



**Unlocking African Youth Potential
through International Higher
Education Partnerships Report**

Research Report

January 2025

[www.britishcouncil.org/
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Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the British Council for their support and collaboration throughout this research. Their guidance and resources were instrumental in shaping the study and ensuring its successful delivery. We would also like to thank the British Council Country representatives for their support during the data collection process. Their efforts in connecting the research team with relevant key stakeholders were of great assistance.

Special thanks go to the representatives from higher education institutions, government officials, policymakers, international partners, non-governmental organisations, and civil society organisations for sharing their time, expertise, and insights. Most importantly, we extend our heartfelt appreciation to the young people who participated in this research. Your voices, experiences and aspirations have been at the heart of this study, and your contributions have provided valuable insights that will inform the future of International Higher Education Partnerships.

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Abbreviations

Abbreviation	Meaning
ACE	African Centres of Excellence
AG	Attorney General
AR	Action Research
ARUA	African Research Universities Alliance
CHE	Commission for Higher Education
COVID	Coronavirus Disease
CSO	Civil Society Organisation
CUE	Commission for University Education
DHET	Department of Higher Education and Training
EFAC	Education for All Coalition
ESSA	Education Sub-Saharan Africa
EU	European Union
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
GDPR	General Data Protection Regulation
GTEC	Ghana Tertiary Education Commission
HE	Higher Education
HEI	Higher Education Institution
HELB	Higher Education Loans Board
ICT	Information and Communication Technology
IHEP	International Higher Education Partnership
IHEPS	International Higher Education Partnerships
KII	Key Informant Interview
LGA	Local Government Area
LMA	Labour Market Alignment
LSE	London School of Economics
MO	Ministry of Education
NAB	National Accreditation Board
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
NGOS	Non-Governmental Organisations
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
SSA	Sub-Saharan Africa
STEM	Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics
TNE	Transnational Education
UCT	University of Cape Town
UK	United Kingdom
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

Abbreviation	Meaning
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
YES	Youth Empowerment Strategy

Executive Summary

Background

This report explores the transformative potential of International Higher Education Partnerships (IHEPs) in unlocking the vast potential of Africa's youth by addressing systemic challenges within higher education. With a special focus on Sub-Saharan Africa, and particularly on South Africa, Ghana, Kenya, and Nigeria, the research examines how collaborative international efforts can enhance educational outcomes and empower young people in the region. Africa's burgeoning youth population, poised to double by 2050¹, represents both an unparalleled opportunity and a pressing challenge. Harnessing this demographic dividend necessitates innovative and inclusive approaches that bridge gaps between education and employment, foster innovation, and equip young people with globally competitive skills.

IHEPs emerge as a strategic solution to these challenges by fostering collaborations between African higher education institutions (HEIs) and global counterparts. These partnerships enable knowledge exchange, capacity building, and the creation of inclusive pathways to success. The study employed a rapid, complexity-informed action research approach to capture diverse stakeholder perspectives, including higher education institutions (HEIs), non-governmental organisations (NGOs), international partners, government representatives, and young people. Data collection included key informant interviews (KIIs) and surveys, with young people making up 75% of respondents, ensuring their voices were central to the analysis. The research explored the specific needs of African youth, identified factors contributing to successful partnerships, and highlighted barriers that limit their impact. Findings underscored the importance of reciprocity, mutual respect, and alignment with local priorities such as health, agriculture, and education. Capacity-building initiatives, including joint research, faculty exchanges, and professional development programmes, emerged as critical to sustainable benefits and long-term educational resilience.

Findings

This study explored key areas related to International Higher Education Partnerships (IHEPs), focusing on their role in bridging gaps between education and employment, empowering African youth, and fostering sustainable development. The findings, aligned with the research questions, are summarised below:

Youth perceptions and experiences of higher education, IHEPs and transitions from university to the labour market:

1. *What are the current gaps between university education and the expectations of young Africans regarding future employment?*
 - The overwhelming majority of the young people surveyed reported a mismatch between university teachings and workplace skill requirements, particularly in practical and technical competencies
 - Universities emphasise theoretical knowledge over practical skills, with outdated curricula and software tools that don't align with modern workplace requirements
 - Severe resource limitations affect quality, with approximately 1,300 accredited universities serving over 1.4 billion people in Africa (one university per million residents)²
 - Survey data from AfDB revealed significant skills mismatches³:
 - 28.9% of youth are underskilled
 - 56.9% are undereducated
 - 17.5% are over skilled

¹ Bekele-Thomas, N. & Westgaard, S. (2024). Unlocking the potential of Africa's youth. Available from: <https://www.un.org/africarenewal/magazine/october-2024/unlocking-potential-africa%E2%80%99s-youth#:~:text=By%202050%2C%20Africa's%20youth%20population.of%20the%20global%20workforce%20increase>.

² Faek, R. (2024). International Student Mobility in Sub-Saharan Africa, Part 1: Regional Overview. Available from: <https://wenr.wes.org/2024/09/international-student-mobility-in-sub-saharan-africa-trends-in-nigeria-and-ghanainternational-student-mobility-in-sub-saharan-africa/print/>

³ African Development Bank (2019). Youth Jobs, Skill and Educational Mismatches in Africa. Accessed on: 03/02/2025

- 8.3% are overeducated
2. *What lessons can be drawn from the experiences of young people who have followed non-traditional education and career paths?*
 - Young people are increasingly embracing digital platforms, multiple activities, and volunteer work to enhance employability
 - The gig economy is growing at 20% annually in Africa, with projections of 80 million gig workers by 2030⁴
 - Bureaucratic processes and outdated policies often hinder the adoption of non-traditional education pathways, particularly in course accreditation
 - Young people are taking more control of their careers through multiple income streams and entrepreneurial ventures
 3. *What strategies can bridge the gap between formal education and the changing job market?*
 - Align university curricula with labour market demands through regular reviews and industry collaboration
 - Partner with local NGOs and CSOs to provide career development and mentorship opportunities
 - Leverage International Higher Education Partnerships (IHEPs) to provide practical skills and exposure
 - Implement on-campus career development initiatives between classes to prepare students for the workforce
 - Address financial barriers and improve awareness of available opportunities through IHEPs
 4. *What are the perceptions and experiences of youth participants in IHEPs, including their access to quality education, skills training, and international networks, and how do these contribute to their empowerment and future opportunities?*
 - IHEPs provide valuable practical training and exposure to state-of-the-art tools often unavailable in home institutions
 - Participants gain essential transferable skills including teamwork, communication, and adaptability
 - International networks developed through IHEPs enhance access to further educational opportunities and professional connections
 - Programmes like the Mandela Washington Fellowship offer practical experience that complements theoretical knowledge
 - Main barriers to IHEP participation include limited awareness and financial constraints

Young people's participation in higher education policy- and decision-making:

1. *How can young people actively participate in shaping educational policies and decisions?*

Young people have several formal pathways to participate in shaping educational policies and decisions. These mechanisms exist at both institutional and national levels, though their effectiveness varies significantly across different contexts. The main channels for participation include:

- Through formal student representative structures in university governing bodies (councils, senates, faculty boards) with voting rights and direct input into institutional policies
- Via national student associations that aggregate student interests and lobby different national structures, including ministries of education and parliamentary committees
- Through participation in intermediary bodies like national commissions/councils on higher education, quality assurance committees, and student loan boards
- By conducting academic research and innovative work through their studies or youth organisations
- Through student representative councils (SRCs) that mediate between students and university management and organise collective action when formal channels prove ineffective

⁴ Mastercard Foundation. (2019). Digital Commerce and Youth Employment in Africa. Available from: https://mastercardfdn.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/BFA_Digital-Commerce-White-Paper_FINAL_Feb-2019-aoda.pdf

2. *How could youth be included and what value could young people contribute to the process?*

The research demonstrates compelling reasons for including youth in educational policy-making, while also highlighting significant challenges that need to be addressed. Young people bring distinctive perspectives and valuable insights that can enhance policy development and implementation.

Value and rationale for youth inclusion:

- Demographic imperative: Youth constitute the majority of Africa's population, and their exclusion from decision-making processes fundamentally undermines policy effectiveness
- Fresh perspectives: Young people bring innovative approaches and digital literacy that are vital for policy development, often developing solutions through self-directed learning and peer collaboration
- Firsthand knowledge: Youth have direct experience of contemporary challenges in higher education, including:
 - Barriers to access and participation
 - Quality and relevance of current curricula
 - Resource constraints and infrastructure needs
 - Digital transformation requirements
 - Graduate employment challenges

However, the research also identifies substantial barriers that currently limit meaningful youth participation:

- Limited access to decision-making spaces
- Financial constraints preventing participation
- Lack of awareness about opportunities
- Hierarchical systems that prioritise elder voices
- Token representation rather than genuine partnership
- Consultation occurring after key decisions have been made
- Inadequate resources for youth engagement activities

The findings emphasise that while formal structures for youth participation exist across African countries, there remains a significant gap between rhetorical commitments and meaningful participation in practice. This suggests a need for systemic reform to ensure that youth participation moves beyond token representation to genuine engagement in educational policy-making processes.

IHEPs and youth empowerment:

1. *What are the existing International Higher Education Partnerships (IHEPs) involving African institutions, and what is their current impact on youth empowerment and development?*

The research reveals that IHEPs across Africa have evolved significantly since the early 2000s, with three primary types of partnerships emerging:

- Exchange programmes: These serve as the dominant form of partnership, particularly emphasised by NGO representatives from Kenya and Nigeria for their role in providing global exposure and cultural adaptability
- Research fellowships: Academic stakeholders particularly value these as essential tools for developing Africa's next generation of research leaders
- Capacity-building workshops: These focus on practical skill development, ranging from digital literacy to project management

The impact of these partnerships is significant, with data showing:

- Students who participate in international academic programmes are 23% more likely to secure formal employment within one year of graduation⁵
- Co-authored research papers receive 50% more citations than single-institution publications from African universities⁶
- STEM education opportunities for young African women have expanded, with partner-supported programmes showing a 40% increase in female enrolment in technology and engineering courses over the past five years⁷

However, the research also highlights significant accessibility challenges:

- The majority of surveyed students indicated there were "none" or very limited IHEP opportunities available through their universities
- Where programmes exist, an overwhelming majority of students have not participated
- Financial constraints emerge as the primary barrier to participation, creating inequity between Global North and Global South students

2. *What are the main challenges and opportunities faced in implementing effective IHEPs for youth development in Africa?*

The research identifies several key opportunities and focus areas for IHEPs:

- Digital literacy: Partnership programmes increasingly emphasise digital transformation and STEM education to prepare students for future job markets
- Leadership development: Youth participants strongly advocate for leadership-focused programming that provides platforms for voice and influence
- Inclusive programming: Particular attention is being paid to reaching marginalised communities and underrepresented youth, especially in rural areas

However, significant challenges persist:

- Resource management: While partnerships can provide access to larger budgets, funding remains a critical constraint
- Sustainability concerns: Stakeholders emphasise the need for partnership models that extend beyond traditional funding cycles
- Communication barriers: Effective partnerships require clear communication channels and shared vision among all stakeholders

Key success factors for effective partnerships include:

- Strong communication and clear vision: Reduced bureaucracy and aligned objectives enable faster decision-making
- Institutional support: Adequate funding and resource allocation are crucial for scaling programmes
- Community engagement: Successful partnerships recognise the importance of working jointly with local communities
- Monitoring and evaluation: Strong feedback mechanisms ensure continuous improvement and adaptation

The research indicates that while IHEPs show promising potential for youth empowerment in Africa, realising this potential requires addressing fundamental inequities, particularly in programme accessibility

⁵ Rahman, S. & Nduru, M. (2023). Employment outcomes of international academic program participants in Sub-Saharan Africa. *Journal of Education and Work*, 36(1), 45-62.

⁶ Kigotho, W. (2021). The impact of international collaboration on research quality in African universities. *University World News Africa Edition*, 12(4), 1-3.

⁷ Mensah, K., & Osei-Tutu, B. (2022). Gender transformation in African STEM education: The role of international partnerships. *African Journal of Science, Technology and Innovation*, 14(2), 156-171.

and resource allocation. Future partnerships must evolve beyond traditional models to ensure more equitable participation and sustainable impact for African youth development.

3. *How can IHEPs be tailored to address the specific needs and challenges of African youth?*

The findings suggest IHEPs could be tailored through:

- Greater focus on local context and community needs
- Enhanced digital literacy and STEM education opportunities
- Increased funding and financial support mechanisms
- More inclusive programme design targeting underrepresented groups
- Stronger integration of practical skills development

4. *What are the key recommendations for policymakers, educational institutions, and other stakeholders?*

The findings suggest several recommendations:

- Develop more sustainable funding models to ensure programme continuity
- Create stronger feedback mechanisms incorporating youth voices
- Enhance collaboration with local organisations and communities
- Focus on building long-term institutional capacity
- Address North-South inequities in programme access and implementation

Factors for successful IHEPs to empower young people:

1. *How do successful IHEPs foster collaboration and knowledge exchange between African and international partners?*

Successful IHEPs build effective collaboration through several key mechanisms:

- Mutual benefits and reciprocity:
 - African institutions provide context-specific knowledge and unique research environments
 - International partners contribute advanced technologies, funding, and global networks
 - Both parties gain from shared expertise and resources
- Alignment with local priorities:
 - Partnerships respond to specific regional needs and challenges
 - Projects align with national and regional development agendas
 - Focus on issues like public health, agricultural productivity, and educational access
- Capacity-building initiatives:
 - Joint research projects facilitate knowledge transfer
 - Faculty and student exchanges enable cross-cultural learning
 - Professional development programmes build local expertise
- Effective governance:
 - Clear communication channels ensure transparency
 - Regular monitoring and evaluation track progress
 - Digital platforms enable continuous engagement
 - Well-defined roles and responsibilities maintain efficiency

2. *What are the ethical considerations and challenges in IHEPs?*

Key ethical challenges include:

- Power imbalances:
 - Historical colonial relationships influence modern partnerships
 - Western academic models often dominate

- Unequal decision-making power in curriculum development
- Limited recognition of local expertise
- Resource and infrastructure disparities:
 - Limited access to research facilities
 - Unreliable internet connectivity
 - Inadequate library resources
 - Financial constraints affecting programme sustainability
- Cultural and contextual challenges:
 - Misalignment between international approaches and local customs
 - Language barriers and differing academic traditions
 - Geographical distance hampering collaboration
 - Limited understanding of local contexts

3. *How can policy frameworks support scalability and sustainability?*

Essential policy elements include:

- Capacity-building networks:
 - Creation of African Centres of Excellence
 - Focus on specific research areas
 - Intra-African collaboration and specialisation
 - Knowledge sharing platforms
- Sustainable funding models:
 - Diversification of funding sources
 - Domestic investment from African governments
 - Private sector involvement
 - Public-private partnerships
- Technology integration:
 - Digital platforms for remote engagement
 - Online workshops and training sessions
 - Collaborative research tools
 - Investment in digital infrastructure
- Local context adaptation:
 - Customised frameworks for specific regions
 - Consideration of socio-economic factors
 - Cultural sensitivity in programme design
 - Institutional ownership

The research emphasises that successful IHEPs require a balanced approach that addresses power dynamics, ensures equitable resource distribution, and maintains cultural sensitivity while building sustainable local capacity. Policy frameworks must support long-term development while fostering genuine partnership and mutual respect between African and international institutions.

4. *How can the findings and insights from this research contribute to broader discussions and actions aimed at unlocking Africa's youth potential for sustainable development through international higher education partnerships?*

- The research demonstrates that effective IHEPs can serve as powerful catalysts for youth development when they:
 - Create pathways for skills development and employment opportunities
 - Enable knowledge transfer and capacity building
 - Foster global networks and cross-cultural competencies
 - Provide access to advanced technologies and research facilities

- The findings suggest that unlocking Africa's youth potential requires addressing systemic barriers through:
 - More equitable partnership models that recognise and value local knowledge
 - Increased investment in digital infrastructure to enable broader participation
 - Development of sustainable funding mechanisms that reduce dependency
 - Creation of inclusive programmes that reach marginalised communities
- The research highlights the importance of youth voice and agency in:
 - Shaping partnership priorities and programmes
 - Ensuring relevance to local contexts and needs
 - Building sustainable and scalable solutions
 - Fostering innovation and entrepreneurship
- The findings underscore the need for a comprehensive approach that:
 - Aligns educational partnerships with employment opportunities
 - Builds bridges between academic knowledge and practical skills
 - Creates pathways for knowledge circulation between the Global North and the Global South
 - Supports the development of local research and innovation capacity

By understanding and addressing these elements, stakeholders can work toward creating more effective and equitable IHEPs that truly serve as vehicles for unlocking Africa's youth potential and contributing to sustainable development across the continent.

Recommendations

Recommendations for higher education institutions:

- Curriculum and assessment and design: Universities must align their offerings with both regional and global needs. For example, the University of Cape Town partnered with the University of Bristol to develop a joint master's programme in Climate Adaptation that combines local and international perspectives⁸
- Partnership development: Institutions should focus on creating equitable partnerships that ensure mutual benefits and capacity building. The South African Network of Skills Abroad (SANSA) demonstrates this through its model of fostering balanced collaboration between South African universities and international partners⁹
- Policy implementation: Universities need robust institutional structures to implement partnership policies effectively, including centralised monitoring systems to track outcomes and align them with institutional priorities

Recommendations for government and policy-makers:

- Policy environment: Governments should create supportive frameworks through initiatives like tax incentives for beneficial partnerships and targeted scholarship programmes for underserved regions
- Visa processes: Simplified visa procedures are crucial; Ghana's "Priority Visa Pathway" for international academic staff and students shows how streamlined processes can enhance academic mobility¹⁰
- Infrastructure support: Targeted investment in infrastructure, particularly for historically disadvantaged institutions, is essential. The African Development Bank's Education Support Programme exemplifies this through funding ICT upgrades in Nigerian institutions¹¹.

⁸ Maringe, F., Chiramba, O., Banda, T., Magabane, A., & Chibaya, S. (2024). Exploring Internationalisation of Higher Education at Public Universities in South Africa: Intentions, Practices, Opportunities and Constraints.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Middlehurst, R., & Fielden, J. (2016). Learning Excellence: 26 International Case Studies. Higher Education Academy in partnership with CHEMS Consulting.

¹¹ Maringe, F., Chiramba, O., Banda, T., Magabane, A., & Chibaya, S. (2024). Exploring Internationalisation of Higher Education at Public Universities in South Africa: Intentions, Practices, Opportunities and Constraints.

Recommendations for NGOs and CSOs:

- Capacity building: Organisations should focus on equipping institutions with necessary skills and tools for internationalisation, following successful models like the Erasmus+ programme's staff training initiatives.
- Decolonial approaches: NGOs should promote equitable knowledge exchange and mutual respect, as demonstrated by the African Research Universities Alliance's collaboration with Brazilian universities¹².

Recommendations for international partners:

- Technology utilisation: Partners should leverage technology to broaden participation, following examples like the British Council's "Going Global Partnerships" virtual platform¹³
- Regional specificity: Partnerships should be tailored to local contexts, as shown by the East African Community's harmonisation of higher education policies¹⁴

Cross-cutting recommendations for all stakeholders:

- Monitoring and evaluation: All parties should implement robust systems to track partnership outcomes and ensure they meet intended goals
- South-South collaboration: Stakeholders should encourage partnerships between institutions in the Global South to reduce dependence on traditional North-South models

The research emphasises several key factors for successful implementation:

- Youth voice must be central to all initiatives
- Partnerships should be equitable and mutually beneficial
- Infrastructure and resource needs must be addressed
- Digital access and technology adoption should be prioritised
- Long-term financial sustainability is crucial
- Gradual implementation with pilot programmes is recommended
- Regular monitoring and evaluation is essential

These recommendations collectively aim to transform international higher education partnerships into more effective tools for youth empowerment and development in Africa.

¹² Maringe, F., Chiramba, O., Banda, T., Magabane, A., & Chibaya, S. (2024). Exploring Internationalisation of Higher Education at Public Universities in South Africa: Intentions, Practices, Opportunities and Constraints.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

1. Introduction

The report presents findings from a research study designed to extend and complement existing [research](#) on the role of international higher education partnerships in youth empowerment efforts. The report explores how International Higher Education Partnerships (IHEPs) can effectively empower African youth, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa, by bridging gaps in education and addressing the unique challenges they face in transitioning from higher education to the labour market. Genesis Analytics was contracted by the British Council to conduct a study aimed at examining the alignment between educational offerings and employment opportunities, the role of non-traditional career pathways, and young people's participation in educational policy making. The study also seeks to understand how IHEPs can contribute to sustainable development, fostering a skilled, employable, and engaged youth population in Africa.

The remaining chapters of the report are organised as follows:

- **Chapter 2** outlines the overall approach to the study
- **Chapter 3** provides a detailed description of the method of implementation including the limitations of this study
- **Chapter 4** presents an in-depth analysis of the study's findings
- **Chapter 5** presents the conclusions and discusses key recommendations informed by the findings

The following additional information has also been included in the annexes, which are available as a separate document upon request:

- Annex 1 provides a list of documents and databases that were reviewed
- Annex 2 includes the information sheet and consent form
- Annex 3 contains the various data collection tools utilised to engage the key informants of the study

1.2. Research Objectives

The overarching objective of this project was to explore and leverage the potential of international higher education partnerships in contributing to youth development (and, by extension, young people's ability to contribute to national, regional, and global sustainable development goals) positively and meaningfully. In fulfilling this objective, the research aimed to:

- Identify and evaluate international higher education partnerships (especially those that have actively collaborated with young people)
- Centre the perspectives, aspirations, experiences, and ideas of young people concerning higher education and educational futures
- Identify the key challenges and opportunities related to the design and implementation of effective IHEPs for youth development in the research countries as well as in Africa more broadly; and
- Develop policy and best practice recommendations for promoting and sustaining youth-focused IHEPs in Africa

1.3. Scope of the Study

While the study explores broader trends across Sub-Saharan Africa, it focuses specifically on Nigeria, Kenya, Ghana, and South Africa. To gain a comprehensive understanding of the landscape, insights and data were gathered from diverse stakeholders including:

- Youth: To capture their first-hand experiences and ensure their voices are heard and are at the forefront of this study. We define youth as those young people aged 18 - 35. This definition aligns with the African Union definition (15 - 35) as well as with conceptual definitions which acknowledge that young people in Africa experience involuntary prolonged “youth-hood” due to various socio-economic challenges¹⁵. We chose the lower limit of 18 to reflect the demographic that is likely to be enrolled in higher education.
- Representatives of higher education institutions: We included HE representatives from both public and private universities, and spoke to lecturers, a Deputy Vice Chancellor of Research and programme managers in university departments of internationalisation.
- International Partners that promote and/or deliver IHEPs
- Non-Government Organizations (NGOs), Civil Society Organisations (CSOs)
- Government representatives and policymakers

A total of 108 participants contributed to this study through interviews and a survey; 68 of the participants were African youth. Further details on the participants can be found in Chapter 2.

