNESCO, 2015). Consequently, African universities have adopted a variety of internationalization strategies, including student and staff exchange programmes, international research collaborations, cross-border academic partnerships, joint degree initiatives, and the integration of global perspectives into curricula (Association of African Universities, 2012). These efforts have been further supported by continental and regional policy frameworks aimed at strengthening cooperation and harmonization within African higher education systems (African Union, 2015; Association of African Universities, 2019).

Despite these developments, the internationalization of African higher education remains uneven and shaped by diverse institutional, national, and regional realities (Teferra, 2014; Knight & de Wit, 2018). While some universities have successfully established strong international networks and gained greater global visibility, others continue to face significant constraints related to funding, infrastructure, policy implementation, and institutional capacity (Materu, 2007; Cloete et al., 2015). Moreover, concerns regarding unequal partnerships, dependence on external funding, and the risk of brain drain continue to influence debates on the direction and outcomes of internationalization in Africa (Altbach & Knight, 2007; Sawyerr, 2004).

2. CONCEPTUALIZING INTERNATIONALIZATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Internationalization is widely understood as the process of integrating international, intercultural, and global dimensions into the core functions and delivery of higher education (Knight, 2004; de Wit et al., 2015). Contemporary scholarship identifies three main approaches to internationalization: internationalization at home, which embeds global and intercultural perspectives in curricula and campus life; internationalization abroad, which emphasizes cross-border mobility and academic exchanges; and comprehensive internationalization, which integrates international dimensions across institutional governance, teaching, research, and engagement activities (Knight, 2012; Hudzik, 2015). For African universities, internationalization serves not only as a pathway to global engagement but also as a mechanism for capacity building, knowledge exchange, regional integration, and socio-economic development (Teferra & Knight, 2008; Altbach & Knight, 2007).

3. EMERGING TRENDS IN THE INTERNATIONALIZATION OF AFRICAN HIGHER EDUCATION

3.1 Growth of International Research Collaborations.

The expansion of international research partnerships has become a central component of the internationalization of higher education in Africa (Lobnibe, 2020). These collaborations have played a significant role in strengthening research capacity, enhancing scholarly productivity, and facilitating greater integration of African institutions into global knowledge networks (Boeren, 2014; Molosi-France & Makoni, 2020). Through such engagements, universities have gained access to research funding, advanced methodologies, and opportunities for academic exchange (Boeren, 2014). Nevertheless, scholarly literature continues to raise concerns regarding the unequal nature of many of these partnerships. In numerous cases, institutions from the Global North exert disproportionate influence over research priorities, funding allocation, and knowledge production processes, which can limit the agency of African researchers and institutions in shaping research agendas that address local and regional needs (Molosi-France & Makoni, 2020; Nkansah et al., 2025; Gyamerah, 2025).

3.2 Increasing Student and Staff Mobility.

Student and staff mobility has emerged as a significant dimension of higher education internationalization across Africa, facilitated through scholarship schemes, academic exchange programmes, research partnerships, and regional and international academic networks (Teferra, 2014; Mohamedbhai, 2013). These mobility opportunities have contributed to cross-cultural learning, professional development, knowledge exchange, and the strengthening of institutional collaborations across national boundaries (Knight, 2012; Teferra, 2014). Regional initiatives and frameworks have further promoted greater access to cross-border educational experiences and academic engagement (African Union, 2015). However, participation in mobility programmes remains uneven across the continent. Financial limitations, inadequate institutional support, restrictive visa policies, and disparities in infrastructure and resources continue to constrain access for many students and academics, thereby limiting the broader benefits of international mobility within African higher education systems (Mohamedbhai, 2013; Teferra, 2014).

