

# **BARRIERS AND OPPORTUNITIES OF STRATEGIC GOVERNANCE OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN WEST AFRICA: THE CASE OF SENEGAL**

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## **Abstract**

This paper is the preamble to a larger dissertation research project which probes to study the state of governance and analyze the potential of strategic governance in the field of higher education in West Africa, particularly in Senegal. Here, we endeavor to reflect on governance in higher education in general, identify the immediate gaps that prevent the success of policies throughout the process. In all, this brief reflection constitutes a sketch of what we ambition to accomplish in our stellar work which, as indicated, will study the barriers and opportunities of strategic governance of higher education in Senegal.

## **Points for Practitioners**

This research calls for the positive exploitation and a better understanding of a region with potential that is often neglected in scholarship. We probe to provide a comprehensive and updated perspective on the domain of governance in the higher education system in Senegal which in some sense could open a window to exploring the question of not only higher education governance but also to the dimensions of governance, such as strategic governance in the sub-Saharan Africa region.

## **Key words**

*Higher Education, Public Policy, Strategic Governance*

## **Introduction**

When it comes to development efforts, countries across the globe face a grand diversity of challenges, but one that makes the unanimity, the role of education in having a major part to play in the standing of a country in relations not only to its peers but also in terms of its internal economic, political and social stability. Education is considered, globally, as an indispensable instrument for national development due to its ability to spawn the paramount “*knowledge, skills, attitudes values and competences for the performance of social and economic roles*” (Osagiobare et al, 2019:173). In this sense, the global motion towards a predominantly knowledge-based society has been accompanied with an increasing accent on education in the programs of the majority of nations around the world but also on development plans elaborated by the international community (i.e. The United Nation’s MDGs and SDGs). Nevertheless, the emphasis put in primary and secondary education in the early 2000s without a prospective plan for the future of Higher Education has put the latter sector in an awkward position; this has been the case for Senegal. Indeed, the Higher Education sector is yet to be adapted to respond not only to the swiftly growing enrollment rates, the changing nature of education universally and the new challenges influenced by globalization among other concerns. In this paper, we endeavor to reflect on the present state of Senegalese’s Higher Education system. This brief analysis is articulated around three major points: first we will have a succinct overview of the history of Higher Education in Senegal, mainly focused on the important aspects of the latter. Second, we will highlight the major issues facing the sector today and how these impact the nation’s economic, political and social development in general. Finally, we will disclose the potential answers that we believe may remedy the issues identified.

## **Historical background**

Senegal’s advent to the scene of Higher Education dates from its pre-independence period, in 1918 with the creation of the *Ecole Africaine de Medecine*, the first medical faculty in the region and later expanded to become what we know today as the Cheikh Anta Diop University of Dakar in 1957. Indeed, as a strategic point for the colonial forces, the University of Dakar was created as the first University of the Francophone West Africa with the aim to form the administrative manpower necessary to create and provide the colonies with the labor pool needed. This is how, the University of Dakar has gained its regional notoriety that made it for the longest a favored destination for many students across the region.

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The first instances of crisis appeared post-independence, mostly due to the fact that the now autonomous nation had to build its identity and with it its education system which is crucial in setting the tone as to the vision of the country, that with atrophied means given that the country had to deal with many of the issues which up to this point were principally the concern of the colonial power. In consequent, the higher education system was neglected for the longest as its primary goal no longer consisted to supplying the nation itself and the West African region with colonial labor, furthermore, education was no longer only reserve to the elites. As stated earlier, this will to give the Senegalese University its own identity, separate to a certain extent from its colonial past, made the following two decades a period of transition and adjustments, mainly at the administrative level. Although we talk of neglect here, we are not talking of abandon; higher education just wasn't a priority any longer, the nation's attention with regards to education was not shifted to basic or primary and secondary education. This didn't have any consequences for a long time as the UCAD<sup>2</sup> still had the infrastructural and pedagogical capacity to welcome and accommodate students; as a result, the system was left at a stagnant stage for the longest with little to no innovations be it in access, quality or governance. Although at a regional level, it was for a long time considered as one of the most prestigious and better equipped (Annuaire de l'Université de Dakar, 1973-1974:9 cited in Gomis, 2013:33) it is worth noting that because of its late entrance to the higher education scene, it is to a certain extent still at a development stage compared to other, more ancient, higher education systems on a global level. The direct consequence of the heavy investments in primary and secondary education was that, two to three decades down the line, demand and enrollment in higher education institutions has nearly decupled going from a total of about 5364 enrolled students in 1972-1973 (Annuaire de l'Université de Dakar, 1973-1974 cited in Gomis, 2013:37) to about 74212 enrolled in the year 2012 (DSI<sup>3</sup>, cited in Gomis, 2013:43). With the shockingly increasing enrollment rates came a deterioration of not only the infrastructures but also the student/professor ratios and, unsurprisingly, a degradation of the teaching quality resulting in a degeneration of the system as a whole.