1.4. Relevance of the study to the British Council

This study is highly relevant and aligns closely with the British Council’s mission to foster connections, understanding, and trust between the UK and other nations. Emphasising the importance of international partnerships in higher education highlights their critical role in addressing educational challenges, fostering knowledge exchange, and supporting the development of African youths in and from Sub-Saharan Africa. This focus not only illustrates the importance of collaboration but also reflects the British Council’s commitment to empowering young people through access to quality education and opportunities.

The study also provides valuable insights into the key barriers African students face in accessing quality education. By unpacking and contextualising these challenges within the larger regional setting, the study offers a deeper understanding of how educational systems can evolve to address diverse needs among youth. The findings may be used to facilitate dialogue that informs policies and practices that benefit individual countries while strengthening the interconnectedness of the global higher education ecosystem. Finally, the study demonstrates how partnerships among various institutions can build sustained relationships based on trust, mutual respect, equity, and shared understanding when designed to address shared challenges.

1.5. Context

The last two decades have been characterised by significant developments and transformations in Africa’s higher education sector. As of 2024, Africa boasts 1,274 officially recognised higher education institutions¹⁶. Of the 1,274 formally recognised higher education institutions in Africa, 625 of those are public institutions and 611 are private institutions; the remaining HEIs are unknown or have not been reported¹⁷. Public universities dominate Africa’s higher education sector (over 80% of all students are enrolled in public universities¹⁸). They also drive knowledge production. Predominantly supported by funding from the government, they offer diverse programmes to meet national needs. However, challenges such as overcrowding, limited infrastructure, and resource constraints are exacerbated by rising demand due to population growth and higher secondary school completion rates, underscoring the need for alternative solutions¹⁹.

The gap in capacity has paved the way for private higher education institutions (PHEIs) in Africa. These institutions have played a crucial role in addressing the growing demand for higher education that public institutions alone cannot meet. These institutions vary widely in terms of size, scope, and mission, ranging from small,

¹⁵ Honwana, A. (2013). Youth, Waithood, and Protest Movements in Africa. Available from:

<https://africanarguments.org/2013/08/youth-waithood-and-protest-movements-in-africa-by-alcinda-honwana/>

¹⁶ UniRank (2024). Universities in Africa; Higher Education In Africa. Accessed on: 27/08/2024. Available at: <https://www.4icu.org/Africa/>

¹⁷ Ibid.

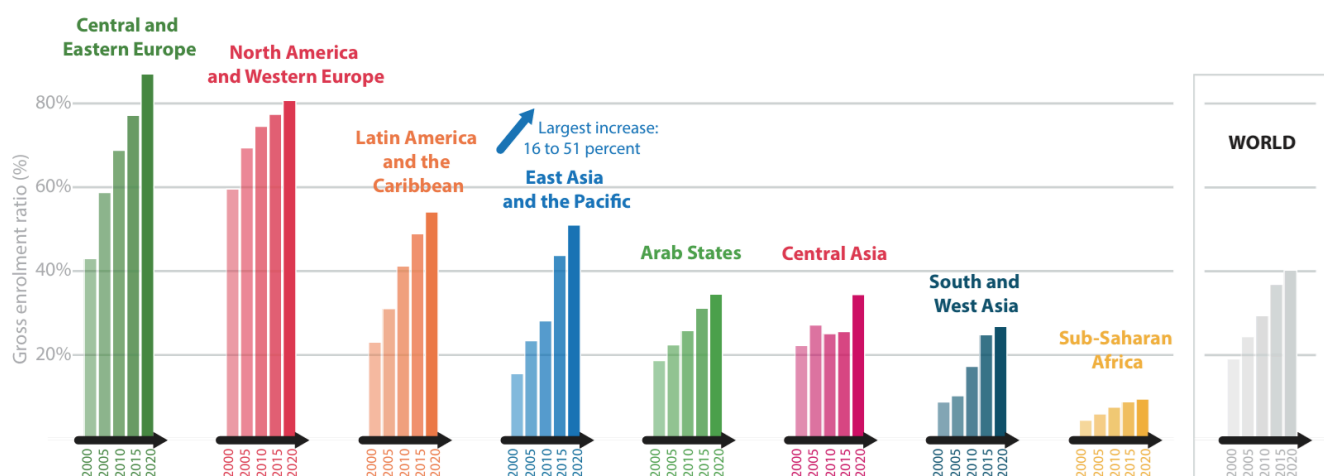
¹⁸ Tamrat, W., & Teferra, D. (2024). Private Higher Education: A Global Overview. In W. Tamrat & D. Teferra (Eds.), *Emerging Dynamics in the Provision of Private Higher Education in Africa* (pp. 1-24). Springer Nature Switzerland AG.

¹⁹ Jowi, J. O. (2024). Recent developments in higher education in Africa: partnerships for knowledge transformations. *Journal of International Cooperation in Education*. 26(1): 34 - 48.

specialised colleges to large, comprehensive universities. However, “despite their phenomenal number and rate of growth over the last decade”, PHEIs have the lowest share of enrolment in Africa at 18%, below the global average of 33%²⁰. This limited enrolment highlights several challenges specific to PHEIs: 1) financial constraints and heavy reliance on student fees, which makes them unaffordable for many students; 2) negative perceptions about quality; 3) difficulties attracting qualified staff; and 4) limited programme offerings, often focused on low-cost disciplines, restricting academic diversity. They face strict regulatory environments and minimal government support²¹. Moreover, PHEIs face strong competition from more established and subsidised public universities, which continue to dominate African higher education due to their long-standing presence, broader accessibility, and government funding²². These interconnected factors illustrate why African higher education remains predominantly a public enterprise, despite the growing presence of private institutions.

The gross enrolment ratio (GER) for higher education in Sub-Saharan Africa increased from 4% in 2000 to 9% in 2020, compared to a global rise from 19% to 40% over the same period^{23 24}. While Africa’s GER remains low, it has shown one of the fastest growth rates globally²⁵. This surge reflects the recognition of higher education as essential for socio-economic development and human capital formation²⁶. Projections indicate that by 2080, young people aged 15 - 24 will account for 500 million of Africa’s population²⁷. This youth bulge confronts development partners with two possible outcomes: (a) a young, agile, and healthy working-age population to swell the ranks of the labour market and industry, and (b) a young population that is susceptible to social ills such as inadequate education, under-employment, recruitment into armed conflict, poverty, and a state of hopelessness. African countries seek to reduce the ratio of non-working people to working people²⁸. The higher education system is pivotal in equipping Africa’s youth with the skills, competencies, and tools necessary to contribute to their economies and societies actively and meaningfully—not merely as recipients of welfare but as innovators, pioneers, and future leaders. To fulfil this role, both public and private higher education institutions must adapt and expand to address the rising demand for education and support the continent’s broader development aspirations.

Figure 1: GER in Tertiary Education by Region²⁹



²⁰Tamrat, W., & Teferra, D. (2024). Private Higher Education: A Global Overview. In W. Tamrat & D. Teferra (Eds.), *Emerging Dynamics in the Provision of Private Higher Education in Africa* (pp. 1-24). Springer Nature Switzerland AG.

²¹Ibid

²² Ibid.

²³World Bank (2024) School enrolment, Tertiary - Sub-Saharan Africa. Available at:

<https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.TER.ENRR?locations=ZG>

²⁴UNESCO (2022). Higher education figures at a glance. Available at:

https://uis.unesco.org/sites/default/files/documents/f_unesco1015_brochure_web_en.pdf

²⁵Jowi, J.O. (2024), "Recent developments in higher education in Africa: partnerships for knowledge transformations", *Journal of International Cooperation in Education*, Vol. 26 No. 1, pp. 34-48. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JICE-11-2023-0037>

²⁶African Union. (2013). 'Agenda 2063: The Africa we want'. Available at: https://au.int/Agenda2063/popular_version

²⁷World Bank (2023). Investing In Youth, Transforming Africa. Accessed on: 27/08/2024. Available at:

<https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2023/06/27/investing-in-youth-transforming-afe-africa>

²⁸World Bank (2012). Youth Bulge: A Demographic Dividend or a Demographic Bomb in Developing Countries? Accessed on: 27/08/2024.

Available at:

<https://blogs.worldbank.org/en/developmenttalk/youth-bulge-a-demographic-dividend-or-a-demographic-bomb-in-developing-countries>

²⁹UNESCO (2022). Higher education figures at a glance. Available at:

https://uis.unesco.org/sites/default/files/documents/f_unesco1015_brochure_web_en.pdf

The higher education sector in Africa faces significant challenges as demand outpaces the capacity of HEIs, driven by a growing youth population and the perceived importance of higher education for socio-economic mobility. Many institutions struggle with inadequate infrastructure, insufficient faculty, and inconsistent government funding, often falling below UNESCO's recommended 26% budget allocation³⁰. This financial instability limits HEIs' ability to upgrade facilities, invest in research, and retain qualified staff. High out-of-pocket expenses for students further exacerbate barriers to access. The "Fees Must Fall" movement in South Africa, for example, underscored the financial struggles faced by students and the need for more affordable higher education³¹. Furthermore, the quality of infrastructure in many African HEIs is often substandard, with outdated laboratories, inadequate libraries, and limited access to digital resources, all of which impede the delivery of quality education³².

International Higher Education Partnerships (IHEPs) have been central to the development of higher education in Africa. For instance, IHEPs play a key role in capacity development, primarily through exchange and visiting programmes with institutions in the global North³³. However, North-South partnerships have also been criticised as being inequitable and unresponsive to the challenges facing local communities³⁴. More recently, Intra-African Higher Education Partnerships (HEPs), driven by revitalised regional economic communities, are creating opportunities for knowledge exchange, innovation, and context-relevant research among African HEIs. Initiatives like the African Research Universities Alliance (ARUA) and RUFORUM also strengthen African institutions' engagement in strategic IHEPs³⁵.

With Africa's growing youth population, it is vital to centre young people's experiences in designing IHEPs.

Whether the youth bulge becomes a demographic dividend or a challenge depends on investments in infrastructure and resources. Globally, inadequate attention and funding often leave young people feeling like their contributions are undervalued³⁶. This is experienced more acutely by young women, who are often underrepresented in decision-making spaces (i.e.: the average proportion of women in parliament in Africa stood at 23.6% in 2019)³⁷. In Nigeria, for example, young people perceive their voices in local, national, and international public discourse as limited and insignificant compared to more dominant groups that include politicians, religious leaders, celebrities, and prominent human rights activists, as well as violent groups such as Boko Haram³⁸.

Many young people in Africa find themselves in positions of "waithood" and face several challenges³⁹.

Access to higher education remains limited, and even for those who complete their studies, securing employment is a significant challenge. Reports consistently highlight concerns about graduate unemployment in countries such as Kenya, Ghana, Nigeria, and South Africa⁴⁰. In Nigeria, the unemployment rate for graduates with undergraduate degrees is as high as 23%⁴¹. In South Africa, while graduate unemployment is lower overall, it is rising, particularly

³⁰ UNESCO (2022). Higher education figures at a glance. Available at:

https://uis.unesco.org/sites/default/files/documents/f_unesco1015_brochure_web_en.pdf

³¹Dube, K. (2024). Challenges and Opportunities Facing Higher Education in South Africa. In: Dube, K. (eds) Redefining Education and Development. Springer, Cham. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-69954-2_2

³²Jowi, J.O. (2024), "Recent developments in higher education in Africa: partnerships for knowledge transformations", Journal of International Cooperation in Education, Vol. 26 No. 1, pp. 34-48. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JICE-11-2023-0037>

³³Ibid

³⁴Ibid

³⁵Ibid

³⁶British Council (2022). Next Generation. Youth Voice: Political and Civic Engagement. Accessed on:

<https://www.britishcouncil.org/research-insight/next-generation-what-we-know>

³⁷ United Nations Economic Commission for Africa. 2019. Women in decision-making spheres in Africa. Available from:

https://www.un.org/shestandsforpeace/sites/www.un.org.shestandsforpeace/files/women_in_decision_making_spheres_in_africa_by_un_eca.pdf

³⁸British Council (2020). Next Generation: Nigeria-November 2020. Accessed at:

<https://www.britishcouncil.org/research-insight/next-generation-nigeria#:~:text=Next%20Generation%20is%20a%20global,last%20implication%20for%20their%20lives>

³⁹Honwana, A. (2013). 'Youth, waithood and protest movements in Africa' (lecture). Available at: <https://repositorio.iscte-iul.pt/handle/10071/7528>

⁴⁰British Council (2014) Can higher education solve Africa's job crisis? Understanding graduate employability in Sub-Saharan Africa. Available at: https://www.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/graduate_employability_in_ssa_final-web.pdf

⁴¹Punch Newspaper. (2024). Rising Graduate Unemployment. Available here: <https://punchng.com/rising-graduate-unemployment/>

among young, Black graduates⁴². It is important to note, however, that different methods of measuring and reporting on unemployment make cross-country comparisons challenging.

Moreover, young people lack opportunities to earn sufficient incomes through other means, like entrepreneurship. While unemployment has driven many to start their businesses, access to entrepreneurship funding remains a significant hurdle as research indicates that “youth-led businesses are more likely to struggle to secure financial resources”⁴³. These challenges are not borne equally by all young people. Marginalised youth, including women, those from poor backgrounds, and those with disabilities, are disproportionately affected⁴⁴. Placing young people at the heart of higher education and IHEP initiatives is vital to addressing these challenges and equipping them with the skills and confidence to drive regional development.

Academic mobility is a key way in which African youth participate in IHEPs. Africa has a long history of student mobility to other regions, dating back to the colonial era⁴⁵. Despite high costs and visa difficulties, Africa remains one of the most mobile regions globally. Between 2000 and 2017, the number of Africans studying abroad grew from 2 million to 5.3 million, driven by inadequate local educational capacities and the perceived quality of foreign training⁴⁶. However, the extent to which these students participate in bilateral IHEPs, such as government-to-government agreements with the global North, remains unclear. International education opportunities are largely limited to students from wealthier, urban households, comprising just 2% of the population by global middle-class standards⁴⁷. Structural inequalities such as high visa denial rates—over 80% for some East African applicants to Canada—further restrict access⁴⁸. While emerging powers like China, Russia, and India offer large-scale government scholarships, western funding remains fragmented and harder to access⁴⁹. Further barriers include weak currency exchange rates that diminish purchasing power, low internet penetration that restricts access to information about opportunities, and an underdeveloped educational services infrastructure outside major economic hubs⁵⁰. These factors create a stark divide between African students' access to international education compared to their peers from wealthier regions, despite Sub-Saharan Africa having one of the highest outbound mobility ratios worldwide⁵¹.

There is growing concern that scholarships and research funding opportunities worth millions of Euros are not being utilised, resulting in lost chances for many⁵². Challenges such as complex application processes and limited awareness hinder access to partnerships. For those who benefit, the advantages go beyond qualifications, fostering global citizenship and skills like tolerance and creativity. Equity is crucial, as African students are often seen solely as scholarship beneficiaries, overlooking their contributions to host institutions. Partnerships must also strengthen African institutions to reduce brain drain.

⁴²Tivarange, T. (2019) The Social Unemployment Gap in South Africa: Limits of Enabling Socio-Economic Redress Through Expanding Access to Higher Education. *Education Policy Analysis Archives*. 27(155): 1 - 31.

⁴³International Trade Centre. (2024). 'Access to Finance for Young African Entrepreneurs'. Available from: <https://intracen.org/file/yepublication58210pdf>

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵Jowi, J.O. (2024), "Recent developments in higher education in Africa: partnerships for knowledge transformations", *Journal of International Cooperation in Education*, Vol. 26 No. 1, pp. 34-48. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JICE-11-2023-0037>

⁴⁶Mulvey, B. (2021) Conceptualising the discourse of student mobility between “periphery” and “semi-periphery”: the case of Africa and China. *Higher Education*. 81: 437 – 451

⁴⁷ Faek, R. (2024). International Student Mobility in Sub-Saharan Africa, Part 1: Regional Overview. Available from: <https://wenr.wes.org/2024/09/international-student-mobility-in-sub-saharan-africa-trends-in-nigeria-and-ghanainternational-student-mobility-in-sub-saharan-africa/print/>

⁴⁸ Waruru, M. (2023). High study visa refusals: Is the recruitment model to blame? Available from: <https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20231108164350439>

⁴⁹ Nuwer, R. (2024). Why China has been a growing study destination for African students. Available from: <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-024-01599-z#:~:text=In%202018%2C%20the%20Chinese%20government,over%20the%20following%20three%20years.>

⁵⁰ Allison, K. n.d. Widening Participation in Outward Student Mobility A toolkit to support inclusive approaches. Available from: https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/sites/default/files/uploads/UUKi%20reports/Widening%20Participation%20in%20outward%20mobility_toolkit_web.pdf

⁵¹ Mulvey, B. (2021) Conceptualising the discourse of student mobility between “periphery” and “semi-periphery”: the case of Africa and China. *Higher Education*. 81: 437 – 451

⁵²Waruru, M (2024) Millions of Euros in Erasmus+ funds meant for Africa not used. *University World News*, 10 October.

2. The Approach

2.1. Complexity-Informed Action Research

This study employed complexity-informed action research, combining action research principles with complexity awareness. Action research is participatory, reflective, and cyclical, aiming to improve practices within specific contexts by integrating theory and practice⁵³. By incorporating complexity awareness, the approach acknowledges the interconnected and unpredictable nature of international higher education partnerships, considering systemic factors like socio-economic conditions and cultural dynamics. The pragmatic focus ensured practical, actionable outcomes for youth development⁵⁴. While sample size and time constraints were limiting factors, the research tools were designed to enable participants to co-create recommendations through targeted questions about student involvement, policy influence, and partnership improvements.

2.2. Research Questions

The primary research question was: How can international higher education partnerships be leveraged to foster youth development in Kenya, Ghana, Nigeria, and South Africa? To address this overarching question, we broke it down into four key research areas, each with specific sub-questions, as detailed in the table below. Additionally, we have highlighted how the methods outlined in the following section of this report are designed to answer these questions comprehensively.

⁵³ Stringer, E. T. (2013) *Action Research*. Sage Publications.

⁵⁴ Patton, M. Q. (2011) *Developmental Evaluation: Applying Complexity Concepts to Enhance Innovation and Use*. Guilford Press.

Table 1: Research Framework including the key questions and data sources

Focus Area	Key Areas	Secondary Data Sources	Primary Data Sources	
		Desk Research	KIIs	Survey
Perceptions and experiences of higher education, IHEPs and labour market transitions from university	What are the current gaps between university education and the expectations of young Africans regarding future employment?	✓	✓	✓
	What lessons can be drawn from the experiences of young people who have followed non-traditional education and career paths?	✓	✓	✓
	What strategies can bridge the gap between formal education and the changing job market?	✓	✓	✓
	What are the perceptions and experiences of youth participants in IHEPs, including their access to quality education, skills training, and international networks, and how do these contribute to their empowerment and future opportunities?	✓	✓	✓
	What role should creativity and innovation play in redefining education for the future of young Africans?	✓	✓	✓
Young people's participation in higher education policy- and decision-making	How can young people actively participate in shaping educational policies and decisions? How would it be included and what sort of value young people could contribute to the process?	✓	✓	✓
IHEPs and youth empowerment	What are the existing International Higher Education Partnerships (IHEPs) involving African institutions, and what is their current impact on youth empowerment and development?	✓	✓	✓
	What are the main challenges and opportunities faced in implementing effective IHEPs for youth development in Africa, from the perspectives of stakeholders including academia, government, and international organisations?	✓	✓	

Focus Area	Key Areas	Secondary Data Sources	Primary Data Sources	
		Desk Research	KIIs	Survey
	How can IHEPs be tailored to address the specific needs and challenges of African youth?	✓	✓	✓
	What are the key recommendations for policymakers, educational institutions, and other stakeholders?		✓	✓
Factors for successful IHEPs empowering youths.	How do successful IHEPs foster collaboration and knowledge exchange between African and international partners? What lessons can be learned from these partnerships for future initiatives?	✓	✓	
	What are the ethical considerations and potential challenges associated with international collaborations within IHEPs? How can these be addressed to ensure equitable and mutually beneficial outcomes for all stakeholders?	✓	✓	✓
	How can policy frameworks be developed or adapted to support the scalability and sustainability of IHEPs in Africa?	✓	✓	✓
	How can the findings and insights from this research contribute to broader discussions and actions aimed at unlocking Africa's youth potential for sustainable development through international higher education partnerships?	✓	✓	✓

3. Method of Implementation

3.1. Inception

The inception phase primarily involved refining the method of implementation, developing the data collection tools, updating the work plan, and producing the inception report. After the first draft had been submitted to the British Council, an inception design workshop was held on the 14th of August 2024, with the British Council representatives from the four countries of interest – Nigeria, Ghana, Kenya, and South Africa. To ensure maximum participation, the inception report was summarised and shared in the form of a PowerPoint presentation at least 24 hours before the workshop. In this workshop, the method of implementation was reviewed, and all comments and feedback were incorporated into the final inception report.

3.2. Data Collection Methods

3.2.1. Systematic Literature Review

Objective: This systematic literature review examined research on international higher education partnerships' impact on youth development in Kenya, Ghana, Nigeria, and South Africa.

Search strategy: The review utilised databases including Google Scholar, UNESCO, Scopus, ERIC, Web of Science, and JSTOR. Keywords focused on international higher education partnerships, youth development, and target countries, using Boolean operators to refine searches.

Selection criteria: Included materials from 2012-2024: peer-reviewed articles, IHEP initiative documents, research on youth development impacts, grey literature, and policy documents. We excluded materials unrelated to higher education partnerships or youth development.

