# Chapter 4
# Benchmarking Global Best Practices for Improving Higher Education Quality in Africa

**Harrison Adewale Idowu**
*Obafemi Awolowo University, Nigeria*

## ABSTRACT

*Given the deplorable state of higher education and the relatively poor attention given to education by African leaders and university administrators, the chapter interrogates global best practices in higher education and how Africa can key into this. Europe and the Asian Tigers, considered to have made significant progress in quality of higher education, are used as benchmarks for best practices in higher education. Relying on the review of extant relevant literature and document analysis, the chapter finds that practices such as massive inclusion of vocational and technical trainings in higher education curricula; increase budgetary allocations to higher education and policy implementation beyond mere formulation have impacted positively on higher education in Europe and among the Asian Tigers. As such, the chapter concludes that if Africa must make significant progress and improve on the quality of its higher education, it must begin to use these practices.*

## INTRODUCTION

The quality of higher education in most parts of Africa, when placed side-by-side those of its counterparts in Europe and the Asian Tigers of Hong Kong, Singapore, South Korea and Taiwan, for instance, becomes relatively poor and in need of improvement. No doubt that higher education elsewhere has attained robust improvements which have left Africa far behind in the scheme of things. While it is no argument that Europe and indeed, the Asian Tigers did not get the current quality of higher education they now possess over-night, there are however, certain strategies and policies that have worked for them over the years which most of the African continent seems to have either ignored or has not gotten right. Hence, the relatively poor quality of higher education that the continent continues to produce over the years. It is therefore, pertinent for Africa to learn some lessons from the strategies adopted by those who

have attained relative success in the quality of higher education. This is the major thrust of the chapter, to explore the strategies adopted by Europe and the Asian Tigers to improve the quality of their higher education, so that Africa can draw from and adopt same.

One major and striking problem with higher education in most parts of Africa, as observed by Mohamedbhai (2011), is the practice whereby higher education institutions enrol students far beyond the capacity they were ordinarily designed to accommodate. This is usually done without corresponding increase in infrastructure and staff strength; a situation which often affects the quality of higher education in the continent. Another aspect which undermines the quality of higher education in Africa is one wherein efforts are consistently made to establish new higher institutions of learning that are not too different from the existing ones in terms of service delivery. Often times, this is done without the requisite staff strength, thus, resulting in depletion of staff of the existing higher education institutions. This is often the result of practices of transferring the existing staff in the old institutions to the new ones, without bringing new hands into the system. This practice further reduces the quality of higher education in Africa. Whereas what Africa needs are "differentiated institutions, ranging from research-strong universities to polytechnics and technical colleges, as well as diversified programmes within each institution, to cater for different types of learners and needs of the country" (Mohamedbhai, 2011: 2), the reverse is often the case in practice. This, to a large extent, is what the likes of Europe and the Asian Tigers have been able to imbibe to improve on the quality of higher education they produce.

The elongation of completion periods of study at most higher institutions of learning in Africa also undermines the quality of higher education in the continent. This is usually due to incessant closure of higher institutions of learning which are products of students' activism and/or disagreement between governments and academic and/or non-academic staff of higher institutions of learning. These scenarios are often the direct opposite in places such as Europe and among the Asian Tigers, where most of the institutions of higher learning experience smooth academic calendar; a factor contributing to better quality of higher education. Mohamedbhai (2011) summarised the factors impeding higher education in Africa as lack of funding; low research output; lack/shortage of quality assurance practices, among others. Elsewhere, Okeke (2015) identifies lagging research capacity, low quality outputs, etc. as some of the challenges besetting higher education in Africa.

As posited by Enders, De Boer, File, Jongbloed, and Westerheijden (2011), there is no other place in the globe where higher education has experienced the substantive change and subsequent improvement than in Europe. This therefore qualifies Europe to provide a model standard of higher education and global best practices in that regard. The European higher education has been met with series of reforms since the 1990s. Some of such reforms include the Bologna Declaration of 1999; the EU's Lisbon Strategy of 2000; the EU's Modernization Agenda of 2007; and the Sorbonne Declaration of 1998, to mention but few (Enders, *et al.,* 2011). All of these reforms have ensured improved higher education in the continent. The same could also be said of the Asian Tigers, who decades ago, devasted by wars, were relatively far behind in all spheres, but have adopted several reforms to improve on the quality of higher education.

Given the foregoing therefore, it becomes pertinent to critically examine the state of higher education in Africa (in terms of quality) and put it side-by-side with what is obtainable elsewhere in Europe and among the Asian Tigers. This is with the aim to unravel the critical challenges of higher education in Africa, while also learning from global best practices which in this case, Europe and the Asian Tigers provide. Europe is particularly interesting and provides a template here, mostly due to the tremendous strides the continent has made in the area of higher education. For the Asian Tigers, theirs becomes of interest and could serve as lessons for Africa, owing to the fact that decades ago, the entire Asian con-

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