3.3 Internationalization of Curriculum.

African universities are increasingly integrating international and intercultural dimensions into their teaching and learning processes as part of broader internationalization efforts (Knight, 2004; De Wit et al., 2015). Curriculum internationalization encompasses the incorporation of global perspectives, international case studies, comparative analyses, intercultural competencies, and subject matter that addresses contemporary global challenges (Leask, 2015). These reforms are intended to equip students with the knowledge, skills, and cultural awareness needed to operate effectively in an interconnected world (Leask, 2015; De Wit et al., 2015). Research suggests that internationally oriented curricula can enhance graduate employability, foster global citizenship, and better prepare students for participation in regional and international labour markets (Leask, 2015; Jones, 2013). Nevertheless, scholars caution against the uncritical transfer of external educational models and frameworks. Such approaches may marginalize indigenous knowledge systems, local realities, and culturally relevant forms of learning, potentially weakening the capacity of higher education institutions to address the specific developmental needs and priorities of their societies (Shizha, 2013; Dei, 2011).

3.4 Expansion of Regionalization Initiatives.

Regional cooperation has emerged as a critical dimension of higher education internationalization in Africa, reflecting the growing recognition that many educational challenges and opportunities can be addressed more effectively through collective action (Knight, 2013; Teferra, 2018). Regional bodies, including the African Union and various regional economic communities, have played a pivotal role in advancing initiatives aimed at harmonizing academic qualifications, developing credit transfer and recognition frameworks, and facilitating the mobility of students, academics, and researchers across national borders (African Union, 2015; Damtew & Altbach, 2014). These efforts seek to enhance compatibility among higher education systems, promote academic collaboration, and improve access to educational opportunities within the continent (African Union, 2015). In this regard, regionalization offers a practical and strategic approach to strengthening higher education in Africa by enabling the sharing of resources, fostering collective capacity development, and deepening academic integration (Teferra, 2018; Damtew & Altbach, 2014). Such cooperation not only enhances institutional effectiveness but also contributes to the broader goals of regional

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development, knowledge production, and continental competitiveness in the global higher education landscape (Knight, 2013; African Union, 2015).

3.5 Digital Internationalization and Virtual Mobility.

The COVID-19 pandemic served as a major catalyst for the digital transformation of higher education across the globe, prompting universities to rapidly adopt technology-mediated approaches to teaching, learning, and international collaboration (Crawford et al., 2020; Marinoni et al., 2020). In Africa, higher education institutions increasingly embraced online learning platforms, virtual exchange programmes, Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) initiatives, and digital research networks to sustain academic activities and international engagement during periods of restricted mobility (Czerniewicz et al., 2020; Mbembe, 2020). These developments have expanded access to international learning experiences, enabling students and academics to participate in cross-border educational and research activities at lower financial cost than traditional forms of physical mobility (Altbach & de Wit, 2020). Furthermore, digital internationalization has created new opportunities for broader inclusion and institutional collaboration beyond geographical boundaries (Knight & Whitemore, 2021). Nevertheless, the benefits of these innovations have not been distributed equally. Persistent digital inequalities, inadequate technological infrastructure, limited internet connectivity, and disparities in access to digital resources continue to constrain meaningful participation for many institutions, students, and scholars across the continent (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2021; World Bank, 2022). As a result, addressing these structural challenges remains essential for ensuring that the digital transformation of higher education contributes to more equitable and sustainable internationalization.

4.0 CHALLENGES FACING INTERNATIONALIZATION IN AFRICAN HIGHER EDUCATION.

4.1 Resource Constraints.

Limited funding continues to be one of the most persistent challenges facing the internationalization of higher education (Knight, 2013; de Wit, 2020). For many institutions, securing and sustaining the financial resources needed to support international activities remains difficult (Altbach & Knight, 2007). Initiatives such as student and staff exchange programs, collaborative research projects, participation in international conferences, and the development of global partnerships require substantial and ongoing investment (Knight, 2013). These activities often involve significant costs related to travel, accommodation, research facilities, technology, and administrative support (de Wit et al., 2015). The challenge is particularly pronounced in many African higher education institutions, where limited budgets must be distributed across multiple pressing needs (Teferra & Altbach, 2004). Priorities such as expanding access to education, improving physical and digital infrastructure, and addressing academic and administrative staff shortages often take precedence over internationalization initiatives (Mohamedbhai, 2013). Consequently, resources allocated to international engagement are frequently insufficient to support sustained and comprehensive efforts.