Data analysis: Data was extracted using a standardised Excel sheet and synthesised thematically to identify patterns in partnership impacts, country-specific insights, and literature gaps. This rapid review informed subsequent primary data collection.

3.2.2. Primary Data Collection

The primary data collection exercise gathered first-hand insights from stakeholders involved in international higher education partnerships and youth development initiatives, primarily focusing on Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, and South Africa. The study employed purposive and snowball sampling methods, engaging 108 participants in total. Weekly meetings with the British Council team enabled ongoing review of the sample distribution and recruitment strategy. Three methods were employed:

a. Key Informant Interviews (KIIs)

Virtual interviews were conducted with 48 stakeholders, including youth, HEI representatives, NGOs, CSOs, government officials, and international partners. KIIs with young people (which included secondary school students transitioning to higher education, current higher education students and those who had recently graduated from higher education) focused on their experiences with higher education and IHEPs, including their expectations, barriers to access, and development goals. The study's methodology introduced potential self-selection bias that should be considered when interpreting findings. The reliance on virtual platforms meant participants needed reliable internet access and technological devices, likely skewing participation towards more resourced and

digitally-literate individuals. We tried to reach marginalised youth by recruiting them through the NGOs, CSOs and international partners that we interviewed, as well as through the British Council. Nonetheless, without extending the time allocated to this task and/or by conducting interviews in person, we recognise that this sampling approach may have inadvertently excluded voices from marginalised communities, particularly those facing digital poverty or in remote areas. Additionally, as participation was voluntary and recruitment largely occurred through professional networks and social media, respondents were likely to be those already engaged with educational initiatives or having prior exposure to international partnerships. While the insights gathered remain valuable, they may not fully represent the experiences of less privileged youth populations in the target countries. This could not be avoided without extending the time for data collection or by recruiting respondents in person.

The limited response from South African stakeholders significantly hampered our research, despite extensive follow-up efforts including multiple reminders and cold calls. Two key factors likely contributed to this challenge: first, our data collection coincided with the end of the academic year, when stakeholders had minimal availability; second, South Africa's complex institutional and governmental vetting processes created additional hurdles under our tight timeline.

Table 2: Number of Key Informants Interviewed

Stakeholder	Total
Government representatives and policy-makers	5
International partners	9
HEI representatives	10
NGOs and CSOs	5
Young people	19
Total	48

b. Focus Group Discussion(s)

We conducted a FGD with one group of young people (7 young people in Kenya), in line with the study aim of reaching as many young people as possible. These discussions provided a platform for dynamic interactions, enabling the participants to share their perspectives, experiences, and aspirations in an interactive manner. These young people were recruited through one of the key informant interviews, where an IHEP convener invited the young people they work with to speak to us about their experiences.

c. IHEP Survey

An online survey gathered 53 responses across ten African countries. While focused on the four target countries, the survey's social media distribution method resulted in significant participation from other nations, providing broader regional context but affecting country-specific representation. We worked with both the Genesis Analytics and British Council communications teams to determine the best survey distribution strategy. The survey was shared on LinkedIn and Instagram. It was available for three weeks (due to limitations on the overall time available to complete the project), which affected the number of respondents that we were able to get. Even though the second highest number of respondents were from Ethiopia (11), which was not a focus country, and the lowest number of respondents was from South Africa (1), which is a focus country, the survey still provides valuable insights into IHEPs in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Table 3: Number of Survey Respondents

Stakeholder	Number of survey respondents
HEI representatives	4
NGOs and CSOs	7
Young people	42
Total	53

Table 4: Survey Sample Distribution by Country

Countries	No. of Participants
Nigeria	14
Ethiopia	11
Kenya	9
Ghana	8
Zimbabwe	6
Botswana	1
Malawi	1
Mali	1
South Africa	1
Uganda	1
Total	53

Due to the constraints of conducting all primary data collection remotely, and the rapid nature of the research, it is important to highlight that the study sample was not intended to be statistically representative of any country's population. Instead, the sampling was purposefully designed to gather **rich, qualitative insights** that reflect the multifaceted experiences and perspectives relevant to international higher education partnerships (IHEPs) especially across the four focus countries.

3.2.4. Research Ethics and Considerations

The research team worked closely with the British Council to ensure that the study's approach, methods of implementation and tools complied with their ethical requirements. During the interviews, questions were thoughtfully adapted as needed to ensure appropriateness and understanding for stakeholders regardless of their age, gender, and educational status. All data collection tools underwent thorough review and approval by the British Council team before their use. Key ethical considerations included ensuring the confidentiality and privacy of the participants, particularly young people. This required robust consent processes involving both the participants and their guardians to safeguard their rights and well-being and also managing power dynamics between researchers and young participants to avoid coercion and influence. Special care was taken to create a safe and comfortable virtual environment, recognising the challenges posed by the lack of in-person emotional cues. We did this by checking in with participants regularly and asking whether they needed a break or had any issues to raise. We also, for example, convened a FGD with youth participating in a IHEP programme while the programme conveners, who work with them regularly, were present.

3.2.6. Data Quality & Management

Throughout the data collection process, all team members maintained regular communication via a group chat to address challenges and ensure adherence to ethical standards. At each stage of data collection, the project manager implemented checks to ensure that all collected data were of high quality and were transcribed accurately. Once data collection was completed, a data cleaning exercise was conducted to ensure the quality and integrity of the data. All collected data was securely stored and backed up to prevent loss or unauthorised access. Qualitative data were transcribed to ensure accuracy and completeness. Any quantitative data drawn from the document and data review were checked, validated, and cross-referenced with other sources for consistency and completeness. Rigorous quality assurance measures, including data verification, were implemented.

Genesis complied with the principles and requirements of the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), emphasising safeguarding individuals' privacy, and promoting responsible practices in data handling. This involved obtaining explicit consent for data processing, ensuring transparency about data usage, and implementing robust security measures to protect personal information. Collected data was securely stored at all times.

3.3. Data Analysis & Synthesis

Following the completion of data collection and the participatory workshop, the research team analysed and synthesised data from multiple sources to derive actionable insights and recommendations. The qualitative data analysis involved a sequence of structured steps. All qualitative data, including transcripts from the KIIs and FGDs, participatory workshop notes, and survey responses, were transcribed to ensure completeness, accuracy, and usefulness. Following this, the research team conducted an inductive, thematic analysis to identify and interpret the themes that emerged from the data. The KII and FGD transcripts were then coded using deductive and inductive coding. Deductive coding involves the use of predetermined thematic codes derived from the key questions in the research framework to validate information found via the desk review while inductive coding involves incorporating additional codes based on emerging findings not captured by the pre-existing codes created at the beginning of the analytic process.

Quantitative data from education databases and reports on higher education and IHEPs were reviewed and used to triangulate and validate findings from the qualitative analysis. Once data analysis activities were completed according to the study timeline, the research team conducted an internal synthesis session to identify any remaining data gaps and aggregate key findings in preparation for report development.

3.4. Limitations

One significant limitation was the potential for not fully accounting for digital divides, as some participants may have had limited access to reliable internet, suitable devices, or private spaces to participate, potentially skewing the representation of views. In African contexts, the most vulnerable young people—those who would benefit the most from IHEPs for youth development—were difficult to reach online. One way the research team attempted to reach as diverse a population of young people as possible was by recruiting through organisations like the British Council and others that work directly with young people. We tried to ensure that all four target countries were represented. However, by the end of the study, due to limitations related to time and the responsiveness of stakeholders, some focus countries were more strongly represented in the study than others. However, the data still provided valuable insights that responded to the research questions that we set out.

Table 5: Limitations and mitigation measures

Limitation/Risk	Mitigation measures
Availability of key stakeholders (e.g. international partners and government representatives) to participate in key	The research team leveraged their own networks as well as the networks of the British Council team, and utilised multiple

informant interviews.	communication channels (WhatsApp, Phone calls and emails) to reach out to stakeholders, especially young people, allowing for flexibility in scheduling and ensuring broader participation.
Full remote data collection , while necessary for efficiency and reach, may have unintentionally excluded participants with limited access to digital resources.	
Skewed representation: Virtual data collection may have inadvertently skewed findings towards more privileged demographics with reliable internet access.	The research team triangulated insights and perspectives from other sources to ensure diverse perspectives and to minimise s in reporting.
Location-specific Recruitment challenges: Recruitment of participants in Ghana and South Africa proved more difficult, resulting in a narrower representation from this context.	The research team leveraged local networks and contacts to increase outreach and representation in both countries, and followed up continuously with contacts that had been acquired.

4. Findings

This section presents the key findings from our analysis of IHEPs in Africa, particularly regarding their role in empowering youth and addressing the gaps between higher education and employment in Sub-Saharan Africa. The study incorporates diverse perspectives from higher education institutions (HEIs), international partners, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), civil society organisations (CSOs), government representatives, and young people. By examining these insights, the findings reveal both the potential and challenges of IHEPs as a strategic tool for advancing educational quality, aligning curricula with job market needs, and fostering youth participation in policy-making. This section is organised around the core themes that emerged from stakeholder interviews, providing a nuanced understanding of how IHEPs can contribute to sustainable development and youth empowerment across Africa.

4.1 Perspectives and Experiences Regarding Higher Education, IHEPs, and the Transition from University to the Labour Market

Higher education plays an important role in human capital development for any economy seeking growth and prosperity for its people. It has been a long-standing belief that national educational investments result in increased employability, innovation, business development and ultimately a greater tax base for the government.⁵⁵ However, the transition from university to employment in formal labour markets has become more challenging, leaving millions of young, educated people despondent about their prospects of social and economic upward mobility. These sentiments are reflected in the findings of this study, with stakeholders across the spectrum acknowledging the disconnect between university curricula and the needs of the labour market as well as the lack of capacity within African economies to absorb skilled labour. The discussion below explores various components of the divergence between higher education and employment.

4.1.1 What are the current gaps between university education and the expectations of young Africans regarding future employment?

Insights from young people (via KIIs and surveys) and civil society organisations revealed a disconnect between the theoretical, knowledge-based focus of African universities and the practical skills demanded by employers. While universities are intended to drive human capital development, their emphasis on knowledge production often overlooks the critical skills required for employability and entrepreneurship. As a result, many graduates enter the labour market without the practical skills or work experience needed to succeed. This gap is exacerbated by outdated curricula, which frequently fail to incorporate modern tools and technologies relevant to current professional environments. A significant number of young people interviewed reported a mismatch between what is taught in universities and the skills required in the workplace.

“Schools still teach with outdated curriculums and software tools so when students graduate, they are not able to match the level of functionality needed in the workplace. They use outdated accounting software in school and use tools like ARP in modern workplaces which they are not familiar with and are unable to cope with in the fast-paced environment.” - **Youth, Nigeria (KII)**

⁵⁵ Centre for Strategic & International Studies (2023). Investing in Quality Education for Economic Development, Peace, and Stability. Accessed on: 31/01/2025.

The concerns raised by survey and interview respondents align with existing literature on employment and education mismatches. Research on graduate unemployment frequently highlights a systemic skills mismatch between higher education and the demands of the economy as a significant contributing factor⁵⁶. A study conducted by the African Development Bank (AfDB), using school-to-work transition survey datasets from 10 African countries, revealed that educational mismatches are an emerging challenge across the continent⁵⁷. A primary issue in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) is the severe shortage of university resources and facilities, which limits educational quality. In 2024, Africa had approximately 1274 recognised higher education institutions serving over 1.4 billion people—about one university per million residents⁵⁸. With just 9.4% of individuals aged 18–23 enrolled in higher education; access remains a privilege for the few⁵⁹. Sub-Saharan Africa also has the world's lowest number of researchers per million people, compared to 4,500 researchers per million people in the UK and U.S.⁶⁰, reflecting limited research capacity and innovation. Universities face additional challenges, including heavy teaching loads and scarce opportunities for research collaboration. The AfDB's study illustrates the scale of this issue in the table below:

Table 6: AfDB Skills Mismatch Results⁶¹

Skills/Education Level	Percentage of Youth
Overskilled	17.5%
Underskilled	28.9%
Overeducated	8.3%
Undereducated	56.9%

National governments frequently position universities as key drivers for developing an employable human capital base, as outlined in various economic development plans⁶². This is not the only challenge universities face, however. Investments in advanced research outputs as well as a focus on job ready graduates are required. This challenge is particularly acute in Sub-Saharan Africa, where national plans call for both practical skills development and building research capacity for global competitiveness. Respondents in our study highlighted the need to equip graduates with practical skills while also advancing research. Balancing these priorities requires universities and governments to address competing demands effectively. Studies in Sub-Saharan Africa have found weak or, in some cases, non-existent links between universities and national development plans⁶³.

Survey respondents from Nigeria indicated that the absence of up-to-date laboratories and software equipment creates a barrier when transitioning into the work environment. Many students in the region lack access to essential resources, such as laboratories and up-to-date software, making it challenging for them to develop the technical competencies expected by employers. Inadequate funding has not only limited infrastructure but also created disparities between students from resource-constrained institutions and those with access to better facilities. International higher education partnerships have played a critical role in adequately preparing young people from the African continent for the labour market.

⁵⁶ Livanos, I. (2010). "The Relationship between Higher Education and Labour Market in Greece: The Weakest Link?" Higher Education 60 (5): 473–489. doi:10.1007/s10734-010-9310-1.

⁵⁷ African Development Bank Group. (2019). Youth Jobs, Skill and Educational Mismatches in Africa. Accessed on: 07/11/2024.

⁵⁸ UniRank (2024). Universities in Africa; Higher Education In Africa. Accessed on: 27/08/2024. Available at: <https://www.4icu.org/Africa/>

⁵⁹ Faek, R. (2024). International Student Mobility in Sub-Saharan Africa, Part 1: Regional Overview. Available from: <https://wenr.wes.org/2024/09/international-student-mobility-in-sub-saharan-africa-trends-in-nigeria-and-ghanainternational-student-mobility-in-sub-saharan-africa/print/>

⁶⁰ World Economic Forum (2020). Here's why Africa needs to invest in home-grown science. Accessed on: 31/01/2025.

⁶¹ African Development Bank (2019). Youth Jobs, Skill and Educational Mismatches in Africa. Accessed on: 03/02/2025

⁶² Tight, M. (2023). Employability: a core role of higher education? Research in Post-Compulsory Education, 28(4), 551–571. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13596748.2023.2253649>

⁶³ Cloete, N., and Bunting I. (2016). Challenges and opportunities for African universities to increase knowledge production. Retrieved from <https://www.oecd.org/sti/Challenges%20and%20opportunities%20to%20increase%20knowledge%20production-%20Draft-%20Nico%20Cloete.pdf>

A young Ghanaian key informant shared insights on their IHEP experience as a Mandela-Washington fellow:

“In Ghana, there are gaps in infrastructure, facilities, and equipment to stimulate new learning experiences. When I read management, it was very theoretical. However, when I did my fellowship in the US (Mandela Washington Fellowship), it was very practical and showed that side of the business. The closest we had to practical stuff was guest lecturers in Ghana, which was great, but we wanted more. But in the US for example, we used CapSim which is a simulator for learning how to run a business.” - **Youth, Ghana (KII)**

Young people, both in Africa and other parts of the world, are increasingly required to take proactive ownership of their careers after completing tertiary education, as qualifications alone are often insufficient for securing employment. A key concern raised is the significant gap between education and employment, with job opportunities frequently dependent on personal connections within various industries. Alongside their studies, young people are encouraged to seek part-time or full-time work experience, often through their own networking efforts, as well as to volunteer and actively build professional relationships to enhance their career prospects.⁶⁴ Another undergraduate survey respondent from Ghana indicated that she has opted (through her own efforts, not through her university) to gain practical experience to complement her studies.

“While I haven’t yet completed my Bachelor’s degree program, I’m focused on gaining practical experience to complement my education. During this vacation, I’m volunteering with NGOs like Child Online Protection and Their World, which has allowed me to develop critical skills and insights that go beyond the classroom. This hands-on involvement is preparing me for future employment by bridging the gap between academic learning and workplace expectations.” - **Youth, Ghana (Survey)**

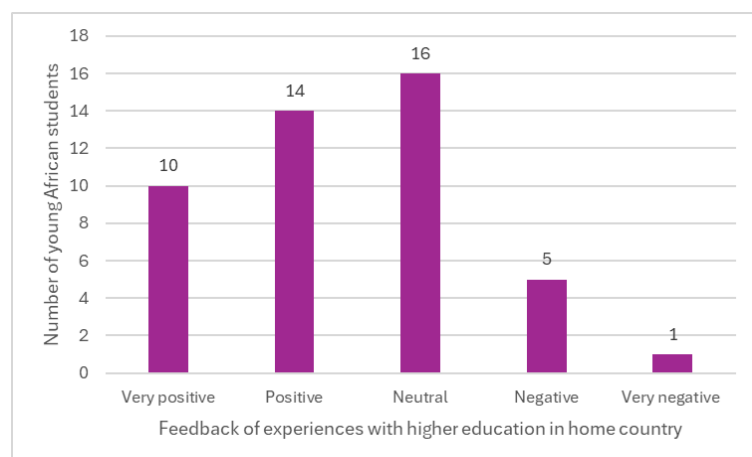
Given the diverse socio-economic backgrounds of the young people in the sample countries for this study, many students lack the resources, connections, and support needed to develop their employability skills. Survey feedback highlights that universities are falling short in providing students with opportunities to access professional networks and build industry connections.

“Universities may not provide enough opportunities for students to connect with industry professionals, which is crucial for job placement after graduation. Some universities may lack robust career services that help students with job search strategies, resume writing, and interview preparation.” - **Youth, Ethiopia (Survey)**

These sentiments are reflected in the mixed feedback received from the survey regarding young people’s experiences in the higher education system (university) as illustrated in figure 2 below.

⁶⁴Leeds Beckett University (2019). How To Make Yourself More Employable. Accessed on: 14/11/2024. Available at: <https://www.leedsbeckett.ac.uk/blogs/student-blog-squad/2019/03/how-to-make-yourself-more-employable/>

Figure 2: Survey feedback on all respondents' experiences with higher education in their home country



The feedback largely highlights positive experiences at university, yet the substantial number of young people expressing neutral or negative views warrants closer attention. Some respondents found value in their education and successfully secured employment. However, others felt their university experience provided theoretical knowledge but lacked the practical skills needed to access the labour market or pursue entrepreneurial opportunities. This contrast underscores the need for innovative interventions within universities to bridge these gaps and better equip students for diverse career pathways.

4.1.2 What lessons can be drawn from the experiences of young people who have followed non-traditional education and career paths?

Survey and interview findings reveal that young people are increasingly open to incorporating non-traditional educational pursuits, particularly via digital platforms, and engaging in multiple activities such as business ventures and volunteer work to enhance their employability. Amid rising university costs and shrinking state budgets, these alternative pathways have gained greater importance. Student-centred learning approaches, including work experience, apprenticeships, short courses, and mentorships, offer valuable opportunities for skills development, particularly in technical and vocational programmes.

The findings show that bureaucratic processes and entrenched attitudes within the higher education system often hinder the adoption of these non-traditional education and career pathways. For example, a study done on obtaining academic accreditation in HEIs in Nigeria found that the challenges facing the accreditation process include⁶⁵:

- Cost of accreditation
- Funding opportunities for accreditation
- Integration of new and innovative courses within the higher education institution
- Appropriate staffing competencies for non-traditional courses
- Poor infrastructure facilities
- Bureaucratic processes in accreditation policies

Course accreditation is the first step to integrating new and innovative programmes into universities. Ensuring increased access to these courses for African students must start with streamlining the accreditation processes. Furthermore, institutions and academic staff need to be open to adapting current academic curricula to emerging skills sets students can use in the marketplace. Respondents expressed frustration with leaders who dismiss

⁶⁵ Obilor, Ezezi Isaac (PhD) and IKPA, Augustine Ikechukwu (PhD) (2022). Review of the Process and Challenges in the Implementation of Academic Accreditation in Higher Educational Institutions in Nigeria. *International Journal of Scholarly and Educational Research in Africa*. ISSN: 2360-9981, Volume 13, Issue 5

non-traditional career paths as less legitimate, underscoring the need for systemic change to fully embrace these evolving approaches to education and employment preparation.

“If the careers of those exploring non-traditional pathways are regulated by people with obsolete mentalities, they will always face barriers. When people hear anything "Cyber" they think you want to be a "yahoo boy". There are several misconceptions about young people being on social media for example and this only gets better when young people are included. We need to go back to the system of understanding the systems and who should be leading those systems. If people leading things do not understand them, then we will continue to have challenges.” - **Youth, Nigeria (KII)**

The demand for young people to become multifaceted and self-enterprising has also challenged the traditional 9-5 approach. A survey done by the Mastercard Foundation found that the gig economy on the African continent is growing at a mean rate of 20% per year.⁶⁶ The continent anticipates having 80 million gig workers by 2030.⁶⁷ This projected number of gig economy workers in Africa far exceeds the projections for comparable countries in the Global South, with India projected to have 23.5 million gig workforce by 2030.⁶⁸ The global size of the gig economy is expected to reach USD 1847 billion by 2030, with Africa set to take up a significant share of this market provided African governments create policies supporting gig economy workers.⁶⁹ Young people are increasingly turning to the gig economy and diverse forms of work to take control of their careers and futures. This shift is largely driven by the growing challenges of securing employment that provides a living wage. An informant illustrated this non-traditional career approach with the following insight:

“When I finished school, I worked two jobs, a 9-5 job and an organisation that I founded. After my Masters degree, I am planning to go full-time into the organisation I founded. I am pursuing this path because I want to be in control of my time and as there is an option for me to be on this pathway, I am taking it.” - **Youth, Ghana (KII)**

While the gig economy offers opportunities to those who can benefit from the flexibility, it also contains dangers of extreme exploitation and lack of labour protection in which skills from higher education are lost both to the graduate and the economy as a whole.