As we've seen throughout history, it takes a crisis to make a change, it took a crisis in the system for the Senegalese authorities to realize that real and immediate change needed to take place; although quite slowly, change did happen but the only factor of crisis that was really focused on was the issue of access as it was, for the longest the tip of the iceberg representing the issues in higher education which, we have stressed earlier, hasn't been subject to a deep reflection as to its scope and goals for the nation in the long term perspective. When we speak of access, it is not solely limited to access in terms of number but also the fact that the only university of the country was located in the capital city of Dakar, making it harder, despite their willingness, for students from other parts of the country to pursue higher education. Ergo, the Gaston Berger University was created in 1990 in the region of Saint-Louis to which was later added, around 2007 three other Universities in different regions of the country.

The sudden inflation in enrollment rates can and is associated with changing world dynamics as with globalization, we have slowly transitioned what we call a knowledge based society with studies showing a direct link between personal educational attainment and national socio-economic and even political development, as Harbison states *"human resources not capital, nor material resources, constitute the ultimate basis for the wealth of nations"* (Harbison, 1973 cited in Addo, 2010:84) which corroborates the observation that *"all advanced countries of the world have achieved their development through research, scientific and technological innovations"* as *"research findings are critical in formulating policies for national planning which would lead to development"* (Addo, 2010:85). Despite the issues encountered in Senegal in the higher education system, a study by the UNESCO finds that even the overabundant enrollment rates do not meet the minimum required to be conducive of innovation and development stating that *"university enrollment rates in sub-Saharan Africa are among the lowest the world"* which is alarming when the same study finds that there is a direct correlation between *"enrollment rates and growth in national income in many countries (Moyer, 200, cited in Urama, 2009)"* (UNESCO, 2010:282). To this we add the fact that not only are enrollment rates low compared to international standards, they are high compared to the current systemic capacity, but they are not adapted to the countries real needs in terms of development which in turns contributes and explains the distressing unemployment rates among University graduates. This trichotomy, which are just a few among the facts that will later be elaborated upon, bring us to question why there hasn't been a comprehensive study of the higher education sector governance, not at the institutional level but at the system level; as noted by Bailey *"a review of the international literature on higher education reveals that much of the focus of research and publication over the past few decades has been on governance at the institutional level (how institutions are organized and operate internally)"*

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*and on the relationship between the state and universities ... There has been relatively little focus on governance at the system level” (Bailey, 2014:171).*

### **Statement of Problem and Goals**

The past two decades of higher education in Senegal have been punctuated by an amplifying systemic crisis of knowledge in its production, management and deployment. The first identifiable concern in the analysis of the current state of affairs is the lack of a comprehensive study on the issue. Indeed, there is obvious lacunae when it comes to the availability of first data in terms of retrospective studies on the question. Existing data only point to the self-evident discrepancies that are access, quality and institutional governance without trying to trace these or ultimately correlating them to the root issue or issues that might have remained unresolved and the consequences of which continue to grow and plague the contemporary system. There is also a lack of comparative qualitative data on the actions of previous governments which would allow to understand and study the nuances of public action in order to lay the groundwork for future action; we mention this fact because we believe it is important, once again to avoid limiting ourselves to addressing the visible ailments without understand how we got to this point. Second, with regards to methods, there is an unequivocal need for an innovative outlook and approach to the issues at hand. We can identify a deficiency in the way the question of higher education is appraised, as we have stated earlier, the subject is often regarded more in relation to the institutional architecture and framework than to the system in itself, the governance of which is the stem to past, present and future incongruities.