In response, many institutions rely heavily on external donor funding, development agencies, or short-term project grants to finance internationalization activities (Altbach & Knight, 2007; Teferra, 2018). While such support can create valuable opportunities, dependence on external funding often undermines long-term planning and sustainability (de Wit, 2020). It may also influence the direction of institutional collaborations and research priorities, aligning them more closely with donor interests than with local or institutional needs (Teferra & Altbach, 2004). As a result, despite broad recognition of internationalization as a strategic objective for enhancing academic quality, research capacity, and global competitiveness, its implementation often remains fragmented, inconsistent, and vulnerable to fluctuations in funding availability (Knight, 2013; de Wit et al., 2015).

4.2 Brain Drain.

Internationalization serves as a key mechanism for facilitating the mobility of talent by providing students, researchers, and academics with opportunities to engage in cross-border study, research, and professional collaboration (Knight, 2012; Altbach & Knight, 2007). Through international partnerships, exchange programs, and global research networks, individuals gain access to advanced knowledge, specialized skills, and diverse academic perspectives, thereby enhancing their professional development and scholarly capacity (Teferra, 2014; de Wit et al., 2015). Nevertheless, increased academic mobility also presents significant challenges, particularly within the context of many African countries. A major concern is the phenomenon of brain drain, whereby highly skilled graduates, researchers, and academics migrate to more developed economies in pursuit of superior research infrastructure, greater access to funding, improved working conditions, and enhanced career prospects (Docquier & Rapoport, 2012; Teferra, 2014). Although such mobility can generate individual benefits and contribute to knowledge exchange, the sustained emigration of highly qualified professionals may adversely affect the capacity of local institutions to deliver quality education, undertake research, and foster innovation (Altbach, 2013). Furthermore, the loss of human capital can constrain national research productivity, weaken institutional competitiveness, and impede broader socio-economic development (Docquier & Rapoport, 2012). Consequently, while internationalization promotes global academic integration and knowledge transfer, it also necessitates strategic

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policies aimed at mitigating talent loss and maximizing the developmental benefits of academic mobility (Knight, 2012; Altbach & Knight, 2007).

4.3 Unequal Global Partnerships.

An expanding body of scholarship underscores enduring power asymmetries in international research collaborations, particularly those involving African higher education institutions (Mouton & Waast, 2008; Shawa & Scheepers, 2019). In many cases, African partners are positioned at the margins of decision-making processes, with limited authority over the formulation of research agendas, allocation of financial resources, and governance structures of collaborative projects (Boshoff, 2010; Molosi-France & Makoni, 2020). These imbalances also shape patterns of knowledge production and dissemination, often privileging perspectives and outputs from more resourced institutions in the Global North (Connell, 2014; Keim, 2010). Such dynamics raise important concerns regarding equity in scholarly collaboration, the institutional autonomy of African universities, and ongoing debates on the decolonization of knowledge systems (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018; Mbembe, 2016). In response, there is a growing scholarly and policy emphasis on advancing more equitable, reciprocal, and mutually beneficial research partnerships that meaningfully recognize the agency, expertise, and contextual priorities of African institutions (Binka, 2005; Mouton & Waast, 2008).

4.4 Policy and Institutional Limitations.

In many higher education institutions, particularly within developing contexts, internationalization is not yet supported by clearly defined or comprehensive policy frameworks, nor is it consistently anchored in dedicated administrative structures (Knight, 2004; de Wit, 2020). Consequently, international activities are frequently dispersed across different faculties and units, leading to implementation that is largely ad hoc and insufficiently coordinated (Knight & de Wit, 2018). This fragmented policy environment undermines institutional coherence, making it challenging to sustain long-term internationalization strategies, systematically monitor and evaluate progress, or ensure alignment between international initiatives and overarching institutional missions and development priorities (de Wit et al., 2015; Knight, 2013).