4.1.3. What strategies can bridge the gap between formal education and the changing job market?

The study highlights that bridging the gap between education and employment requires aligning university academic programmes with labour market demands, partnering with local NGOs to provide career development and mentorship opportunities, and leveraging IHEPs. Youth respondents stressed the importance of revising university curricula to complement theoretical knowledge with practical skills and professional network exposure. This need for alignment is aptly described in the following excerpt:

“Most of what is taught is theoretical and most courses are not career-facing, with very little opportunity to network with industry and take up internships. For some of the programs, even though there is a requirement to take up internships, this is not always available. For my course in politics and philosophy, I didn't have a real opportunity to gain career skills before moving into the job market. I transitioned to business development after politics and philosophy. Most of us did not use our undergrad certificate. There is a direct contrast between what is studied and where you end up.” - **Youth, Nigeria (KII)**

Respondents highlighted the importance of aligning university education with the demands of the highly digital environment and the Fourth Industrial Revolution. This alignment is essential to equip graduates with skills relevant to modern industries and contemporary ways of working across sectors.

⁶⁶ Mastercard Foundation (2019). Digital Commerce and Youth Employment in Africa. Accessed on: 11/11/2024

⁶⁷ Ibid

⁶⁸ Horasis (2024). Future of Asia's Gig Economy. Accessed on: 16/12/2024. Available at: <https://horasis.org/future-of-asias-gig-economy/>

⁶⁹Business Research Insights (2024). Gig Economy Market Size, Share, Growth, And Industry Analysis. Available at: <https://www.businessresearchinsights.com/market-reports/gig-economy-market-102503>

“I think as the education system is in Ghana, there are instances where it does prepare you for employment and also when it doesn't. Education inspires you to change your life and instill the lifelong desire for learning. However, the transition from the 3rd to the 4th Industrial Revolution is not yet adequate. The way we teach today does not guarantee relevance for tomorrow.” - **Youth, Ghana (KII)**

Emphasis on undertaking a curriculum review was also shared by higher education institutions, showing a shared recognition of the gaps between education and employment. A respondent from Covenant University in Nigeria shared insights on the need to collaborate with industries to factor their expectations into the curricula:

“Many employers have frustrations that graduates do not integrate perfectly when they get into the industry and that they have to be retrained to perform tasks for which they were employed. Yes, there is this gap. Our curriculum has to be reviewed alongside people in the industry so their expectations are factored into the creation process.” - **HEI representative (KII)**

Creating strategies to facilitate the school-to-work transition effectively will require coordinated efforts to deliver demand-led skills and capacitate young people with the agency to make informed career choices.⁷⁰ A study done by Education Sub-Saharan Africa proposes a set of strategies for transitioning to work which include: networking and collaboration, participation in skills training and voluntary work, flexible mindset and advocacy for policy change.⁷¹ The exercise of aligning higher education and the labour market is often referred to as labour marketing alignment (LMA).⁷² LMA can be defined as activities and related outcomes that share the goal of ensuring that higher education institutions graduate the correct number of graduates with the necessary skills for the job market in a way that supports students' career goals and is consistent with institutional mission as well as current economic conditions.⁷³

Table 7: Approaches to labour market alignment⁷⁴

Career pathways system reform at the state level	4-year liberal arts college	University academic department	Community college workforce program	Short-term professional development course
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - State labor market assessment to determine programs to expand and/or add - Employers provide input on occupations, credentials, and broad skills - Contextualized learning - Connections to workplace learning fostered - Stackable credentials - Prior learning credit for work and military experience 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Local, regional or national labor market assessment to inform new majors and broad enrollment levels - Employers provide broad input on general skill needs - Problem-based learning and intensive writing - Internships and industry exposure strongly promoted - Coordinated academic and career counseling, early and ongoing. - Optional career course for credit 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - National or state labor market assessment to determine majors to expand and/or add - Employer advisory groups provide high-level input on skill needs and competencies - Problem-based learning - Internships required or strongly promoted - Integrated academic and career counseling - Mandatory for credit career development course 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - State or local labor market assessment to determine specific programs and enrollment levels - Employer panels to identify specific skills and competencies for curriculum - Hands-on applied learning - Required internships - Coordinated academic and career counseling, early and ongoing. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Local labor market assessment to determine specific enrollment levels - Employer panels to identify specific skills and competencies for curriculum - Problem-based learning - Job shadowing experience - Integrated career advising

⁷⁰ Asare, S., Essah, P., Udeh, J., Sasu, S., Mulwa M., (2023). What Can Tertiary Students in Africa Do to Increase Their Chances of Finding Work? Education Sub-Saharan Africa (ESSA). Mini Report

⁷¹ Ibid

⁷² Rutgers Education and Employment Research centre (2017). Aligning Higher Education and the Labour Market: Guiding Principles and Open Questions. Accessed on: 11/11/2024

⁷³ Ibid

⁷⁴ Rutgers Education and Employment Research centre (2017). Aligning Higher Education and the Labour Market: Guiding Principles and Open Questions. Accessed on: 11/11/2024

The findings emphasise the potential for universities to collaborate with local NGOs and CSOs to offer mentorship and career development programmes beyond regular academic activities. Partnerships with higher education institutions and NGOs have proven effective in bridging the gap between university education and employment. Key informant interviews highlighted organisations like Leap Africa and Teach in Nigeria as examples of external organisations providing valuable support to students.

“The universities in their own right are not providing the things that are needed to prepare students for the world of work, it is the NGOs and CSOs that are the middlemen who are bridging the gap between education and the world of work, Organisations like Leap Africa, Teach for Nigeria, and One Foundation are examples.” - **NGO representative (KII)**

Survey respondents from the NGO and civil society sphere shared examples of career development programmes that they run for university students.

“I helped organise a series of workshops focused on entrepreneurship and innovation, featuring guest speakers from international institutions. These workshops provided students with practical insights and skills relevant to starting their own ventures and navigating the global job market.” - **CSO representative (Survey)**

Universities have a unique opportunity to lead career development initiatives directly on campus. With their proximity to students, these programmes can be conveniently integrated into students' schedules between classes. Investing in on-campus career development programmes presents a valuable opportunity for universities to better prepare students for the workforce. A respondent from Kenyatta University highlighted ongoing efforts to bridge the gap between academics and the professional world.

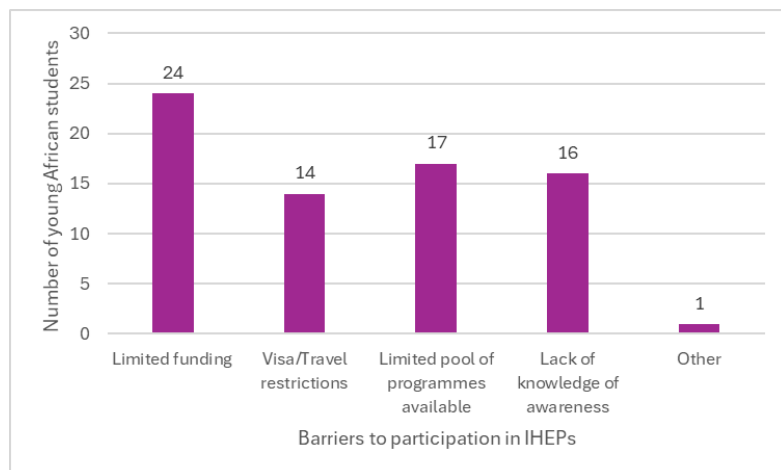
“Kenyatta is offering for example "growing leaders" programme which is to help graduating students change their mindset to prepare themselves for the world of work. This includes teaching them some 21st-century skills like communication” - **HEI representative (KII)**

The findings of the study also showed participation in IHEPs offers students an opportunity to acquire greater levels of skills that enhance their employability. The exposure to people from different cultures, backgrounds, and academic disciplines helps young people develop interpersonal skills, soft skills, teamwork skills and agility to adapt to a completely new and different environment. These are skills that are essential to the world of work. A youth respondent cited their participation in the US Mandela Washington Fellowship as an experience that offered a very practical experience versus the theoretical aspects of the academic programme.

“However, when I did my fellowship in the US (Mandela-Fellowship), it was very practical and showed that side of business. The closest we had to practical stuff was guest lecturers in Ghana, which was great, but we wanted more. But in the US for example, we used CapSim which is a simulator for learning how to run a business” - **Youth, Ghana (KII)**

Greater access to IHEPs is also essential to ensure that these partnerships can be used as a strategic tool to bridge the gap between education and employment. Survey findings (illustrated in figure 4) show that awareness of IHEPs is limited and access to funding for participation in these programmes remains the biggest challenge.

Figure 3: Survey findings on barriers to participation in IHEPs⁷⁵



Addressing these gaps requires increasing the visibility of IHEPs and fostering partnerships at the local level to democratise access and create sustainable impacts on youth employability. Additionally, IHEPs must consider the financial barriers students face, such as out-of-pocket expenses for application fees, upfront registration costs, and travel expenses. These costs can become burdensome for students, even when scholarships cover most tuition fees for international academic programmes.

4.1.4. What are the perceptions and experiences of youth participants in IHEPs, including their access to quality education, skills training, and international networks, and how do these contribute to their empowerment and future opportunities?

Youth participants in International Higher Education Partnerships (IHEPs) have expressed diverse perceptions and experiences, particularly regarding their access to quality education, skills training, and international networks. These aspects significantly contribute to their empowerment and future opportunities. This section summarises findings from 4.1.1, 4.1.2 and 4.1.3.

- **Access to Quality Education**

Youth respondents highlighted the disconnect between their university education and the job market's expectations, often citing outdated curricula and limited resources as significant barriers as discussed in section 4.1.1. However, IHEPs have been instrumental in addressing these gaps by offering more practical and globally competitive learning opportunities. Participants noted that their experiences in IHEPs, such as the Mandela Washington Fellowship, which provided hands-on learning and exposure to state-of-the-art tools and methods and which were often unavailable in their home institutions.

⁷⁵ Authors own from survey data

- **Skills Training**

IHEPs have played a pivotal role in equipping youth with essential skills for the modern workforce. By integrating practical training components, participants gained transferable skills like teamwork, communication, and adaptability. The ability to engage in internships and use advanced simulators (e.g., CapSim for business training) enhanced their employability, bridging the gap between theoretical knowledge and real-world application, see section 4.1.2 for detailed findings.

- **Building International Networks**

Participation in IHEPs facilitated the development of robust international networks, which empowered youth to access further educational opportunities and professional connections. Students highlighted how these partnerships expanded their global perspectives and enabled collaboration with peers and mentors from diverse backgrounds. These networks not only enriched their personal and professional growth but also increased access to scholarships and grants, opening pathways for postgraduate education as discussed in-depth in section 4.1.3.

- **Contribution to Empowerment and Opportunities**

Through IHEPs, youth participants reported a significant transformation in their perspectives and confidence. Exposure to diverse cultures and innovative practices fostered a sense of global citizenship and agency. The practical skills, international exposure, and networking opportunities provided by IHEPs were crucial in equipping them to navigate competitive job markets and pursue entrepreneurial ventures.

A summative reflection from a youth respondent who participated in an IHEP also emphasised how the programme played an important role in widening their network and further funding opportunities to continue with postgraduate studies (which for some career paths is an important employability enhancer):

“I have gained a lot of skills and built a good network globally. Your thinking changes and you become a global citizen. I have also had the opportunity to receive research grants just under the school I went to.” - **Youth, Nigeria (KII)**

These findings underscore the transformative potential of IHEPs in addressing educational and employment challenges faced by African youth while empowering them with the skills and networks needed to succeed in a rapidly evolving global landscape.

4.1.5. Conclusion: Aligning Higher Education with Employment Realities

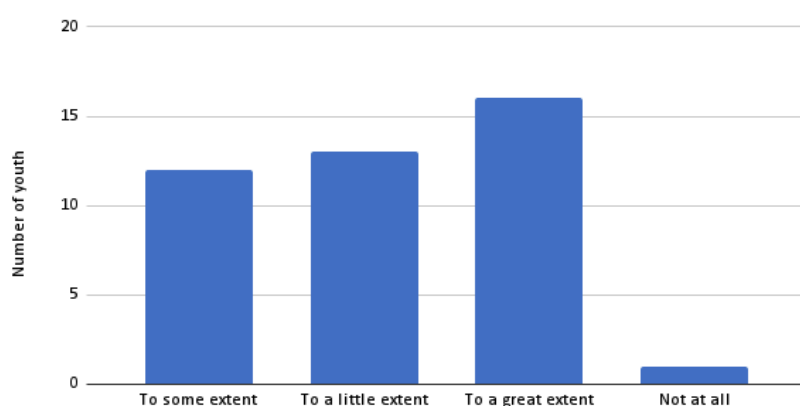
The findings highlight the critical misalignment between higher education and labour market demands in Sub-Saharan Africa. While universities play a pivotal role in human capital development, many graduates lack the practical skills and experience needed to thrive in the job market or entrepreneurial ventures. This disconnect is exacerbated by outdated curricula, insufficient infrastructure, and limited opportunities for professional networking. Young people are increasingly adopting non-traditional pathways, such as the gig economy and digital platforms, to address these gaps, but systemic barriers persist. The study also underscores the transformative potential of International Higher Education Partnerships (IHEPs) in bridging these divides by enhancing access to practical training, fostering global networks, and equipping youth with competitive skills. To address these challenges, universities and stakeholders must collaborate to redesign curricula, integrate modern technologies, and prioritise demand-led skills development. Achieving alignment between education and employment requires holistic, innovative approaches that centre youth voices, leverage partnerships, and adapt to evolving labour market needs.

4.2 Youth Participation in Higher Education Policy and Decision-Making

4.2.1 How can young people actively participate in shaping educational policies and decisions?

It is widely accepted that young people should have a voice in the policies and decisions that directly affect their lives, including those related to higher education⁷⁶. However, it is also acknowledged that “many African countries have ignored and excluded their youth from decision-making, often with dire consequences”⁷⁷. The survey findings reinforce the idea that there is a gap between rhetoric and reality regarding youth participation in decision-making. While the majority of survey respondents (see Figure 4 below) feel to “a great extent” that young people can contribute to decision-making, a not-insignificant number also believe that this is only the case “to some extent”. This indicates that there are some gaps between existing participation and meaningful engagement opportunities, necessitating action to bridge those gaps.

Figure 4: The extent to which survey participants believe that young people have opportunities to contribute to policy and decision-making in higher education



In the survey, young people were also asked to select the factors that best explain the barriers preventing them from meaningfully engaging in policy- and decision-making processes. The results are presented in Figure 5 (below), where access to decision-making spaces, financial constraints, and lack of awareness about opportunities to participate were the most dominant.

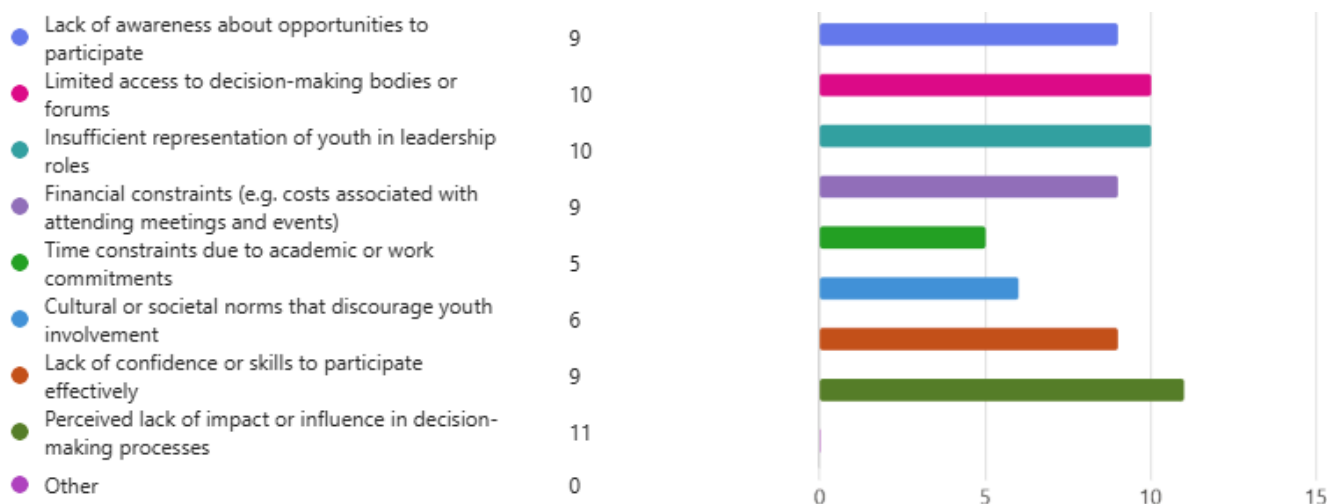
“Young people have a lot to contribute when they are equipped with the financial support and especially when they can get rid of their inferiority complex, anything is possible as a young person.” - **Youth, Ghana (Survey)**

“Young people can contribute to educational policy-making processes by building their confidence level and be independent in their decisions without the influence of any individual to be able to bring out bold suggestions.” - **Youth, Ghana (Survey)**

⁷⁶ See, for example: OECD. (2017). Chapter 8: Engaging youth in policy-making processes. Available from: https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/engaging-youth-in-policy-making-processes-module-6_5ifm8tmj7qjc.pdf?itemId=%2Fcontent%2Fcomponent%2F9789264283923-10-en&mimeType=pdf ; Greenhalf, J. & McGee, R. (2011). Young citizens: youth and participatory governance in Africa. Available from: <https://www.iied.org/14607iied>

⁷⁷Obonyo, R. (2023). Africa must increase youth participation in politics and the economy. LSE Blogs: Africa at LSE. <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/africaatlse/2023/05/12/africa-must-increase-youth-participation-in-politics-and-the-economy/>

Figure 5: Barriers preventing youth from participation in policy and decision-making (reported by youth)



4.2.2 What is youth participation in policy and decision-making?

Youth participation in policy and decision-making refers to the meaningful involvement and active engagement of young people in processes that shape policies, programs, and decisions, at all levels, that affect their lives and communities. Meaningful youth engagement encompasses several core principles, as depicted in Box 1 below⁷⁸:

Box 1: Principles for meaningful youth participation in policy and decision-making

Rights-Based and Safe

A rights-based and safe approach ensures young people are systematically educated about their rights and entitlements while establishing strong protective mechanisms. This principle emphasises the creation of comprehensive referral systems to protect youth and provides them with the means to hold duty bearers accountable. It focuses on developing protective measures against threats or attacks, ensuring that youth can participate in decision-making processes without fear of repercussions while maintaining safe spaces for their engagement.

Institutionally Mandated

This principle requires the formal incorporation of youth engagement into organisational and institutional structures through official policies or legislation. Rather than relying on occasional or ad hoc input, it ensures consistent and systematic engagement throughout all stages of decision-making processes. The establishment of clear institutional frameworks supports sustained youth participation and integration across all levels of governance and decision-making.

Designated

To prevent unequal power dynamics and competition between youth and non-youth actors, this principle ensures specific seats or positions are reserved for youth representatives. It creates structured opportunities for youth input through a clear allocation of roles in decision-making bodies, establishing protected spaces where youth voices can be heard and valued within the decision-making process.

Resourced

Meaningful youth engagement requires dedicated funding allocated specifically for youth participation activities. This includes financial support for travel and accommodation when needed, resources for capacity building and training, and investment in youth engagement infrastructure. Adequate resourcing ensures that participation opportunities are accessible to all youth, regardless of their economic status.

⁷⁸ United Nations. (2023). Our Common Agenda Policy Brief 3: Meaningful Youth Engagement in Policy and Decision-making Processes. <https://www.un.org/common-agenda/content/meaningful-youth-engagement>

Transparent

Transparency involves clear communication about how youth input will be used and processed within decision-making structures. It requires open sharing of information about decision-making processes, well-defined channels for information sharing, and clarity about roles and responsibilities. There should be clear documentation of youth contributions and how they influence outcomes.

Accessible

Accessibility demands inclusive design of participation mechanisms that accommodate all youth, including those with disabilities. This principle ensures multiple channels for engagement while removing physical and virtual barriers to participation. It takes into consideration language and communication needs, ensuring that all youth can meaningfully engage regardless of their circumstances or abilities.

Voluntary

The voluntary nature of youth engagement respects young people's freedom to choose their level of participation without pressure to express views against their personal beliefs. This principle upholds their right to withdraw at any stage, respects personal boundaries, and ensures independence in decision-making. It recognizes that meaningful engagement must come from a genuine willingness to participate.

Informative

An informative approach ensures age-appropriate information sharing and timely updates about relevant processes. It requires a clear explanation of complex issues through diversity-sensitive communication methods. Regular briefings and updates keep youth informed and equipped to participate meaningfully in decision-making processes with a full understanding of the context and implications.

Reciprocal Accountability

This principle establishes two-way responsibility, requiring tracking and reporting on how youth input is used while also expecting youth to consult with wider constituencies they represent. It creates mutual feedback mechanisms and regular reporting on outcomes, ensuring transparent communication channels between decision-makers and youth participants.

Diversity and Inclusion

The diversity and inclusion principle ensures non-discrimination in participation and active inclusion of marginalised voices. It demands representation across all demographics including race, sex, language, religion, age, ethnicity, gender identity, disability status, migrant/economic status, and other characteristics. This principle guarantees equal opportunities for participation regardless of background or circumstances.

Youth as Partners

Recognizing youth as partners means treating them as equal stakeholders in decision-making processes. This principle requires active facilitation of engagement, collaborative decision-making approaches, and genuine respect for youth perspectives. It moves beyond token participation to establish authentic partnerships where young people's contributions are valued and integrated into final decisions.

4.2.3 What is the importance of youth participation in policy and decision-making processes in higher education in Africa and what value could young people contribute to the process?

The rationale for enhanced youth participation in higher education policy stems from several key factors:

- Firstly, the demographic reality demands it. Youth constitute the majority of Africa's population and excluding them from decision-making processes can undermine the effectiveness of particular policies and decisions⁷⁹. Rising youth unemployment, poverty and inequality further necessitate their meaningful involvement in policies that directly affect their lives⁸⁰. They enhance policy relevance by ensuring interventions reflect lived realities and actual needs rather than assumed priorities⁸¹. Experts have

⁷⁹ Chamisa, S. F., & Shava, E. (2016). Youth involvement in policy making: A case of South Africa. *Journal of Social Sciences*, 49(1,2), 165-174.

⁸⁰ Kariuki, P., Mpani, N., & Malotana, Y. (2022). Youth participation and inclusive decision-making in South Africa. *Democracy Development Program*.

⁸¹ Chamisa, S. F., & Shava, E. (2016). Youth involvement in policy making: A case of South Africa. *Journal of Social Sciences*, 49(1,2), 165-174.

emphasised that "youth should not be seen just as beneficiaries but rather as key stakeholders and active participants in policy development and implementation processes"⁸². Youth participation also improves accountability by monitoring implementation, highlighting service delivery gaps, advocating for transparency, and demanding institutional responsiveness⁸³. Their role in oversight helps ensure policies achieve intended outcomes.