Motions towards addressing these data, methods and analytical hiatuses define the principal objective of this study: exclusively considering the question of governance in the higher education in Senegal however, through the lens of strategic governance which we believe could be a way to not only address the main issues that the system is today confronted with but also, ultimately revitalize the latter. In this sense, we prospect to assess the barriers and opportunities of strategic governance of higher education in Senegal in a way that could open the doors to expand the question on the francophone west Africa region.

### **1. Addressing the question of governance: could strategic governance be the answer?**

The choice to articulate the research around the question of governance is justified by the fact that The Higher Education system presents all the criteria needed to be considered a public enterprise: indeed, it promotes growth, which justifies the implication and intervention of the state but also promotes social justice hence the emphasis put on enlarging access and democratisation of the system. As stated by Mamdani, *“higher education is where teachers are trained, where curricula are developed, where the range of leadership of an independent country is cultivated, and where research is located. In sum, higher education is where we develop the range of choices, which make democracy meaningful in different spheres of life. Higher education is the strategic heart of education; those who wish to transform general education must begin with higher education”* (Mamdani, 2008:1) to which we add that Higher Education is an indispensable tool for the transformation of our contemporary societies. By virtue of the government’s involvement, to understand why policies in general still haven’t produced satisfactory changes in the higher education system of Senegal, we must without a doubt start with the nucleus and bring a neoteric outlook to the question of governance of the Higher Education in parallel to the issues that we judge most critical to scrutinize.

In the higher education system in Africa in general, Senegal in particular, the question of governance is more than ever relevant to address especially when we see that the latter is evolving in a paradigm which no longer fits the global standards and when the system is scantily able to address lingering issues of access and quality. Despite the (necessary) reforms that have been introduced in recent years to allow more autonomy for higher education institutions, the government still plays a predominant role in the governance of the system in general. Khalid Zaman, in a study aimed at developing *“a framework for the internationalization of universities using three broad categories of governance indicators, i.e., political governance, economic governance and an institutional dimension of governance”* concluded that *“to improve the governance of institutions for higher learning is to increase the capacity of the government and higher education sectors so that they may implement meaningful policy reform”* (Zaman, 2015); because of the high level of implication of the government in higher education affairs, we suggest adding that, for the case of Senegal, we should start by improving higher education system governance in order to produce the desired impact on higher education institutions.

Governance in and of itself is broad enough to delve into to try to understand the said system but when we see the intricacy it constitutes it would only be beneficial to consider the dimensions that most fit the issue at hand and whatever objective we are trying to attain. In this case, the ideal would be to develop a system able to *“anticipate*

*potential futures*” meaning the ability “to foresee the long-term potential future developments and thus be able to react to them in an anticipatory way”, the “capacity to induce important changes compared with the way society has been functioning in the past” and the implementation of “emergent strategies” which is “understood as the negotiated outcomes of many interacting policy actors and processes” (Potůček, 2005:4) which summarize the core qualities of strategies governance, construed as “... A dynamic process of the creation and implementation of policy, politics, and administration, that is animated by the endeavour of manifold social and economic groups with different interests, but also by the search for a sustainable development orientation and social contract(s), that could counterbalance these interests in a way that will be compatible with the long-term interests of the whole society – including its future generations” (Potůček, 2005:1).

## **Conclusion**

With the growing demand for higher education globally, lower income nations are facing new challenges, on top of the ones they are already dealing with because more and more people on the continent are adopting the conception that education in general, higher education in particular is one of the safest ways to insure better life quality for themselves, their families and future generations. The present rhetoric on sustainability cannot be dissociated from the debate of knowledge because in order to build sustainable societies we must educate these societies to be sustainable. To that effect, higher education plays a crucial role because it can play the role of a “catalyst for the creation of sustainable, innovative and equitable societies” (UNESCO, 2017); this discourse may be easy to grasp in countries that are already ahead and have successfully enough developed systems of higher education that are already profitable for their societies but for nations with an ever expanding demand of higher education who are still struggling to meet the basic needs of their populations and to respond to crucial issues of development, it is more difficult to actually get to the bottom of the issue and end up finding themselves, as it is the case in Senegal, constantly trying to overcome the visible issues which ultimately only has a temporary effect resulting in a never ending cycle of crisis. Realistically, solving what we believe is the real issue of higher education, system governance, cannot be achieved through archaic means; a novel schema needs to be introduced and strategic governance could constitute a beneficial element to the process.

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