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Networks and student support are vital for developing African leaders in higher education

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To navigate the region's unique development challenges, Africa must harness its rapidly expanding population and promote ethical leadership among new generations. We look at the student support systems and networks needed to realise this potential through higher education.

This post is the third in the series [Pathways to Success for Africans in Higher Education](#), bringing awareness to the journey that African nationals experience when navigating tertiary education, and its importance for the continent's development.

African **leadership** is at a crossroads. Many data reports have shown that the growth of Africa's population will **increase dramatically** this century, doubling by 2050 with 50% expected to be **under the age of 25**. As Africa sits on a ticking time bomb of **youth in 'waithood'**, at the turn of the 21st century, more than ever Africa's future depends on taking advantage of its human potential.

To navigate the region's unique development challenges, there is a need to promote ethical leadership with a roadmap based on integrity, transparency and equity for the youth. Today's African leaders must think collaboratively, be regionally focused, cognizant of global power dynamics and value equitable participation to subvert histories of **dependency** and **exploitation**. An ethical leadership for Africa should be solutions-driven, standing against **imperialist agendas** and **out-dated systems** and focused on reshaping **social, economic** and **political structures** innovatively to challenge today's status quo.

The iconistic approach to African leadership no longer fits the current context of the continent. While we are unlikely to have another Nelson Mandela, Kwame Nkrumah or Julius Nyerere, we have visionary leaders in a variety of sectors who think critically about systemic solutions and sustainable economic growth that can maintain hope – the hope to re-establish trust between youth and their representative governments, and to empower young people coping with the effects of unemployment and disenfranchisement.

African leadership and higher education

For all early career bloomers, senior managers, innovators, thought leaders and entrepreneurs, the pathway of higher education for emerging African leaders is a common step. Despite the challenges of **entering into** and **adjusting to Western educational contexts**, an opportunity to study in selective and elite higher education institutions

abroad, like LSE, can provide African students with the resources and opportunities to catapult their career journey.

As international students study with their home communities in mind, higher education can greatly contribute to improving institutions, structures and systems on the continent by emphasising ethical and transparent leadership. However, it is important for students to have support systems that promote their academic success, which assist in their leadership development and reinforce their connection and commitment to the African continent. As we continue to strive to understand the experiences of African students, there are specific and unique types of support that are most effective within higher education.

It is important to emphasise that providing specific and contextual support to African students in international settings does not imply that these individuals need 'special treatment' or that African students are operating at a level below their peers. This 'deficit thinking' in education is often used to categorise students as marginal and is often related to their racial or socio-economic identity.

For African students, deficit thinking can be compounded by the narratives surrounding Africa in the Western psyche that characterise the continent as a monolith with prominent images of poverty, corruption and despair. While African countries have their challenges, these well-constructed **stereotypes** have their roots in a **history of colonialism** and should be complicated and challenged where evident in a space of **higher learning**. Providing specific support to African students is necessary to counteract these narratives, but it is also good practice in establishing a truly equitable, diverse and international community by encouraging a plurality of social and cultural capital, bringing to the seminar room diverse worldviews and ideologies. This should especially be promoted by selective and elite higher education institutions that boast an internationalist approach.

Support needed for African students

What support systems should be put in place and what should they look like? There are three areas we encourage institutions to look at more closely.

Firstly, higher education institutions need to emphasise support for African students' mental health. **Mental health is becoming increasingly prevalent in African contexts**, and many students while studying abroad can become more susceptible to mental health challenges as a result of the microaggressions or discrimination they experience. This is particularly true in an institution that is as academically rigorous and demanding. Though mental health providers, such as school counsellors, may be trained to address common mental health issues, counsellors are frequently ill-equipped to understand the context from which African students arrive and the challenges they face when they enter a Western institution. In addressing mental health issues, and the stigma it may bring, professionals who share an aspect of their racial, ethnic or cultural identity make students feel more confident that they will be understood and receive culturally relevant guidance and support.

Secondly, in order to promote leadership development and a commitment to the continent, African students would benefit from mentorship that focuses on the different pathways they can take to achieve their goals and be successful. Speaking to a fellow African who attended their institution and translated the experience into a career or leadership opportunity in Africa, or which contributes to their wider African community, is invaluable. Being matched with a mentor with expertise in the student's field of interest (or a similar one) can also play a substantial role in the latter's leadership growth beyond the classroom. Given the pressure that academic studies require, the role of the mentor can be to facilitate the student's ability to have a wider perspective and see their goals more clearly.

Lastly, with the challenges in accessing the African job market and the need for collaboration across a more connected continent, it is important for African students to develop personal networks with other students and individuals who will empower them as they positively impact their communities. These networks will not only help students remain committed to working on African issues, combatting the popularised notion of the 'brain drain', but they will also serve as a community of like-minded individuals who can engage in more in depth conversations about issues through an African lens. By building more networks of African leaders, an ecosystem of changemakers can be created that will work to solve the issues that different African countries face. These leadership networks can serve as spaces where innovative ideas are shared and where support is provided beyond national boundaries, cultures or tribe. It will become the responsibility of these networks to ensure their inclusivity and equitable representation, especially with regard to gender.

LSE as a case study

LSE as an institution is moving towards providing some of these support systems and resources for African students, but there is still room to grow. One programme called the **Programme for African Leadership (PfAL)** has been in existence for almost a decade, and has provided a safe space for MSc students who are African nationals to grow and develop as leaders.

Working with LSE's **Student Counselling Services**, a workshop was delivered to PfAL in January 2020 addressing mental health challenges specifically faced by Africans and African students, with the intention that the workshop is provided on an annual basis. PfAL has also provided African students with mentorship and networking opportunities with the launch of a group mentorship initiative, led by alumni of the PfAL network this year. Alongside events such as the

PfAL Forum and regular networking socials facilitated by the programme throughout the academic year, these initiatives provide a space for Africans to connect and build meaningful relationships. PfAL has been a great resource, and more can be done at LSE to support the development, growth and potential of its African students.

Building on this work, the creation of new programmes like the Africa Engagement Programme (AEP), work to expand support for African students in their career journey, and also to contribute to the development of such an ecosystem of changemakers who are devoted to the African continent. By working closely with LSE offices – **LSE Student Marketing & Recruitment, LSE Philanthropy & Global Engagement, LSE Alumni** and **LSE Careers** – this programme works to connect LSE's African students, African alumni and, potentially, African employers. It also strives to build relationships with donors interested in addressing the needs of African communities connected to LSE.

As LSE and other selective international institutions continue to learn more about the experiences of African students, maintaining systems that support academic success, ethical leadership development and strong African networks are crucial. Over time we will undoubtedly see the impact that these higher education institutions can make on the continent overall.

Photo: PfAL New Class 2019, LSE. Credit: Owen Billcliffe.

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