"Involving young people ensures that their voices and needs are represented in decision-making. This can lead to more inclusive and effective policies that address the realities faced by today's learners." - **Youth, Ethiopia (survey)**

"Young people are the next future leaders; hence their contributions will be significant in making education better because they know very well that if things are not going well, their future will be affected." - **Youth, Ghana (survey)**

- Secondly, young people bring fresh perspectives and innovative approaches that are vital for policy development. Their intersectional perspectives consider how different groups relate to policy issues based on their social contexts and power structures⁸⁴. This helps make policies more relevant and responsive to local needs. Youth also bring digital literacy, technological solutions, and creative approaches to longstanding challenges⁸⁵, often developing digital skills through self-directed learning and peer collaboration rather than from formal education, allowing them to innovate and solve real-world problems in unique ways⁸⁶.

"I believe that young people can offer fresh perspectives, innovative ideas, and firsthand knowledge of current challenges in education, helping shape policies that better reflect their needs and the evolving job market." - **Youth, Ghana (survey)**

"Young people are fresh and can come up with ideas that are modern and fresh which can align with the current and future needs as they are not that much outdated." - **Youth, Botswana (survey)**

"Growing up in a digital age, young people are often more adept at using technology. Their insights can help integrate modern tools and platforms into educational practices, enhancing learning experiences." - **Youth, Ethiopia (survey)**

- Thirdly, youth have vital firsthand knowledge of contemporary challenges in higher education, including barriers to access and participation, the quality and relevance of current curriculums, resource constraints and infrastructure needs, digital transformation requirements and graduate employment challenges.

"Youngsters can contribute a lot of values towards the educational policy-making process. This is because since they know the challenges that they are facing today, their participation matters. For instance, in terms of identifying each of specific issues they are facing and in turn finding possible solutions." - **Youth, Ethiopia (survey)**

⁸² Jacobs, T., & George, A. (2022). Between rhetoric and reality: Learnings from youth participation in the adolescent and youth health policy in South Africa. *International Journal of Health Policy and Management*, 11(12), 2927-2939. <https://doi.org/10.34172/ijhpm.2022.6387>

⁸³ Kariuki, P., Mpani, N., & Malotana, Y. (2022). Youth participation and inclusive decision-making in South Africa. *Democracy Development Program.*

⁸⁴ Kosciulek, D. (2020). Strengthening youth participation in climate-related policymaking (Policy Briefing 225). South African Institute of International Affairs. <https://www.saiia.org.za/research/strengthening-youth-participation-in-climate-related-policymaking/>

⁸⁵ Klemenčič, M., Luescher, T. M., & Mugume, T. (2015). Student organizing in African higher education: Polity, politics and policies. In *Student Politics in Africa: Representation and Activism*. African Minds. https://www.africanminds.co.za/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/9781920677916_txt.pdf

⁸⁶ Černočová, M. & Selcuk, H. (2019). Digital Literacy, Creativity and Autonomous learning. In book: *Encyclopedia of Education and Information Technologies*. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/333421200_Digital_Literacy_Creativity_and_Autonomous_Learning

Youth can contribute to higher education policy processes in several important ways. In policy development and review, they can participate in parliamentary processes, engage in policy formulation from inception, provide implementation feedback, and help develop monitoring frameworks⁸⁷. Although not directly related to higher education or IHEPs, the case of the African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM) Youth Advisory Panel demonstrates how youth can be meaningfully integrated into policy structures, though challenges remain in ensuring consistent engagement throughout the process (see Box 2 below)⁸⁸.

Box 2: Youth Participation in the APRM⁸⁹

The African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM) is a self-assessment tool established by the African Union (AU) to promote good governance across member states. Through reviews, the APRM evaluates each country's performance in democracy, political governance, economic management, corporate governance, and socio-economic development. It facilitates learning and accountability through peer reviews, which enable countries to share best practices and identify areas needing improvement.

Youth participation within the APRM framework has seen mixed results. While several frameworks like the African Youth Charter (AYC) and Agenda 2063 advocate for youth inclusion, meaningful integration remains limited. Notably, the APRM Secretariat hosted the inaugural Youth Symposium in Chad in 2019, where youth from various regions contributed to discussions on governance. This event led to the establishment of a youth network and some collaborative efforts with the AU's Youth Division, signalling progress. However, youth involvement has often been tokenistic, with limited impact on decision-making structures and policies.

Challenges to youth participation include structural barriers, such as complex APRM processes and limited resources at the national level. Additionally, while youth are occasionally represented in events, their roles tend to be limited to attendance rather than active decision-making. Key recommendations include establishing quotas for youth representation in National Governing Councils (NGCs) and further embedding youth perspectives in APRM tools and processes to ensure sustainable and genuine inclusion.

Through formal student representative structures, young people can participate in university governing bodies like councils, senates, and faculty boards, where they have voting rights and direct input into institutional policies. National student associations can aggregate student interests and lobby different national structures, including ministries responsible for higher education and parliamentary portfolio committees. Similarly, student representative councils and national student bodies can serve on intermediary bodies like national commissions/councils on higher education, quality assurance committees, and student loan boards, providing direct student input into regulatory and funding decisions. Student representative bodies play a crucial role in aggregating and articulating student interests, mediating between students and university management, and organising collective action when formal channels prove ineffective⁹⁰. Their role as intermediaries is especially important given the often-wide gap between decision-makers and youth communities. However, the effectiveness of these representative structures varies significantly. As one young person noted:

"I know students are given a voice from the student representative council point of view in universities to relay the concerns of students, acting as middle persons. They have influenced university decisions to some extent, but I doubt it is at a very high level." - **Youth, South Africa (KII)**

Another respondent emphasised that:

"The Student representative councils have to be useful beyond when there are strikes. Young people should be listened to and heard. Their impact should not be limited by leaders." - **HEI representative (KII)**

⁸⁷ Kariuki, P., Mpani, N., & Malotana, Y. (2022). Youth participation and inclusive decision-making in South Africa. Democracy Development Program.)

⁸⁸ Mpungose, L. (2020). Africa's diverging approaches to youth inclusion and participation (Occasional Paper 307). South African Institute of International Affairs. <https://www.saiia.org.za/research/africas-diverging-approaches-to-youth-inclusion-and-participation/>

⁸⁹ Ibid.

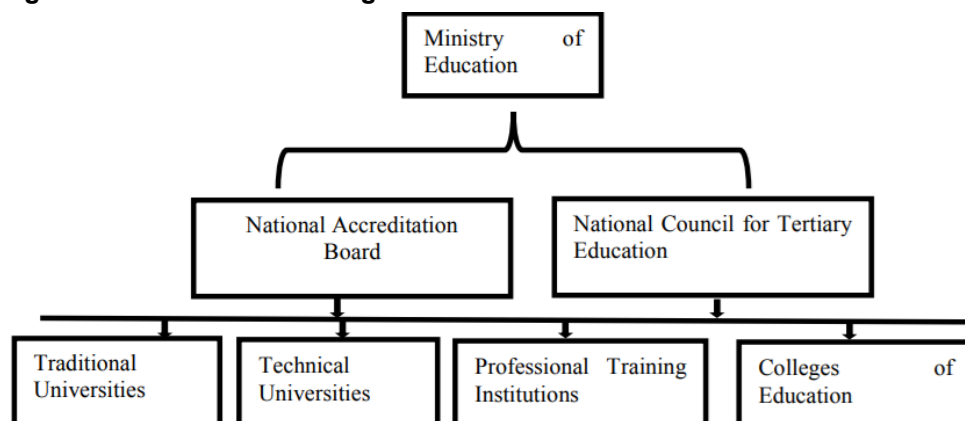
⁹⁰ Luescher, T. M., Klemenčič, M. & Jowi, J. O. (2016). *Student Politics in Africa : Representation and Activism*. Boston: African Minds.

Young people can also contribute to higher education policy and decision-making through their own academic research and innovative work, whether that be through their higher education studies or through the youth organisations they belong to. It has been noted, for example, that youth-led research partnerships have proven particularly effective in generating evidence for policy development⁹¹.

4.2.4. Higher education policy-making and youth participation in focus countries

a. Ghana

Figure 6: The Structure of Higher Education Governance in Ghana⁹²



Higher education governance in Ghana operates through a multi-layered system of institutions (see Figure 5, above), with varying degrees of youth participation at different levels. At the apex, the Ministry of Education (MoE) sets broad national education policy and oversees funding allocations⁹³. The Ghana Tertiary Education Commission (GTEC)⁹⁴ serves as the primary regulatory body, advising on policy and overseeing financial management, while the National Accreditation Board (NAB) ensures quality standards through programme accreditation⁹⁵. Based on the composition of the advisory boards of both the MoE and the GTEC, young people are not formally engaged in the decision-making processes⁹⁶. However, the National Union of Ghana Students acts as a pressure group advocating for student interests at a national level⁹⁷.

“Youth participation in policy-making at Ghana Tertiary Education Commission (GTEC) is primarily indirect, with student perspectives represented through institutional feedback channels and student leadership involvement in broader institutional consultations. When developing policies or accreditation standards, GTEC gathers input from tertiary institutions, which in turn reflect the views and experiences of their student bodies. This feedback helps shape policies to better meet the needs of the student population, even if youth are not directly involved in policy forums” - **Government representative (KII)**

At the institutional level, universities have internal governance structures like Councils and Academic Boards. Here, youth participation is more evident but can also often be limited in scope. In Ghana’s university system, students do have some formal representation through the Students’ Representative Council

⁹¹ Klemenčič, M., Luescher, T. M., & Mugume, T. (2015). Student organizing in African higher education: Polity, politics and policies. In *Student Politics in Africa: Representation and Activism*. African Minds.

https://www.africanminds.co.za/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/9781920677916_txt.pdf

⁹² Amankona, D., Kodua, L. T. & Ogunwemimo, T. M. (2018). Governance in Higher Education: A Comparative Study on Ghana and China. *Research on Humanities and Social Sciences*. 8(20): 14 - 27.

⁹³ Ghana Ministry of Education: <https://moe.gov.gh/>

⁹⁴ Since 2020, previously the National Council for Tertiary Education

⁹⁵ GHET. (2020). Education Regulatory Bodies Act. Available from: <https://www.gtec.edu.gh/our-mandate>

⁹⁶ See MoE advisory board on here: <https://moe.gov.gh/index.php/about-us-3/> and GTEC board members here: <https://www.gtec.edu.gh/board>

⁹⁷ Amankona, D., Kodua, L. T. & Ogunwemimo, T. M. (2018). Governance in Higher Education: A Comparative Study on Ghana and China. *Research on Humanities and Social Sciences*. 8(20): 14 - 27.

(SRC), which participates in discussions about tuition fees and other student-related matters at the institutional level⁹⁸. However, students' role in university governance remains constrained. They are often viewed primarily as passive recipients of education and skills training rather than active stakeholders in educational decision-making - a perspective that limits their ability to meaningfully influence governance structures and policies⁹⁹. Their representation often amounts to only 10-20% of governing bodies, indicating their marginalized influence in higher education decision-making¹⁰⁰. Young people's input is frequently sought after decisions are substantially formed rather than during the initial planning stages, contradicting the principle of youth as equal partners in decision-making¹⁰¹. Marginalised students also face resource constraints that affect their ability to participate in HE governance structures, which undermines the diversity and inclusion principle of meaningful and effective youth engagement¹⁰². The quote below highlights the hierarchal, age-based dynamics in Ghana that contribute to the lack of meaningful youth participation in HE decision-making as well:

"Institutions are very old people driven and some of them have retired and are still directors. The system delays people in the sense that by the time they get to policy-making, they are old. A lot of universities say they retain their students and they become the decision makers. But they only use them as pawns, like research assistants. They send them to do the low-level things and they are not given the capacity to contribute." - **Youth. Nigeria (KII)**

b. Kenya

Like in Ghana, higher education governance in Kenya operates through a multi-layered system. Higher education in Kenya is administered through the Ministry of Education. The Commission for University Education (CUE), formerly the Commission for Higher Education, is the key regulatory body overseeing both public and private universities. CUE's responsibilities include regulating university education, accrediting programs, ensuring quality standards, overseeing the establishment of new universities, and promoting research and innovation. The Higher Education Loans Board (HELB) is another important semi-autonomous agency that provides loans, bursaries, and scholarships to students. At the institutional level, universities have a hierarchical structure consisting of a Chancellor (honorary head), University Council (overall administrative body), Senate (academic authority), Vice Chancellor (chief executive) supported by Deputy Vice Chancellors, and Faculty and Departmental Boards.

Within this governance structure, youth participation shows varying degrees of meaningful engagement. Historically, at the national level, student movements like the Tanganyika African Welfare Society and the Student Union of Nairobi played important roles in advocating for educational reforms in the post-independence period¹⁰³. However, when student movements were later banned by the government, students had to find alternative ways to voice their concerns through publications, meetings, symposia, and demonstrations¹⁰⁴. Today, Kenya has several national policies and frameworks meant to support youth participation, including the National Youth Council Act (2009) and the Kenya Youth Development Policy (2017)¹⁰⁵. However, meaningful participation remains limited due to various structural, cultural, and economic barriers, such as aged-based hierarchical systems that prioritise elder voices and financial constraints limiting ability to attend policy forums¹⁰⁶. In Kenya, a key informant described how students are involved in international levels of policy-making too:

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Senyo, P.K., & Addae, E. (2016). Stakeholder Participation in Higher Education: A Case Study of Ghana. *Journal of Education Policy*, 31(4), 466-478.

¹⁰² Atuahene, F., & Owusu-Ansah, A. (2013). A Descriptive Assessment of Higher Education Access, Participation, Equity, and Disparity in Ghana. *SAGE Open*, 3(3), 1-16.

¹⁰³ Mulinge, M. M., Arasa, J. N. & Wawire, V. (2017). *The Status of Student Involvement in University Governance in Kenya: The Case of Public and Private Universities*. Senegal: CODESRIA.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Kinsbergen, S. (2023). Let's talk about you(th) A study on youth engagement in Kenya. Available from: [https://cps.ruhosting.nl/pdf/you\(th\).pdf](https://cps.ruhosting.nl/pdf/you(th).pdf)

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

"We have student groups that are involved with issues of policy. If I speak, for example, from our pharmacy and healthcare side, you can see young pharmacist groups, you can see international pharmacy student federations, and you can see World Medical Students associations, and they have a voice in the World Medical Assembly. And that those are some of the very top-notch levels of policy-making regarding health. So I can see our students and some of our recent graduates participating in that policy. And to tie that with education, of course, it goes hand in hand with healthcare education when they're involved at such high levels of policymaking." - **HEI representative (KII)**

At the institutional level, students participate in university governance primarily through student government bodies like student unions, councils, and associations¹⁰⁷. For example, at Kenyatta University, the Kenyatta University Students Association (KUSA) represents students, while at United States International University, the Student Affairs Council (SAC) serves this role. Student representatives sit on various university committees and governing bodies. However, their involvement appears to be limited - they are often excluded from high-level decision-making bodies or only have proxy representation¹⁰⁸. Desk research indicates that student participation tends to be higher at lower levels of governance (department/faculty committees) compared to senior management levels¹⁰⁹. Rather than true shared governance with co-decision rights, universities tend toward an "authoritative paternalistic model" where students have limited discretion and serve mainly in an advisory rather than decision-making capacity¹¹⁰. This suggests that while formal structures exist for student participation, meaningful youth engagement in higher education governance in Kenya remains a work in progress.

"Well, some of the barriers will be, and as I said, not all this is available to every young person. One of the barriers is that some of the young students are, I mean, young people who qualify for university, but they may not be able to get into university because of lack of school fees, and other socioeconomic issues. So, without access to university or even college education, then there are bright students who are missing out on this [participation in HE policy- and decision-making]. And then again, for students to be involved in such high-level issues, they have to be interested and know who to approach, and who can guide them to go to such areas. Such information is not usually available. I tend to see it's the more aggressive students who tend to do a lot of research on these things. The average student is more overwhelmed with their studies. Some of them are also still very young, trying to discover themselves. So those are some of the issues that they encounter. So it's not blanket open to everyone, but those who are determined and those who have access then can be able to access this." - **HEI representative (KII)**

C. Nigeria

The governance of higher education in Nigeria operates through a complex network of institutions and regulatory bodies, with decision-making power primarily concentrated at the federal level. The Federal Ministry of Education sits at the apex, responsible for setting overall policy direction and allocating federal funding to institutions. Three key regulatory bodies oversee different sectors of higher education: the National Universities Commission (NUC) for universities, the National Board for Technical Education (NBTE) for polytechnics, and the National Commission for Colleges of Education (NCCE) for education colleges. These bodies are tasked with programme accreditation, setting academic standards, and ensuring quality assurance¹¹¹.

While there are some channels for youth participation in Nigerian HE governance, there appears to be a lack of robust frameworks to ensure this participation is meaningful and effective. The National Policy on Education (1988) states that decisions about (higher) education "shall grow out of their life and social ethics of the community which they serve"¹¹². However, not only is implementation limited, but institutional weakness in Nigeria means that there are very few formal structures that facilitate youth engagement at the national level. Despite the existence of student representative bodies like the National Association of Nigerian Students (NANS), their

¹⁰⁷ Mulinge, M. M., Arasa, J. N. & Wawire, V. (2017). *The Status of Student Involvement in University Governance in Kenya: The Case of Public and Private Universities*. Senegal: CODESRIA.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Moja, T. (2020). "Nigeria Education Sector Analysis: A Platform for Re-engineering Education for Employment." World Bank Policy Paper.

¹¹² Abdullahi, S. 2014. The role of youth participation in educational development. *International Journal of Technical Research and Applications*. 2(7): 63 - 65.

involvement in national policy-making tends to be more consultative than truly participatory, falling short of the principle of treating youth as equal partners in decision-making¹¹³. And while some young people participate through civil society organisations, research on youth participation in Nigeria has found that these spaces “are either hijacked by government or infiltrated such that youth groups often do the bidding of the government”¹¹⁴. Therefore, decision-making remains primarily adult-initiated, where youth consultations do happen but have limited influence. **At the institutional level, youth participation appears to be primarily structured through traditional student representation mechanisms.** This includes Student Affairs departments and the Student Union Government, which serve as formal channels through which students can theoretically engage with institutional leadership¹¹⁵. Additionally, some representation exists at departmental and faculty board levels¹¹⁶, though the extent and effectiveness of this representation is not well documented. Resource constraints play a significant role in limiting institutional participation¹¹⁷. High educational costs and exorbitant school fees not only restrict access to higher education but also impact students' ability to actively engage in institutional governance processes, especially as many students representative bodies lack dedicated funding for capacity building and participation activities¹¹⁸. This creates a situation where participation mechanisms may exist on paper (as described by the key informant below) but remain practically inaccessible to many students.

“We have a student council that ensures that policies by the university are reflective of students' needs. The council is also part of the process of policy formulation if the policy is related to them. Students are not involved in all policy formulation. There are also feedback systems to hear from students and use their insights to shape university policy.” - **HEI representative (KII)**

d. South Africa

Higher education governance in South Africa operates through a system where decision-making is distributed across various stakeholders and institutions. At the national level, the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) serves as the primary governmental body responsible for post-school education policy, working under the direction of the Minister of Higher Education, Training, and Innovation. The Council on Higher Education (CHE) functions as an independent advisory body and oversees quality assurance¹¹⁹. The South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) is responsible for overseeing the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) and all qualifications have to be registered with SAQA. Within this complex framework of required approval routes, universities maintain significant autonomy through their institutional governance structures, including Councils and Senates. HEIs have the ability to manage their budgets and set admission requirements within national guidelines¹²⁰.

At the national level, there are a few key mechanisms for youth participation in higher education policy. The South African Union of Students (SAUS) serves as a representative body that engages with the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) on policy matters and represents student interests across public universities¹²¹. Moreover, the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) has student representatives on its board¹²². Student participation in institutional governance structures is formally mandated through the Higher

¹¹³ Adesulu, D. (2018). "Student Participation in Higher Education Governance in Nigeria: Challenges and Opportunities." *Journal of African Higher Education Studies*.

¹¹⁴ Ugwuozor, F. O. & Mbaji, I. N. 2024. Can youths engage their leaders? Assessing Nigerian youths 'capacity to demand accountability. *Cogent Social Sciences*. 10(1): 1 - 9.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Ibrahim, M. (2021). "Resource Allocation and Student Representation in Nigerian Universities: A Critical Assessment." *African Journal of Education Policy*.

¹¹⁹ Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET). (2019). *Policy Framework for Higher Education Governance*. Government Gazette, Pretoria.

¹²⁰ Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET). (2019). *Policy Framework for Higher Education Governance*. Government Gazette, Pretoria.

¹²¹ SAUS. 2015. Briefing paper prepared for the second national Higher Education Transformation Summit, 2015. Available from: <https://www.justice.gov.za/commissions/feeshet/docs/2015-HESummit-Annexure04.pdf>

¹²² NSFAS. 2023. Annual Report 2021/22. Available from: https://www.nsfas.org.za/content/reports/NSFAS%20-%20Annual%20Report%202021&2022_Final%20version_25.10.2023.pdf

Education Act of 1997, which requires student representation on university councils and forums¹²³. Student Representative Councils (SRCs) serve as the primary vehicle for student participation at the institutional level. While these structures provide designated spaces for youth voices, power imbalances and resource constraints often limit their effectiveness, with consultation often happening after key decisions have already been made. The #FeesMustFall movement of 2015-2016 highlighted significant gaps between formal structures for student participation and students' demands for more substantive involvement in decision-making processes¹²⁴. While there are formal protections for student participation in governance, safety concerns during protests and demonstrations suggest challenges in maintaining rights-based and safe approaches to student engagement¹²⁵. While key informants noted that there weren't many (if any) opportunities for youth to participate in decisions about higher education, they were supportive of the idea:

"The best people to respond to this question [about how IHEPs should be designed] are the youth themselves who are the recipients of these programmes. I'm actually quite far removed in terms of their experiences and given the generational divide... I'm a feminist scholar so I believe that even before the conceptualisation of whatever project, programme, the beneficiaries must be involved." - **HEI representative (KII)**

4.2.5. Conclusion: From Tokenistic to Meaningful Participation

The analysis of youth participation in higher education policy and decision-making across Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, and South Africa reveals a consistent pattern: while formal structures for youth engagement exist, there remains a substantial gap between rhetorical commitments and meaningful participation. Across these countries, youth participation is often characterised by tokenistic representation rather than genuine partnership and influence in decision-making processes. This is evidenced by limited student representation in governing bodies, consultation occurring after key decisions have been made, and persistent structural, cultural, and economic barriers that prevent effective engagement.