4.5 Balancing Global and Local Priorities.

A recurring theme in the literature is the inherent tension between global engagement and local relevance within higher education systems (Marginson & Rhoades, 2002; Knight, 2013). Institutions are increasingly required to navigate the competing demands of enhancing international competitiveness and fulfilling their core mandate of responding to local societal needs and advancing national development priorities (Altbach & Knight, 2007; De Wit et al., 2015). This dual imperative highlights the complexity of contemporary internationalization processes, which must reconcile participation in global academic networks with contextual responsiveness (Knight, 2004; de Wit, 2020). As such, scholars emphasize the importance of adopting internationalization strategies that are both globally informed and locally grounded, ensuring that global perspectives are meaningfully integrated without undermining institutional relevance to local contexts and development imperatives (Leask, 2015; Marginson, 2014).

5. OPPORTUNITIES FOR ADVANCING INTERNATIONALIZATION

There are several important opportunities for strengthening internationalization in African higher education (Teferra, 2014; Knight, 2013). These include expanding South-South and intra-African collaborations, increasing investment in digital infrastructure, and developing more equitable international partnerships (UNESCO, 2021; Jowi, 2009). Other key areas involve strengthening regional higher education integration frameworks, promoting the inclusion of indigenous knowledge within international curricula, and leveraging diaspora networks to enhance research and innovation (African Union, 2015; de Wit, 2020; Boshoff, 2010). These opportunities provide pathways for a more inclusive and contextually relevant internationalization agenda (Teferra, 2018; Knight & de Wit, 2018).

6. TOWARDS A CONTEXTUALIZED MODEL OF INTERNATIONALIZATION IN AFRICA

Scholarship increasingly argues that internationalization in African higher education should go beyond the uncritical adoption of Western models and instead be grounded in local contexts, development priorities, and institutional realities (de Wit, 2020; Jowi, 2009; Teferra, 2014). Rather than a one-way transfer of knowledge from the Global North, it is increasingly understood as a reciprocal and collaborative process built on mutual learning and shared expertise (Knight, 2013; Altbach & Knight, 2007).

This perspective calls for more equitable partnerships in which African institutions have a meaningful role in shaping research agendas, resource allocation, and project outcomes (Molosi-France & Makoni, 2020; Boshoff, 2010). It also underscores the importance of regional cooperation as a means of strengthening institutional capacity and enhancing Africa's collective position in global higher education (African Union, 2015; Teferra, 2018). In addition, there is growing emphasis on shifting from knowledge dependency to knowledge co-creation, where African scholars actively contribute to global knowledge production (Connell, 2014; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018). Expanding digital access and integrating indigenous knowledge systems further support more inclusive, contextually relevant, and culturally grounded forms of internationalization that connect global engagement with local and regional development needs (UNESCO, 2021; Dei, 2011).

7. CONCLUSION

Internationalization has become a key strategic priority for higher education institutions across Africa (Altbach & Knight, 2007; Knight, 2015). Existing scholarship highlights notable progress in international research collaborations, mobility of students and staff, curriculum reform, regional integration, and the growing use of digital technologies to enable global academic engagement (Teferra & Knight, 2008; Sawyerr, 2004). Collectively, these advances have expanded opportunities for knowledge exchange, strengthened institutional capacity, and enhanced the global visibility of African universities.

However, the literature also underscores persistent constraints. These include limited financial resources, continued brain drain of highly skilled academics, asymmetries in global partnerships, and restrictive policy and regulatory environments, all of which can limit the depth and sustainability of internationalization efforts (Bamiro, 2012; Cloete et al., 2015; Teferra, 2020).

Looking forward, there is broad agreement on the need for more balanced and context-sensitive approaches. This entails building equitable partnerships, deepening regional and continental collaboration, leveraging digital innovation, and integrating African epistemologies within global academic discourse (Knight, 2015; Odora Hoppers, 2009). Such an approach positions African universities to engage more effectively with the world while remaining responsive to local development priorities and contributing to broader continental transformation.

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