"I think a lot of decisions are made without young people in the room and in instances where they are in the room, it looks like they are just there for the numbers and to rubber stamp decisions. I think their needs are suppressed and not prioritised." - **Youth, South Africa (KII)**

The case studies demonstrate that current participation mechanisms fall short of meeting the core principles for meaningful youth engagement (as outlined in Box 1). While some countries have established designated spaces for youth representation through student councils and unions, these bodies often lack adequate resources, genuine decision-making power, and institutional support to be truly effective. The hierarchical nature of higher education institutions, combined with cultural attitudes that view students primarily as beneficiaries rather than stakeholders, continues to impede authentic youth participation. This is particularly evident in cases where student representatives are excluded from high-level decision-making processes or where their involvement is limited to advisory rather than decision-making roles.

Moving forward, transforming tokenistic youth participation into meaningful engagement requires systemic changes at both institutional and national levels. This includes strengthening the legislative frameworks that mandate youth participation, ensuring adequate resource allocation for youth engagement activities, and fundamentally shifting institutional cultures to recognise young people as equal partners in higher education governance. Additionally, special attention must be paid to ensuring diversity and inclusion in participation mechanisms, particularly for marginalised youth who face additional barriers to engagement. Only through such comprehensive reforms can higher education systems bridge the gap between rhetorical

¹²³ Dell, S. (2021). Higher Education Governance and Student Representation in South African Universities. *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa*, 9(1), 23-40.

¹²⁴ Cele, N., & Koen, C. (2019). Student Politics and the Changing Dynamics of Student Participation in University Governance in South Africa. *Higher Education Policy*, 32(1), 1-20.

¹²⁵ Mabasa, K. (2022). Student Participation in University Decision-Making: Challenges and Opportunities in South African Higher Education. *South African Journal of Higher Education*, 36(2), 45-62.

commitments to youth participation and its meaningful implementation in practice. Further details on how to achieve systemic changes are included in the recommendations section of the report.

4.3 IHEPs and Youth Empowerment

4.3.1. Participation in IHEPs and their impact on youth empowerment,

International higher education partnerships in Africa have evolved significantly since the early 2000s, shifting from predominantly North-South collaborations to include more South-South and intra-African networks¹²⁶. While traditional partnerships with European and North American institutions remain important, particularly in research funding and capacity building¹²⁷, African universities are increasingly pursuing strategic alignments with emerging economies like China and India, which offered over 50,000 scholarships to African students between 2015 - 2020¹²⁸. A noteworthy trend is the rise of digital partnerships accelerated by COVID-19, with virtual exchange programmes and online collaborative degrees becoming more prevalent across the continent¹²⁹. These partnerships are crucial for addressing critical development challenges, as they enable knowledge transfer, enhance research capacity, and help build a skilled workforce needed for economic growth¹³⁰. Moreover, international collaborations have been shown to significantly increase research output and quality, with co-authored papers receiving 50% more citations than single-institution publications from African universities¹³¹. For Africa's youth specifically, these partnerships create vital pathways for skills development and employment, with data showing that students who participate in international academic programmes are 23% more likely to secure formal employment within one year of graduation¹³². Research indicates that exposure to diverse academic environments through these partnerships enhances students' critical thinking abilities and cross-cultural competencies, crucial skills for the increasingly globalised job market¹³³. Additionally, international partnerships have been instrumental in expanding STEM education opportunities for young African women, with partner-supported programmes showing a 40% increase in female enrolment in technology and engineering courses over the past five years¹³⁴.

Findings from the survey indicate that International Higher Education Partnership (IHEP) programmes across African regions primarily operate through three distinct but interconnected channels. Exchange programmes emerge as a dominant feature, with NGO representatives, from Kenya and Nigeria particularly, emphasising their transformative impact. These programmes, established through international university partnerships, enable students to gain global exposure and cultural adaptability, which respondents identified as crucial for personal and professional development in today's interconnected world. The survey also revealed strong support for research fellowships, especially among academic stakeholders who view them as essential for developing Africa's next generation of research leaders.

Capacity-building workshops rounded out the third major programmatic area identified in the survey, with both organisers and participants highlighting their practical value. A respondent from Ghana noted how these workshops equip young people with crucial skills ranging from digital literacy to project management. Youth participants expressed particular enthusiasm for workshops focused on digital competencies and leadership development, viewing them as essential stepping stones toward employment readiness. This emphasis on practical skill development through workshops appears to effectively bridge the gap between traditional education and the demands of the contemporary job market. Insights from key informant interviews resonate with the survey findings,

¹²⁶ Knight, J., & Woldegiorgis, E. T. (2017). *Regionalization of African Higher Education*. Sense Publishers.

¹²⁷ Jowi, J. O. (2020). "Developing sustainable international partnerships in African higher education: Challenges and prospects." *International Journal of African Higher Education*, 7(2), 45-60.

¹²⁸ Teferra, D., & Knight, J. (2018). "Understanding African higher education developments in a global context." *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 22(4), 313-329.

¹²⁹ Obamba, M. O., & Mwema, J. K. (2021). Digital transformation of African higher education partnerships. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 25(4), 372-387.

¹³⁰ Adams, J., Banks, M., & Oleksiyenko, A. (2022). International partnerships in African higher education: Impact assessment and future directions. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 41(3), 789-803.

¹³¹ Kigotho, W. (2021). The impact of international collaboration on research quality in African universities. *University World News Africa Edition*, 12(4), 1-3.

¹³² Rahman, S., & Nduru, M. (2023). Employment outcomes of international academic program participants in Sub-Saharan Africa. *Journal of Education and Work*, 36(1), 45-62.

¹³³ Wilson, P. (2021). Global competencies and employability: The impact of international education partnerships in Africa. *International Journal of Educational Development*, 82, 102-114.

¹³⁴ Mensah, K., & Osei-Tutu, B. (2022). Gender transformation in African STEM education: The role of international partnerships. *African Journal of Science, Technology and Innovation*, 14(2), 156-171.

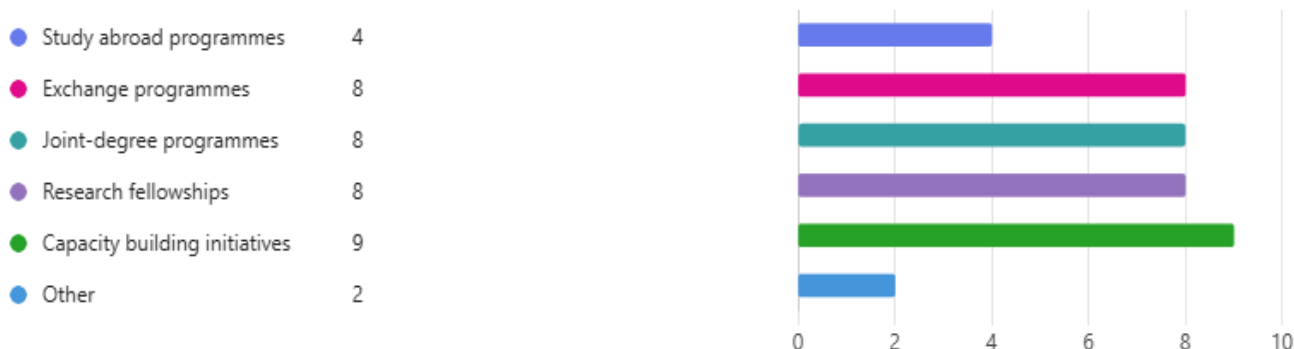
as demonstrated by a representative from Covenant University in Nigeria, for example, who was able to provide examples of the kinds of partnerships that were available at the University:

“The African Agricultural Knowledge Transfer Partnership is a partnership between Covenant University and Nottingham Trent University, funded by Innovate UK [the total fund was £2.5 million for round 1]¹³⁵. This partnership addresses food insecurity. It aims to have strawberries growing in Nigeria all year round. We also have a partnership with Ashesi University in Ghana to help young researchers build capacity as it relates to grant writing. This is necessary for conducting impactful research. We have executed four webinars in that programme. We have partnerships on student mobility outside Nigeria. We have a partnership with the University of Glasgow on entrepreneurship. Students come together to address challenges that are linked to the Sustainable Development Goals. It supports students to move from the ideation stage to the prototype and testing stage.” - **HEI representative (KII)**

The graphs below show young people’s (university students, in particular) responses to questions about IHEPs that are available to them through their university and whether they had participated in them or not. The majority of students, as shown in Figure 5, have indicated that there are “none”, and where students have said that there are programmes available, they were mostly study abroad programmes, exchange programmes and research fellowships. In Figure 8, however, an overwhelming majority of these students have stated that they have not participated in these programmes. The reasons for not participating are shown in Figure 9, where the predominant reason has to do with the lack of finances. This reason has been reinforced by other stakeholders interviewed, who have pointed to the lack of equity in exchange programmes in particular, where students from the global North have the means to participate meaningfully in these programmes in ways that students from the global South do not.

“The second thing is sometimes when we partner, especially for mobility, you'll find that for European universities, it's easy for them to bring their students and staff to South Africa, but it's hard for us to send our students. For staff, it is not always that big of a problem. But for students, it is extremely hard. I mean, most South African students don't even have a passport, let alone afford a life overseas. So again, it boils down to issues of funding, but also, it's a South African problem. Issues of inequality in this country and so on.” - **HEI representative (KII)**

Figure 7: IHEPs offered by universities in the sample



¹³⁵ See the UK Innovate website for more information about this scheme: <https://iuk-business-connect.org.uk/opportunities/african-agriculture-knowledge-transfer-partnerships-ktp-2023-24-round-1/>

Figure 8: Number of youth who have participated in IHEPs

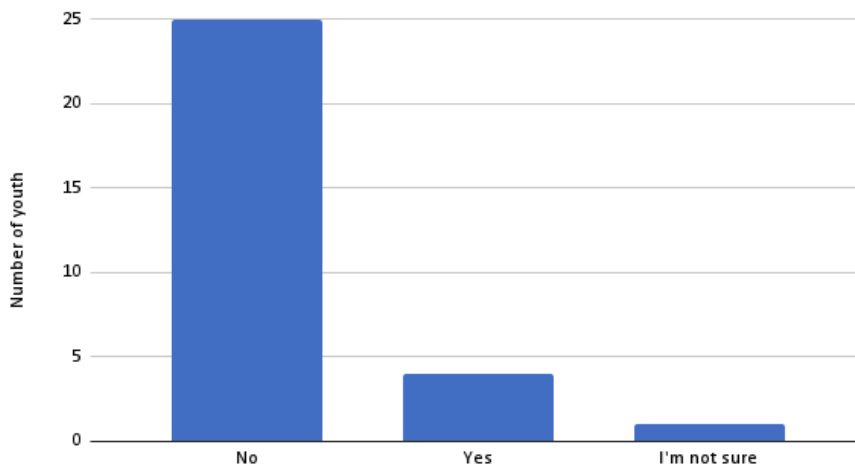
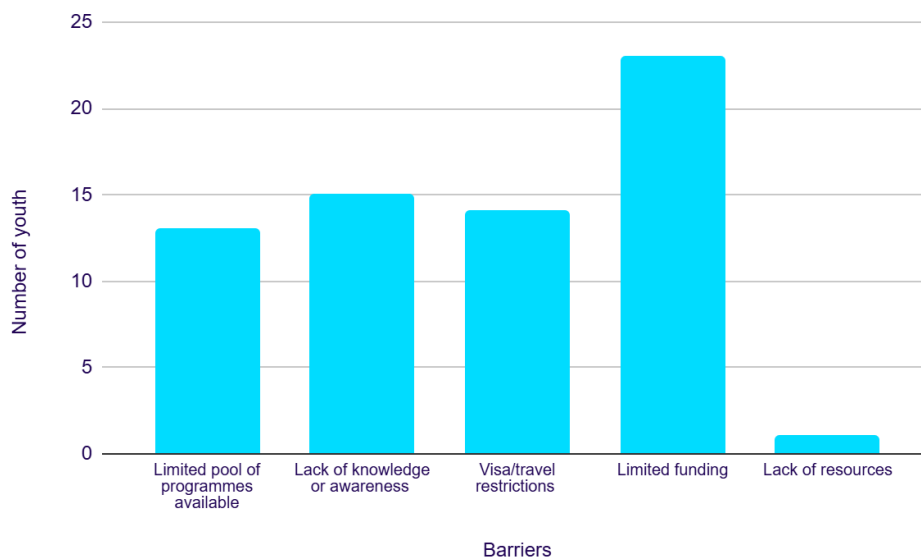


Figure 9: Named barriers to IHEP participation



KIIs with young people, in particular, focused on their participation through scholarships to study abroad. Among the scholarship programmes that young people participated in were the Mastercard Foundation scholarship and the Chevening scholarship (see box 3 for more details).

Box 3: Scholarship for African Student Mobility

Mastercard Foundation¹³⁶

The Mastercard Foundation Scholars Programme is a transformative educational initiative designed to shape the next generation of African leaders. At its core, the programme aims to support bright yet poor young people, primarily from African countries, by providing them with comprehensive educational opportunities. What makes this scholarship unique is its holistic approach - it goes beyond just covering tuition fees to include full financial support for books, housing, meals, and other educational expenses, ensuring scholars can focus entirely on their studies and personal development.

The programme's vision extends far beyond traditional academic achievement. While academic excellence is

¹³⁶ See the Foundation's website for information about the scholarship: <https://mastercardfdn.org/all/scholars/becoming-a-scholar/>

important, the Mastercard Foundation places significant emphasis on developing leadership skills, fostering entrepreneurial thinking, and instilling a strong sense of social responsibility. Scholars receive extensive mentoring, career guidance, and access to internship opportunities, all while being connected to a global network of fellow scholars and leaders. This comprehensive support system helps prepare them to become transformative leaders who will drive positive social change in their communities and across Africa.

Through partnerships with prestigious educational institutions both within Africa and internationally, including universities in North America and Europe, the programme creates diverse learning environments and opportunities for cross-cultural exchange. There is a particular emphasis on supporting young women, recognizing their crucial role in Africa's development. The ultimate goal is to create a ripple effect of positive change, as scholars are encouraged to give back to their communities and contribute to the social and economic transformation of their home countries. This focus on "giving back" is woven into the fabric of the programme, creating a cycle of positive impact that extends well beyond individual scholarship recipients.

Chevening¹³⁷

The Chevening Scholarship Programme is the United Kingdom government's prestigious international awards programme aimed at developing global leaders. Funded by the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) and partner organisations, it provides outstanding scholars with the opportunity to pursue a one-year master's degree at any UK university.

The programme specifically targets ambitious and driven professionals who demonstrate leadership potential and strong academic qualifications. Chevening scholars are selected based on their ability to positively contribute to their home countries' development upon completing their studies in the UK. The scholarship typically covers full academic funding, including tuition fees, a monthly living allowance, travel costs to and from the UK, and other allowances for essential expenses.

What makes Chevening unique is its focus on building lasting positive relationships between the UK and future leaders, decision-makers, and influencers from around the world. Beyond academic studies, scholars become part of an influential global network of over 50,000 alumni. They engage in exclusive networking events, cultural experiences, and professional development opportunities throughout their time in the UK. The programme emphasises not just academic excellence but also leadership development, cultural exchange, and the creation of long-lasting connections between the UK and other nations.

The selection process is highly competitive and looks for candidates who can demonstrate their leadership qualities, networking abilities, and clear plans for how their UK study will help them achieve their career goals and contribute to their home countries' development. Successful applicants must have at least two years of work experience and meet English language requirements. Alumni of the programme often go on to hold significant positions in government, private sector, academia, and civil society organisations in their home countries, fulfilling the programme's aim of nurturing future global leaders.

4.3.2. What are the main challenges and opportunities faced in implementing effective IHEPs for youth development in Africa, from the perspectives of stakeholders including academia, government, and international organisations: How IHEPs Can Best Support Youth Development?

International higher education partnerships have emerged as critical mechanisms for advancing youth development goals across borders, particularly in addressing educational inequities between Global North and South institutions¹³⁸. While these partnerships manifest through various initiatives, recent survey insights reveal three primary focal areas that align with local development needs: **digital literacy, leadership development, and inclusive programming**.

¹³⁷ See the Chevening website for information about the scholarship: <https://www.chevening.org/scholarships/>

¹³⁸ Wilson, M. (2020). International university partnerships and sustainable development goals: A systematic review. *Higher Education*, 79(4), 678-694.

- The **digital transformation** of higher education partnerships has become increasingly central to youth development objectives. As one Ethiopian survey respondent (Youth, 18 - 24) emphasised:

“[There is a need to] prioritise STEM education and digital literacy initiatives to equip students with essential skills for the future job market” - **Youth, Ethiopia (survey)**

This focus is particularly pronounced in urban regions, where growing tech sectors create both opportunities and imperatives for digital skill development. As evidenced by one HE representative's experience, these partnerships can yield significant benefits: "Collaboration allows for access to bigger budgets which we would not have if we were working alone" (Kenya HEI representative) highlighting how digital initiatives can be better resourced through partnership approaches. These findings align with the literature on digital transformation in international partnerships¹³⁹, though the survey data suggests an even more urgent emphasis on digital literacy in the African context.

- **Leadership development** emerges as another crucial component of current partnership models, especially in countries like Ghana where youth participants strongly advocate for leadership-focused programming. As one survey respondent noted, "[Young people can add] a lot [of value]. They have very good ideas and just need a platform for their voices to be heard" (NGO representative). Government stakeholders affirm this priority, noting that they have "leadership engagements in the universities and this is to prepare them for leadership roles beyond the university environment" (youth advocacy and policy organisation representative, Nigeria). This emphasis on youth empowerment through leadership development supports Chen's theoretical framework for youth engagement while providing concrete evidence of how such engagement manifests in practice¹⁴⁰.
- **Inclusivity** stands as a third pillar of contemporary partnership approaches, with particular attention to reaching marginalised communities. A Kenyan respondent's observation that "Our programmes focus on reaching out to underrepresented youth, particularly those from rural areas" reflects a broader commitment to educational equity. NGO stakeholders particularly emphasise the importance of "looking at the differences across geographies to understand the nuances of improving access; differentiation and adaptation are quite essential in grasping how to intervene." This focus on inclusivity appears consistently across demographics, with NGOs particularly emphasising expanded access, supporting Martinez and Wong's call for more equitable collaboration models¹⁴¹.

However, existing partnerships face **implementation challenges** that require strategic responses for them to benefit young Africans. Survey insights point to three key areas for improvement in future programme design:

- **Enhanced collaboration** with local organisations: A Nigerian-based NGO survey respondent noted that part of their success could be attributed to "working closely with local communities and partners", highlighting the importance of local knowledge in programme development. This is exemplified by successful cases like Youth Hub Africa, described as "a strong, locally led organisation that can operate with minimal supervision from the management team." This aligns with Thompson's (2021) analysis of power dynamics in North-South partnerships while providing specific pathways for addressing such imbalances¹⁴².

“Involve community organizations [sic] in program development to address local needs and create pathways for students to engage with their communities.” - **Youth, Ghana (survey)**

¹³⁹ Williams, A., & Patel, S. (2022). Digital transformation in international higher education partnerships. *Technology, Knowledge and Learning*, 27(1), 12-34.

¹⁴⁰ Chen, H. (2021). Youth voice in educational partnerships: A framework for engagement. *International Review of Education*, 67(2), 89-112.

¹⁴¹ Martinez, C., & Wong, L. (2023). Decolonizing international education partnerships: Towards equitable collaboration. *Comparative Education Review*, 67(1), 45-67.

¹⁴² Thompson, R. (2021). Power dynamics in North-South university partnerships: Challenges and opportunities. *Journal of International Development*, 33(2), 234-256.

- Emphasis on **sustainability**: Sustainability emerges as a critical concern, particularly among experienced stakeholders, who noted the importance of designing and implementing partnerships with long-term visions in mind. This sentiment is echoed by government stakeholders who acknowledge that "socio-economic factors, such as economic instability and resource limitations, often exacerbate educational and employment challenges." This focus on long-term impact suggests a need for partnership models that extend beyond traditional funding cycles and project timelines, as advocated by Anderson and Kumar (2019)¹⁴³.

"Successful partnerships are about moving beyond the short-term goals. You need to listen to each other and discover the true motivations for a long-term" - **NGO representative (survey)**

"Decisions made today will impact the future of education and the workforce. Involving young people in the policy-making process ensures that the interests and perspectives of future generations are considered, leading to more sustainable and relevant educational outcomes." - **NGO representative (survey)**

- **Robust feedback mechanisms**: The integration of feedback mechanisms represents a third crucial area for improvement, with particular support from youth participants. NGO stakeholders emphasise the importance of "establishing a clear feedback mechanism that works to get the information you need so that information could be shared and adapted for others to test and use" (NGO representative, Kenya) Another NGO perspective highlights the need for "developing mechanisms to ensure that teams and organisations are not working in silos. Ensuring that there are collaborative channels where people can come together to co-create." This emphasis on continuous feedback and adaptation aligns with Roberts et al.'s (2022) findings on successful multilateral networks while providing specific mechanisms for implementation¹⁴⁴.

"As the primary stakeholders in the education system, young people can provide critical feedback on existing policies. Their firsthand experiences can help identify what works and what needs improvement." - **Youth, Ethiopia (survey)**

Analysis of successful international higher education partnerships focusing on youth development in Africa reveals several critical success factors that can inform future partnership design and implementation. These insights, drawn from both survey data and stakeholder interviews, highlight the interplay between institutional structures, communication practices, and resource management in creating effective partnerships:

- **Strong Communication and Clear Vision**

Effective communication emerges as a fundamental driver of successful partnerships. As one respondent emphasised, "Clear and continuous communication prevents misunderstandings and keeps all partners aligned with the programme's objectives." This finding is reinforced by higher education institutions' experiences, where "reduced bureaucracy" and "strong communication" are cited as key success factors enabling faster decision-making. The importance of shared vision is particularly evident in successful cases where "the people/staff also understand what the vision of the university is," allowing for more effective implementation of partnership initiatives.

NGO stakeholders particularly emphasise the need to "develop common ground and having a common vision of what you want to see, and how this aligns with professional growth." This alignment extends beyond mere

¹⁴³ Anderson, P., & Kumar, R. (2019). Transformative partnerships in higher education: Building sustainable development capacity. *Journal of International Education*, 45(3), 178-195.

¹⁴⁴ Roberts, S., Johnson, K., & Lee, M. (2022). Multilateral higher education networks: Impact on youth development in Global South contexts. *Higher Education Policy*, 35(4), 567-589.

operational coordination to include a "reporting style and storytelling approach in a way that is interesting, easy to understand by a wide audience," ensuring that partnership achievements and challenges are effectively communicated to all stakeholders.

- **Resource Management and Institutional Support**

Adequate funding emerges as a critical success factor, with survey participants from South Africa noting that "adequate funding allows us to scale our programmes and reach more youth effectively." This is exemplified by successful institutional experiences where "collaboration allows for access to bigger budgets which we would not have if we were working alone." Some institutions have leveraged this advantage significantly, with one reporting that they have "succeeded in building about 400 MOUs with different institutions such as Bill and Melinda Gates, USAID and others."

- **Mutual Commitment and Community Engagement**

The importance of mutual commitment and respect between partners is consistently highlighted. A Nigerian respondent's observation that partnerships thrive "when both parties respect each other's contributions and work toward a shared vision" reflects a broader understanding of partnership equity. Successful partnerships also recognize that "at least a third of learning is out in the community," emphasising the need to "work jointly with community and students." This community-centred approach helps address what NGO stakeholders identify as "cultural and religious aspect[s]" and the "limited and lack of sufficient education opportunities in the northern regions and access to employment opportunities."

- **Institutional Flexibility and Innovation**

Successful partnerships often demonstrate institutional flexibility and openness to innovation. As one HEI representative noted, "The university is always open-minded to explore various partnership pathways to explore new opportunities." This adaptability is crucial for addressing what NGO stakeholders identify as the need for "looking at the differences across geographies to understand the nuances of improving access."

- **Monitoring, Evaluation, and Adaptation**

Successful partnerships consistently incorporate strong monitoring and evaluation mechanisms. NGO stakeholders emphasise the importance of ensuring "that there are M&E mechanisms in place and reported to inform decision making" and "establishing a clear feedback mechanism that works to get the information you need so that information could be shared and adapted for others to test and use."

4.3.3. Conclusion: Transforming African Youth Development Through Inclusive Higher Education Partnerships

The analysis of International Higher Education Partnerships (IHEPs) in Africa reveals a complex landscape marked by both promising developments and persistent challenges. While these partnerships have evolved to include more South-South collaborations and digital initiatives, with demonstrated benefits in research output and employment prospects, their impact remains limited by accessibility barriers. Survey data notably shows that the majority of African students either lack access to IHEP programmes or face significant financial constraints in participating in them, creating a stark disparity between availability and actual engagement.

Success factors for effective IHEPs include strong communication, adequate resource management, and meaningful community engagement. However, the research emphasises that future partnerships must prioritise three critical areas: enhanced collaboration with local organisations, sustainable long-term programming, and

robust feedback mechanisms that incorporate youth voices. Digital literacy, leadership development, and inclusive programming emerge as key focal areas that align with local development needs.

The findings suggest that while IHEPs hold significant potential for youth empowerment in Africa, realising this potential requires addressing fundamental inequities, particularly the North-South divide in programme accessibility and resource allocation. Moving forward, partnerships must evolve beyond traditional models to ensure more equitable participation and sustainable impact for African youth development.

4.4 Key Success Factors and for Effective IHEPs that Empower Youths

4.4.1. How do successful IHEPs foster collaboration and knowledge exchange between African and international partners?

IHEPs have emerged as a vital mechanism for empowering African youth by fostering collaborations and knowledge exchange between African and international institutions. These partnerships are designed to bridge gaps in resources, expertise, and innovation, thereby enhancing the quality of education and research across the continent. By facilitating the transfer of knowledge and best practices, IHEPs contribute to developing and strengthening robust educational frameworks and research capabilities in African institutions. This approach addresses local challenges and integrates African perspectives into the global academic discourse, promoting a more inclusive and diversified knowledge economy.

One of the key success factors of IHEPs is the mutual benefit derived from these collaborations. Effective partnerships are built on the principles of reciprocity, respect, and shared goals. Both African and international partners bring unique strengths to the table, creating a synergistic environment where resources and expertise are pooled together for mutual advancement. For instance, African institutions often provide rich, context-specific knowledge and access to unique research environments, while international partners contribute advanced technologies, funding, and global networks. This reciprocal relationship ensures that both parties gain from the partnership, fostering a sense of ownership and commitment that is crucial for the sustainability of these initiatives.

“Developing mechanisms to ensure that teams and organisations do not work in silos but instead foster collaborative channels where people can co-create” is essential for meaningful partnerships” - **HEI representatives (KII)**

Another critical factor is the alignment of partnership goals with local and regional development priorities. Successful IHEPs are those that are responsive to the specific needs and challenges of the African context. This involves a thorough understanding of the socio-economic, cultural, and political landscapes in which these institutions operate. By aligning their objectives with national and regional development agendas, IHEPs can ensure that their efforts are relevant and impactful. For example, partnerships that focus on addressing public health issues, improving agricultural productivity, or enhancing educational access are more likely to resonate with local communities and policymakers, thereby garnering broader support and engagement.

Capacity building is also a cornerstone of effective IHEPs. These partnerships often include components such as joint research projects, faculty and student exchanges, and professional development programmes. By investing in the development of human capital, IHEPs help to build a cadre of skilled professionals who can drive innovation and development in their respective fields. This is particularly important in Africa, where there is a pressing need for skilled researchers, educators, and practitioners. Literature suggests that international partnerships have significantly strengthened postgraduate training and research production in Africa, marking a shift towards Africa-led and Africa-focused research agendas.¹⁴⁵ Through capacity-building initiatives, IHEPs contribute to the creation of a sustainable pipeline of talent that can address both current and future challenges.

Finally, the success of IHEPs hinges on effective governance and management structures. Clear communication, transparency, and accountability are essential for maintaining trust and ensuring that partnerships are managed efficiently. This includes establishing clear roles and responsibilities, setting measurable goals, and regularly monitoring and evaluating progress. Effective governance structures help to mitigate potential conflicts and ensure that resources are used efficiently. Moreover, they provide a framework for

¹⁴⁵Jowi, J.O. (2024). Recent developments in higher education in Africa: partnerships for knowledge transformations.

continuous improvement, allowing partnerships to adapt and evolve in response to changing circumstances and emerging opportunities. In recent years, the digitalisation of higher education—accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic has opened new avenues for collaboration and governance in IHEPs.¹⁴⁶ Digital platforms now play a crucial role in enabling continuous engagement and supervision, especially in geographically dispersed partnerships.¹⁴⁷ Governance structures that integrate monitoring and evaluation mechanisms support continuous improvement, allowing partnerships to adapt to evolving circumstances and emerging opportunities. The importance of a clear reporting style was highlighted, with one NGO emphasising the need for “storytelling approaches that are interesting and easy to understand by a wide audience”. Additionally, by investing in the development of human capital, these partnerships help build a cadre of skilled professionals who can drive innovation and development in their respective fields.

“Learning from international institutions on how to incorporate employability capacity of students is one of the important components of IHEPs” - **HEI representatives (KII)**

These foundational elements set the stage for the specific examples of some successful IHEPs in South Africa, Ghana, Kenya, and Nigeria, which are discussed in detail below:

- For instance, the African Research Universities Alliance (ARUA), established in 2015, has been pivotal in promoting collaborative research and capacity building among its member universities across Africa and their global partners.¹⁴⁸ This alliance has facilitated numerous joint research projects, workshops, and academic exchanges, contributing to the development of a robust research culture and the empowerment of young African scholars.
- In South Africa, the University of Cape Town’s partnership with the University of Bristol in the UK exemplifies the success of IHEPs.¹⁴⁹ This collaboration has focused on addressing public health challenges through joint research initiatives and student exchanges. The partnership has not only enhanced the research capabilities of both institutions but also provided South African students with valuable international exposure and opportunities to engage in cutting-edge research.
- Similarly, the University of Ghana’s collaboration with the University of Copenhagen has led to significant advancements in food security and nutrition research, benefiting both local communities and the broader academic community. These partnerships have enabled students and researchers to tackle pressing local issues while gaining insights from global perspectives.

While understanding the key success factors of IHEPs provides a foundation for identifying what drives impactful and sustainable collaborations, it is equally important to recognise the barriers that can impede these partnerships. Although reciprocity, alignment with local needs, capacity building, and effective governance are essential elements for successful IHEPs, these ideals are often challenged by practical constraints. Many African institutions face significant resource limitations, cultural and geographical divides, and governance complexities that can strain the collaborative process. These barriers highlight the complexities involved in maintaining partnerships that are both equitable and impactful. Moving from examining success factors to barriers provides a more comprehensive view of the challenges IHEPs must navigate to fulfil their potential in empowering African youth and enhancing the continent’s educational landscape. The barriers to successful IHEPs are as follows:

Barriers and Challenges to Successful IHEPs

Despite the benefits of International Higher Education Partnerships (IHEPs), they face complex and significant challenges that can hinder their potential to empower African youth effectively. These challenges often revolve around resource limitations, cultural and geographical distances, and governance and intellectual discrepancies, all of which can impact the quality and sustainability of collaboration. Additionally, power dynamics, administrative

¹⁴⁶ Ibid

¹⁴⁷ Ibid

¹⁴⁸ Dine RD, Elkheir LYM, Raimi MO, Alemayehu M, Mohamed SY, Turzin JK, et al. (2024) Ten simple rules for successful and sustainable African research collaborations. PLoS Comput Biol 20(6): e1012197. Available here: <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pcbi.1012197>

¹⁴⁹ University of Bristol. (n.d.). Bristol-UCT Cotutelle Programme. Available here: <https://www.bristol.ac.uk/doctoral-college/partnerships/cotutelle/bristol-uct/>

hurdles, and ethical concerns emerge as critical issues that must be navigated to maintain balanced and equitable partnerships. Addressing these barriers requires a nuanced understanding of local contexts, a commitment to equitable practices, and a focus on creating scalable and sustainable frameworks.

- Resource and Infrastructure Disparities

One of the most pressing challenges facing IHEPs in Africa is the persistent resource gap between African institutions and their international partners¹⁵⁰. This disparity manifests in limited access to research facilities, unreliable internet connectivity, inadequate library resources, and significant financial constraints that affect programme sustainability. This financial strain of low academic salaries often requires African academics to engage in additional consultancy work, which competes with their research responsibilities within IHEPs.¹⁵¹ Recent studies highlight that some African institutions face governance and resource challenges due to over-reliance on external funding and inconsistent domestic support, which impacts the longevity and impact of partnerships. As one South participant emphasised:

"Without consistent funding, it's difficult to scale up and provide quality resources to participants." This challenge appears consistently across all demographics, indicating its systemic nature in the sector - **HEI Representative (KII)**

The infrastructure challenges are particularly acute in the digital realm. NGO representatives report having to provide stipends or reimbursements to learners specifically for internet connectivity to enable participation in their programmes. Higher education institutions (HEIs) have recognised the critical importance of resource sharing, with one representative noting:

"When we partner with those in the global north, we can have access to their resources or facilities which are more upgraded than ours in the global South." - **HEI representative (KII)**

- Power Dynamics and Partnership Equity

Historical colonial relationships continue to influence modern educational partnerships, often creating imbalanced power dynamics¹⁵². This manifests in the dominance of Western academic models, unequal decision-making power in curriculum development, and limited recognition of local expertise. A Nigerian youth participant provided powerful insight into these inequities:

"There are some partnerships that are one-sided and do not benefit Nigerian universities. Some foreign institutions use partnerships with Nigerian universities as a way to get more funding especially when they can say they are working with a lot of students and some professors from Nigeria." - **Youth, Nigeria (KII)**

This exploitation of partnerships for funding advantages particularly disadvantages youth beneficiaries, who may find themselves as statistical additions rather than genuine participants in programme design and implementation. When young people are treated as passive recipients rather than active stakeholders, partnerships fail to harness their insights and innovation potential. The persistence of these colonial dynamics undermines youth empowerment by limiting young people's voices, restricting access to genuine collaborations, perpetuating dependency and failing to recognise and nurture local youth leadership potential.

¹⁵⁰ Knight, J., & Woldegiorgis, E. T. (2017). *Regionalization of African Higher Education*. Sense Publishers.

¹⁵¹ Jowi, J.O. (2024). Recent developments in higher education in Africa: partnerships for knowledge transformations.

¹⁵² Obamba, M. O., & Mwema, J. K. (2019). "Symmetry and proportionality in international education partnerships: The African experience." *Higher Education Policy*, 32(4), 601-619.

These power imbalances extend to resource distribution, with a South African participant emphasising that:

"Equity is essential to avoid power imbalances in partnerships." - **Government representative (KII)**

- Cultural, Geographical Distance and Contextual Misalignment

Cultural alignment and local relevance remain significant challenges in partnership programmes¹⁵³. This includes issues with curriculum content, teaching methodologies, language barriers, and differing academic traditions. An Ethiopian survey respondent highlighted how "Misunderstandings can arise when international partners don't fully appreciate local customs." This issue is particularly pronounced in rural areas where cultural norms vary significantly from urban centres. The challenge extends to academic requirements and expectations. As noted below:

"We study English our whole lives only to be told we need to write English Proficiency Exams when coming to some universities. But this is not the case for those coming from America for instance." - **Youth, Ghana (KII)**

Such disparities highlight the need for more culturally sensitive and equitable partnership approaches. Additionally, physical separation between African institutions and their international counterparts can impede collaboration. Effective research partnerships benefit from regular, face-to-face communication, which is constrained by long travel distances and the associated financial and logistical costs.¹⁵⁴ Furthermore, limited ICT infrastructure in Africa hampers virtual collaboration, making it difficult to bridge geographical divides through technology.

"Looking at the differences across geographies to understand the nuances of improving access helps foster inclusion and socialisation among beneficiaries" - **Government representative (KII)**

- Administrative and Regulatory Challenges

Cross-border educational partnerships face significant administrative challenges that hinder their effectiveness. Complex and expensive visa processes create barriers to participation, particularly for students and staff from low-income regions. Differing quality assurance standards and unclear credit transfer frameworks further complicate collaboration, often leaving students without recognition for completed coursework. One international partner representative reported the following:

"There are challenges with aligning the calendars of institutions involved in the partnership. This makes it difficult with regards to when students may be available for academic work." - **International partner representative (KII)**

Immigration policies create additional barriers, with one HEI representative noting that:

"Immigration policies can have some impact. The process for covering the cost of resident permit payments every year can be burdensome." - **HEI representative (KII)**

- Institutional Capacity and Funding

¹⁵³ Ndlovu-Gatsheni, S. J. (2017). "Decolonizing research methodology must include undoing its dirty history." *Journal of Education and Practice*, 8(9), 12-25.

¹⁵⁴ Jowi, J.O. (2024). Recent developments in higher education in Africa: partnerships for knowledge transformations.

Public institutions face significant challenges in both capacity and funding, which undermine their ability to meet the growing demand for higher education. Limited infrastructure, such as inadequate classrooms, laboratories, and digital resources, hampers their ability to accommodate increasing student enrolments. Many institutions operate with outdated facilities and insufficient access to modern tools and technologies, further restricting the quality of education provided. Funding constraints are a critical issue, with many public institutions heavily reliant on inconsistent government support that often falls short of recommended levels. This underfunding affects their ability to attract and retain qualified faculty, invest in research and development, and maintain or upgrade infrastructure. Additionally, public institutions frequently struggle with the high costs of supporting underserved and marginalised populations, exacerbating inequalities in access to higher education. The combination of capacity and funding challenges places a strain on public institutions' ability to deliver high-quality, inclusive, and future-focused education. As one HEI representative explained:

"Being a public institution, we rely heavily on public financing and support to implement our programmes. We have less research funding." This can lead to compromised research objectives, with another noting that "When you participate in these and you don't have enough resources on your own, you tend to work towards the objectives of those who are funding the research and not exactly the objectives you are interested in." - **HEI representative (KII)**

- Employment and Skills Development

A critical concern emerging from stakeholder interviews is the alignment between higher education and employment outcomes. Government representatives in Ghana highlighted:

"[There are] ongoing challenges, such as inconsistent alignment between academic curricula and industry needs. Many institutions struggle to conduct the necessary market research or engage sufficiently with alumni and industry to adapt their programmes to job market requirements... Having a placement service that can make it easier for students to transition to work. This can be a form of internship or other formats like capacity building for your people to gain skills for the job market." - **Government representative (KII)**

- Governance and Bureaucratic Challenges

Differences in governance structures, regulatory requirements, and bureaucratic processes can complicate IHEP implementation. African countries vary widely in governance performance, with some nations experiencing political instability, corruption, or complex regulatory environments. Such issues can reduce the attractiveness of African institutions as partners and complicate project coordination across borders. Recent studies indicate that some African institutions encounter governance and resource challenges due to an over-reliance on external funding and inconsistent domestic support, which affect the sustainability and effectiveness of partnerships.¹⁵⁵

- Intellectual and Research Capacity Challenges in IHEPs

Intellectual and knowledge disparities pose a significant challenge to effective international higher education partnerships (IHEPs).¹⁵⁶ The disparity in research experience and expertise between African and international institutions creates intellectual distance, often resulting in asymmetrical relationships where African institutions

¹⁵⁵Ibid

¹⁵⁶O. Chirambal; E. S. Ndofirepill. (2023). Access and success in higher education: disadvantaged students' lived experiences beyond funding hurdles at a Metropolitan South African university. Faculty of Education University of Johannesburg, South Africa. Available here: https://www.scielo.org.za/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S1753-59132023000600005

have limited influence over research agendas.¹⁵⁷ These dynamic risks reinforcing dependency rather than fostering local expertise and empowerment. Compounding this issue is the limited research capacity within many African institutions, where a robust research culture is often absent from academic structures. Insufficient access to resources, training, and advanced research opportunities further constrains the ability of African researchers to contribute meaningfully to IHEPs, diminishing the potential for equitable and impactful collaborations.

4.4.3. Ethical Considerations in IHEPs

IHEPs involving African institutions face various ethical challenges, often stemming from historical power imbalances and dependencies on Global North institutions. Africa's higher education system has long been shaped by colonial legacies, which influence current partnerships and often lead to inequitable terms¹⁵⁸. Ethical concerns also arise about the agenda-setting power held by international institutions and partners, which sometimes directs resources toward projects that align more with foreign interests than with Africa's development needs¹⁵⁹.

"Some institutions use partnerships with African universities primarily to secure funding, without necessarily providing benefits that address local needs. This can lead to partnerships that are extractive rather than mutually beneficial." - **HEI representative (KII)**

Collaborations aimed at empowering African universities should prioritise mutually beneficial partnerships that respect and value local knowledge. Such partnerships enable African universities to play a central role in defining research priorities, ensuring that projects align with the needs and perspectives of local communities. Additionally, policies that foster transparency and inclusivity in partnership arrangements are essential, helping to ensure that local researchers and students have equitable access to resources and meaningful participation in decision-making processes. To foster genuinely empowering partnerships, there is a need for ethical frameworks that prioritise equity and mutual respect. This means actively involving African institutions in setting research agendas, programme design, and decision-making processes. Local NGOs and CSOs have emphasised the importance of partnerships that respect cultural and socio-economic contexts. For example, regional organisations like NGOs and HEIs stressed that:

"Understanding cultural nuances across geographies is essential for socialisation and inclusion" - **HEI representative (survey)**

- Transparency and consent

Ensuring transparency and informed consent is fundamental in IHEPs, particularly when engaging young participants. Participants should clearly understand the partnership's goals, their role, and how their input and data will be used. This is especially relevant for youth participation, where power dynamics between researchers and young people must be managed to avoid coercion or undue influence. NGOs such as Education For All Children (EFAC) have noted the importance of involving young people in feedback loops and decision-making processes, ensuring that their voices genuinely shape programme outcomes. According to one CSO representative:

"Engaging students in policy and programme design, especially through feedback mechanisms, empowers them to influence decisions meaningfully." - **CSO representative (survey)**

¹⁵⁷Ibid

¹⁵⁸Ibid

¹⁵⁹Ibid

- Avoiding dependency and promoting sustainable local capacity

Another ethical consideration is avoiding dependency and fostering sustainable local capacity. Partnerships that rely heavily on external funding can create a cycle of dependency, where local institutions become reliant on foreign support without developing self-sustaining structures. This dependence can hinder long-term development by limiting local investment, innovation, and institutional growth, as organizations may focus on immediate funding rather than sustainable strategies. Furthermore, when external funding decreases or ceases, these institutions often face operational challenges, disrupting essential services and weakening their stability and independence. To counteract this, IHEPs need to take a longer term strategic response by investing in building local capacities and resources that can operate independently after the end of the project. All institutions emphasised the need for "localised support and co-creation," suggesting that IHEPs should be tailored to meet the specific needs of African institutions rather than replicating foreign models that may not be sustainable in the local context. This will require careful understanding and negotiation between the partners.

- Ethical handling of intellectual property and knowledge exchange

IHEPs must also address the ethical handling of intellectual property and knowledge exchange. Knowledge produced through these partnerships should be accessible to both African and international partners. NGOs and CSOs raised concerns about knowledge asymmetries, where local institutions may contribute valuable context-specific insights without receiving full recognition or access to shared intellectual property.

"Ensuring that knowledge exchange is reciprocal and accessible to all parties involved" is essential for promoting ethical and equitable partnerships" - **NGO representative (KII)**

- Protection of vulnerable groups and inclusivity

Lastly, IHEPs should adopt ethical standards that protect vulnerable groups and promote inclusivity. Some young people, particularly those from marginalised communities, may face unique challenges in accessing and participating in international partnerships. Ethical IHEPs must address these barriers by implementing inclusive recruitment strategies and providing financial support, such as stipends for internet connectivity or travel costs. An NGO representative noted:

"Ensuring equitable access and creating incentives, like stipends for connectivity to enable participation from economically disadvantaged students is essential. This approach ensures that all youth, regardless of socio-economic background, have an opportunity to benefit from the partnership, fostering a genuinely inclusive approach to youth empowerment." - **NGO representative (KII)**

These ethical considerations highlight the importance of designing and implementing IHEPs that respect and empower African institutions and communities. By embedding ethical principles into their frameworks, IHEPs can contribute meaningfully to sustainable development, promoting partnerships that are not only effective but also fair and just.

4.4.4. How can policy frameworks be developed or adapted to support the scalability and sustainability of IHEPs in Africa?

For IHEPs to be scalable and sustainable within African contexts, partnerships must go beyond short-term collaborations to build enduring frameworks that support local capacity building. There is a need for policy frameworks that prioritise sustained investment in African higher education infrastructure, particularly in areas such as digital connectivity and research funding.¹⁶⁰ These frameworks are essential for creating self-sustaining academic ecosystems that can support long-term growth and resilience against external pressures.

¹⁶⁰Ibid

- Capacity-Building Networks and Knowledge Sharing

A key strategy for achieving scalability in IHEPs involves creating networks and platforms for continuous knowledge sharing and capacity building. The establishment of African Centres of Excellence (ACE), for example, represents an impactful model where institutions across the continent focus on specific research areas, fostering intra-African collaboration and specialisation. **These centres, supported by initiatives such as the World Bank's ACE programme, aim to strengthen research, improve postgraduate education quality and address regional development challenges through targeted research in fields like agriculture, health, and engineering.** This focus on regional collaboration enables institutions to pool resources and share expertise, making it possible for knowledge generated within one institution to benefit others across the continent, thereby enhancing scalability. ACE has been instrumental in addressing regional development challenges by building the capacity of HEIs.

- Regional and Intra-African Collaborations

Additionally, intra-African partnerships, as promoted by entities like the African Union, play a critical role in building scalable models for educational collaboration.¹⁶¹ By focusing on regional integration and capacity development, these frameworks help to reduce dependency on external funding and promote self-reliant educational systems in Africa. By encouraging partnerships within the continent, African institutions can create self-reliant educational frameworks that align with local priorities. For instance, Leap Africa highlighted the importance of **“creating collaborative channels that prevent organisations from working in silos”** and fostering a community-based approach where institutions co-create solutions tailored to their specific contexts. Such regional models support scalability by promoting partnerships that are deeply rooted in African needs and realities.

“Creating feedback mechanisms that work to get the information you need facilitates knowledge sharing, allowing for adaptability and scalability across regions and institutions” - **International partner (KII)**

- Resource Diversification and Sustainable Funding Models

One of the most pressing challenges to the sustainability of IHEPs is the over-reliance on foreign funding, which can create cycles of dependency. Sustainable partnerships require diversified funding sources, including domestic investment from African governments, private sector involvement, and public-private partnerships.

“Beyond grants, it's critical to provide technical support and capacity-building to ensure local organisations can meet the expectations of funders and operate independently in the future. By diversifying resources and investing in capacity building, IHEPs can create financially resilient structures that withstand shifts in funding priorities from international donors.” - **NGO/CSO representative (KII)**

- Adapting to Local Contexts and Building Institutional Ownership

Scalable and sustainable IHEPs must be adaptable to diverse local contexts and foster a sense of ownership within African institutions. Successful partnerships avoid a “one-size-fits-all” approach and instead customise their frameworks to align with the specific socio-economic, political, and cultural landscapes of the regions they serve. Stakeholders emphasised the importance of “differentiation and adaptation to the local context, as this enhances inclusion and increases the likelihood of successful outcomes”. By actively involving African institutions in the design and execution of programmes, IHEPs can empower these institutions to take ownership of the partnership, which is essential for long-term sustainability.

¹⁶¹Jowi, J.O. (2024). Recent developments in higher education in Africa: partnerships for knowledge transformations

- Utilising Technology to Support Continuous Engagement

The role of digital platforms in supporting the scalability and sustainability of IHEPs cannot be overstated, especially in a post-COVID-19 world. The pandemic highlighted the importance of remote engagement tools, which enable institutions to maintain active partnerships despite geographical distances. Leveraging technology not only enhances accessibility but also allows for continuous supervision, feedback, and knowledge exchange. Institutions can maintain regular interactions through online workshops, training sessions, and collaborative research projects, reducing the costs and logistical challenges associated with face-to-face engagements. By investing in digital infrastructure, African institutions can ensure that IHEPs remain active and scalable even in the face of physical or financial barriers.

In summary, the scalability and sustainability of IHEPs in Africa depend on creating frameworks that prioritise long-term capacity building, resource diversification, regional collaboration, and adaptability to local needs. Successful models, such as the ACE initiative and intra-African partnerships, demonstrate the potential for building resilient educational systems that align with Africa's development priorities. By focusing on these elements, IHEPs can achieve meaningful and lasting impact, empowering African youth, and strengthening the continent's academic and research capabilities for generations to come.

4.4.5. Conclusion: Key Success Factors for Effective IHEPs Empowering Youths

This section underscores the critical elements that drive the success of IHEPs in empowering African youth. Effective partnerships are built on principles of equity, mutual respect, and alignment with local priorities, ensuring reciprocal benefits for all stakeholders. Capacity-building initiatives such as faculty exchanges, joint research, and professional development programmes emerge as essential components for fostering institutional resilience and youth empowerment. However, significant challenges persist, including resource asymmetries, bureaucratic inefficiencies, and inequities in partnership dynamics. Addressing these requires a commitment to decolonial approaches, streamlined administrative processes, and policy frameworks that prioritise sustainability and scalability. Greater inclusivity, enhanced access, and the active participation of youth in the design and evaluation of IHEPs are also crucial to maximising their impact.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

5.1. How can the findings and insights from this research contribute to broader discussions and actions aimed at unlocking Africa's youth potential for sustainable development through international higher education partnerships?

The purpose of this study was to explore how IHEPs can empower African youth by addressing systemic challenges in higher education and graduate employment. The research examined higher education alignment with labour markets, non-traditional career pathways, and youth participation in educational policy making, whilst identifying strategies for sustainable partnerships.

Africa's youth demographic presents significant potential, but realising this opportunity requires coordinated action from governments, higher education institutions, international partners, and civil society. International Higher Education Partnerships (IHEPs) offer a critical pathway for strengthening education systems, addressing skills gaps, and enabling youth success in the global economy.

Effective implementation requires:

- Government policy reform and investment in internationalisation
- Higher education focus on curriculum relevance and institutional frameworks
- International partner investment in capacity-building and technology
- Youth integration in partnership design and implementation

The expanding youth population in Sub-Saharan Africa makes these actions urgent. While failure to act risks increasing unemployment and inequality, well-designed partnerships can create pathways to future industries, entrepreneurship, and innovation. Through collective action focused on inclusivity, sustainability, and cultural sensitivity, stakeholders can transform Africa's demographic opportunity into equitable, innovative growth.

The findings from this research emphasise that IHEPs can play a transformative role in unlocking Africa's youth potential by addressing systemic educational gaps, fostering skills development, and creating opportunities for youth empowerment by:

- Enhancing employability: IHEPs can help bridge the gap between education and labour market demands by aligning curricula with industry needs and offering practical, globally relevant training.
- Fostering innovation and resilience: By integrating diverse perspectives and innovative teaching methods, IHEPs can equip youth with the adaptability needed in rapidly changing global markets.
- Building networks and global citizenship: Exposure to international collaborators fosters intercultural understanding and global perspectives, empowering youth to lead change within and beyond their communities.

These insights are complemented with actionable steps, such as:

- Amplifying youth voices: Encouraging youth participation in designing and evaluating IHEPs to ensure their relevance and inclusivity.
- Strengthening international collaborations: Expanding partnerships to include a broader array of stakeholders (e.g., private sector, NGOs) for holistic solutions.

- Aligning with sustainable development goals (SDGs): Ensuring IHEPs contribute directly to broader global goals, such as quality education (SDG 4) and decent work and economic growth (SDG 8).

IHEPs hold immense potential to address critical challenges in Africa's higher education landscape. These partnerships can help to bridge gaps between academic curricula and labour market demands, foster innovation through equitable collaboration, and enhance institutional capacity to produce employable graduates. However, to achieve these outcomes, it is essential to move beyond generic strategies and adopt targeted, actionable approaches tailored to the specific needs of institutions, governments, and project partners.

The recommendations presented in this section address key opportunities and challenges identified in the project findings. They are grounded in practical examples and case studies from successful international collaborations, offering stakeholders robust, evidence-based guidance. Each recommendation highlights actionable steps for fostering collaboration, promoting equity, leveraging technology, and strengthening policy frameworks. By implementing these strategies, stakeholders can ensure that IHEPs effectively contribute to building resilient, inclusive, and globally competitive higher education systems in Africa.

A key cross-cutting theme in all these recommendations is the inclusion of youth voices. Engaging young people as active participants in shaping partnerships ensures that their needs and aspirations are directly reflected in outcomes and can provide critical avenues for empowerment and development. The African Leadership University (ALU), for example, places students at the centre of its problem-based learning approach, fostering practical problem-solving and leadership skills. Similarly, policy co-creation with youth has proven impactful.¹⁶² The African Union's Youth Advisory Board provides young people with platforms to influence decision-making processes directly, serving as a model for integrating youth perspectives into policy dialogues and programme development.¹⁶³ Additionally, support for youth entrepreneurship initiatives is vital. The Tony Elumelu Foundation's Entrepreneurship Programme demonstrates how mentorship, funding, and capacity-building workshops can equip young African entrepreneurs with the skills needed for success.¹⁶⁴ Linking such initiatives to IHEPs further empowers young people. Other examples such as the African Youth Charter's role in policy consultation and TSIBA's mentorship programmes, which encourage youth-led initiatives, highlight the transformative impact of including young voices in decision-making.

5.1.1. Recommendations for higher education institutions

- **Relevant curriculum and assessment design**

Higher education institutions must ensure that their curriculum offerings align with both regional and global needs to remain relevant and impactful. For example, the University of Cape Town's partnership with the University of Bristol developed a joint master's programme on Climate Adaptation, integrating local and international perspectives to equip students with region-specific and globally relevant skills¹⁶⁵. Similarly, Brandman University in the United States redesigned its curriculum to align institutional learning outcomes with industry needs, incorporating assessments that strengthen employability¹⁶⁶. Monash University's "Assessment Design Decisions Framework" further demonstrates how structured assessment practices can enhance learning outcomes, ensuring graduates meet labour market expectations¹⁶⁷. TSIBA's innovative curriculum, which combines business administration education with practical placements and entrepreneurial projects, exemplifies how African institutions can bridge the gap between education and employability¹⁶⁸.

- **Promote Equitable Partnerships**

¹⁶²African Leadership University. (n.d.). Unlock Learning by Doing: Experience the Power of Hubs

¹⁶³African Union. (2015). Youth Division. Available here: <https://au.int/en/youth-division>

¹⁶⁴The Tony Elumelu Foundation. (n.d). Our Approach. Available here: <https://www.tonyelumelufoundation.org/our-approach>

¹⁶⁵ Maringe, F., Chiramba, O., Banda, T., Magabane, A., & Chibaya, S. (2024). Exploring Internationalisation of Higher Education at Public Universities in South Africa: Intentions, Practices, Opportunities and Constraints. IEASA and British Council.

¹⁶⁶Middlehurst, R., & Fielden, J. (2016). Learning Excellence: 26 International Case Studies. Higher Education Academy in partnership with CHEMS Consulting

¹⁶⁷Middlehurst, R., & Fielden, J. (2016). Learning Excellence: A Summary Analysis of 26 International Case Studies. Higher Education Academy in partnership with CHEMS Consulting.

¹⁶⁸TSIBA (2024). 20 Year Impact Report. TSIBA Business School.

Equitable partnerships ensure mutual benefits and capacity building for all parties involved. The South African Network of Skills Abroad (SANSA) provides a model for equitable knowledge exchange by fostering collaboration between South African universities and international partners¹⁶⁹. Similarly, the International Institute for Water and Environmental Engineering (2iE) in Burkina Faso illustrates how embedding professional input into curricula can drive entrepreneurship and regional development through initiatives like business incubators¹⁷⁰.

- **Develop institutional structures for policy implementation**

To optimise the benefits of partnerships, institutions must establish effective policy implementation structures. This could include the creation of a centralised database to monitor partnership outcomes, aligning them with institutional priorities¹⁷¹. James Madison University's Centre for Assessment and Research Studies offers a model for using data-driven approaches to evaluate student learning and programme effectiveness¹⁷².

5.1.2. Recommendations for governments and policymakers

- **Create enabling policy environments**

Governments play a vital role in reducing barriers to internationalisation by creating supportive policy environments. For example, Kenya's Higher Education Loans Board (HELB) facilitated funding access for international exchange students, showcasing how government support can promote cross-border academic mobility¹⁷³. Governments should implement policies like tax incentives for partnerships benefiting local communities and scholarships targeting underserved regions.

- **Simplify visa processes**

Simplified visa processes are essential to encourage international mobility. Ghana's Ministry of Education developed a "Priority Visa Pathway" for international academic staff and students, streamlining mobility and reducing administrative burdens¹⁷⁴. Similar streamlined processes could encourage more robust academic exchanges across Africa.

- **Support infrastructure development**

Investments in infrastructure, particularly in historically disadvantaged institutions (HDIs), are crucial for equitable participation in international partnerships. For example, the African Development Bank's Education Support Programme funded ICT upgrades in Nigerian HDIs, enabling virtual exchanges and research collaborations¹⁷⁵. The University of Cape Town's EDU initiative also highlights how targeted infrastructure investments can enhance student retention and institutional performance¹⁷⁶.

5.1.3. Recommendations for NGOs and CSOs

- **Facilitate capacity-building programmes**

¹⁶⁹ Maringe, F., Chiramba, O., Banda, T., Magabane, A., & Chibaya, S. (2024). Exploring Internationalisation of Higher Education at Public Universities in South Africa: Intentions, Practices, Opportunities and Constraints.

¹⁷⁰ Middlehurst, R., & Fielden, J. (2016). Learning Excellence: 26 International Case Studies. Higher Education Academy in partnership with CHEMS Consulting.

¹⁷¹ Maringe, F., Chiramba, O., Banda, T., Magabane, A., & Chibaya, S. (2024). Exploring Internationalisation of Higher Education at Public Universities in South Africa: Intentions, Practices, Opportunities and Constraints. IEASA and British Council.

¹⁷² Middlehurst, R., & Fielden, J. (2016). Learning Excellence: 26 International Case Studies. Higher Education Academy in partnership with CHEMS Consulting.

¹⁷³ Maringe, F., Chiramba, O., Banda, T., Magabane, A., & Chibaya, S. (2024). Exploring Internationalisation of Higher Education at Public Universities in South Africa: Intentions, Practices, Opportunities and Constraints. IEASA and British Council.

¹⁷⁴ Middlehurst, R., & Fielden, J. (2016). Learning Excellence: 26 International Case Studies. Higher Education Academy in partnership with CHEMS Consulting.

¹⁷⁵ Maringe, F., Chiramba, O., Banda, T., Magabane, A., & Chibaya, S. (2024). Exploring Internationalisation of Higher Education at Public Universities in South Africa: Intentions, Practices, Opportunities and Constraints. IEASA and British Council.

¹⁷⁶ TSIBA (2024). 20 Year Impact Report. TSIBA Business School

Capacity-building programmes equip institutions with the skills and tools needed for internationalisation. The Erasmus+ programme's focus on training academic staff has enhanced global relevance for African universities¹⁷⁷. Similarly, 2iE's entrepreneurship competitions and mentorship initiatives demonstrate how capacity-building fosters innovation and leadership¹⁷⁸.

- **Incorporate decolonial approaches**

Decolonial approaches foster mutual respect and equitable knowledge exchange. The African Research Universities Alliance's collaboration with Brazilian universities addressed shared colonial histories, creating joint research opportunities¹⁷⁹. NGOs and CSOs can play a role in implementing culturally responsive educational tools, such as the University of Notre Dame's e-portfolio initiative, which enables personalised learning and self-assessment¹⁸⁰.

5.1.4. Recommendations for international partners

- **Leverage technology for broader engagement**

Technology allows institutions with limited resources to participate in global networks. The British Council's "Going Global Partnerships" used virtual platforms to facilitate conferences between South African and UK universities, showcasing how technology can expand participation¹⁸¹. Curtin University's Action Learning approach similarly demonstrates how faculty training improves transnational education delivery¹⁸².

- **Develop region-specific partnership models**

Region-specific partnerships align collaborations with shared cultural, historical, and economic contexts. The East African Community's harmonisation of higher education policies illustrates how regional frameworks can facilitate mobility and cooperation¹⁸³. TSIBA's partnerships with local businesses for student internships provide a practical example of linking education to employment opportunities¹⁸⁴.

5.1.5. Cross-Cutting Recommendations for All Stakeholders

- **Strengthen monitoring and evaluation mechanisms**

Robust monitoring and evaluation systems ensure partnerships meet their goals and deliver tangible benefits. South Africa's Council on Higher Education implemented a tracking system to evaluate internationalisation outcomes, aligning them with national and institutional objectives¹⁸⁵. Brandman University's curriculum redesign, which uses assessment loops for continuous improvement, provides a framework for evaluating partnership

¹⁷⁷Middlehurst, R., & Fielden, J. (2016). Learning Excellence: 26 International Case Studies. Higher Education Academy in partnership with CHEMS Consulting.

¹⁷⁸Middlehurst, R., & Fielden, J. (2016). Learning Excellence: A Summary Analysis of 26 International Case Studies. Higher Education Academy in partnership with CHEMS Consulting

¹⁷⁹Maringe, F., Chiramba, O., Banda, T., Magabane, A., & Chibaya, S. (2024). Exploring Internationalisation of Higher Education at Public Universities in South Africa: Intentions, Practices, Opportunities and Constraints. IEASA and British Council.

¹⁸⁰Middlehurst, R., & Fielden, J. (2016). Learning Excellence: 26 International Case Studies. Higher Education Academy in partnership with CHEMS Consulting

¹⁸¹Maringe, F., Chiramba, O., Banda, T., Magabane, A., & Chibaya, S. (2024). Exploring Internationalisation of Higher Education at Public Universities in South Africa: Intentions, Practices, Opportunities and Constraints. IEASA and British Council.

¹⁸²Middlehurst, R., & Fielden, J. (2016). Learning Excellence: 26 International Case Studies. Higher Education Academy in partnership with CHEMS Consulting.

¹⁸³Maringe, F., Chiramba, O., Banda, T., Magabane, A., & Chibaya, S. (2024). Exploring Internationalisation of Higher Education at Public Universities in South Africa: Intentions, Practices, Opportunities and Constraints. IEASA and British Council.

¹⁸⁴TSIBA (2024). 20 Year Impact Report. TSIBA Business School

¹⁸⁵ Maringe, F., Chiramba, O., Banda, T., Magabane, A., & Chibaya, S. (2024). Exploring Internationalisation of Higher Education at Public Universities in South Africa: Intentions, Practices, Opportunities and Constraints. IEASA and British Council

success¹⁸⁶. Additionally, the University of Bio Bio's "First Year Induction and Integration Programme" highlights strategies for improving student retention and tracking outcomes, offering lessons for African HEIs¹⁸⁷.

- **Encourage South-South collaborations**

South-South collaborations reduce reliance on traditional North-South models and foster regional autonomy. The University of the Western Cape's partnership with Makerere University in Uganda demonstrated the benefits of intra-African collaborations in addressing public health challenges¹⁸⁸. 2iE's regional networks and alignment with the European Credit Transfer System further illustrate how South-South and hybrid collaborations can enhance educational outcomes¹⁸⁹.

5.1.6. Considerations for Implementing Recommendations

Category	Considerations
Amplifying Youth Voices	Ensure inclusive and diverse representation; institutionalise youth engagement mechanisms; provide resources and funding for youth-led initiatives.
Fostering Collaborative Curriculum Development	Engage stakeholders (industry, students, faculty) in design; balance local relevance with global competitiveness; incorporate ongoing evaluation processes.
Promoting Equitable Partnerships	Address resource imbalances; ensure transparent agreements and accountability; focus on inclusivity of smaller institutions and marginalised communities.
Developing Institutional Structures for Policy Implementation	Secure institutional buy-in; build scalable solutions; invest in capacity-building for administrative staff.
Creating Enabling Policy Environments	Align policies across ministries; ensure stakeholder involvement in policy design; provide sufficient funding for implementation.
Simplifying Visa Processes	Create dedicated pathways for partnership-related visas; adopt digital systems for efficiency; establish feedback mechanisms for continuous improvement.
Supporting Infrastructure Development	Target investments in high-impact areas like ICT; ensure equity across institutions; develop plans for maintenance and sustainability.

¹⁸⁶Middlehurst, R., & Fielden, J. (2016). Learning Excellence: 26 International Case Studies. Higher Education Academy in partnership with CHEMS Consulting.

¹⁸⁷Middlehurst, R., & Fielden, J. (2016). Learning Excellence: A Summary Analysis of 26 International Case Studies. Higher Education Academy in partnership with CHEMS Consulting.

¹⁸⁸Maringe, F., Chiramba, O., Banda, T., Magabane, A., & Chibaya, S. (2024). Exploring Internationalisation of Higher Education at Public Universities in South Africa: Intentions, Practices, Opportunities and Constraints. IEASA and British Council

¹⁸⁹ Middlehurst, R., & Fielden, J. (2016). Learning Excellence: 26 International Case Studies. Higher Education Academy in partnership with CHEMS Consulting

Leveraging Technology for Broader Engagement	Address digital access disparities; provide training for stakeholders; ensure robust cybersecurity measures.
Facilitating Capacity-Building Programmes	Tailor programmes to specific institutional needs; measure and monitor outcomes; encourage peer learning and knowledge exchange.
Encouraging South-South Collaborations	Provide funding mechanisms for South-South initiatives; focus on shared regional challenges; strengthen regional academic networks.
Funding Mechanisms	Leverage diverse funding sources (e.g., PPPs, grants); ensure long-term financial sustainability; focus on performance-based and resource-pooling models.
Gradual Rollouts	Begin with pilot programmes; implement in phases; focus on high-need areas first; incorporate robust monitoring and evaluation processes.

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