

Higher Education Systems and Institutions, Guinea Bissau

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Without Abstract

Historical Background

The Republic of Guinea-Bissau is a small country (approximately 36,125 square kilometers) on the west coast of Africa, bordered by Senegal to the north and the Republic of Guinea-Conakry to the southeast. With a population estimated at around 1.9 million inhabitants, it is one of the poorest countries in the world, ranking 178th of the 189 countries listed in the Human Development Index of 2019. The population's life expectancy is 57 years, the adult literacy rate is 46%, and the most recent figures on expenditure on education reveal that, in 2013, only 2.13% of its GDP was allocated to the different levels of the education system. Even though Portuguese is the official language, the majority of the population speaks Creole. Constant political instability contributes to the country's economic difficulties.

Guinea-Bissau gained its independence from Portugal in 1974 after a destructive war and PAIGC, the political party resulting from the main independence movement, ruled the country from 1974 to 1999. The first multiparty and democratic elections took place in 1994. Yet, since then, a succession of civil wars, military coups, and political assassinations have plunged the country into a protracted political turmoil. As a result, the education system has been likewise plagued by political indecision, discontinuities, and unfinished reforms (Silva and Oliveira [2017](#)).

Development of Higher Education

The first attempt to establish tertiary education in Guinea-Bissau can be traced back to 1978 with the establishment of the National Law School, an institution for training cadres for public administration, justice, and teaching. This initiative was followed by the establishment of the "Pedagogical Detachment Vanguard Tchico Té" and of the "National College of Physical Education

and Sports,” focusing on responding to the shortage of secondary education teachers. Other higher education institutions were established in the 1980s and 1990s through bilateral cooperation agreements with Cuba, Portugal, and Sweden, even though some of these initiatives were short-lived. In 1986, the medical school was established with the help of “Cuban Cooperation,” and, even though later deactivated, it was again revived in 2004 and integrated into the structures of Amílcar Cabral University. In the mid-1980s, the Olof Palme International Center was established with the support of the Swedish government in cooperation with the Ministry of Agriculture, and, even though the initiative did not last, it left behind some important related structures, namely, the Research Center for Agricultural Development (INPA) and the Research Center for Fisheries (CIPA). In 1990, the Law School was established, in cooperation with the Faculty of Law of Lisbon University, which provides scientific and pedagogical support.

Until the end of the twentieth century, most Guineans who wanted to pursue tertiary education were forced to study abroad, namely, in Portugal, Cuba, and Eastern Europe, through various scholarship programs, and most of them never returned to the country. As an attempt to stop this brain drain process, in 1999 the government implemented a series of initiatives as an attempt to improve tertiary education provision in Guinea-Bissau and issued a decree that placed all existing research centers and every activity related to education and training under the coordination of the Ministry of Education.

That same year, the first university in Guinea-Bissau, the “Amílcar Cabral University,” was founded. It was managed by a private foundation (FUNPEC – Foundation for Promotion of Education and Culture), composed of the government of Guinea-Bissau and one Portuguese private university (Lusophone University). However, this higher education institution only became operational by the end of the academic year 2003/2004, and, in 2008, the government gave the overall management of this university to the Portuguese Lusophone University, which gave rise to an entirely private university, the University of Lusophone Guinea. Other private universities were established as from the start of the twenty-first century, namely, the “Hills University of Boé,” founded by a group of intellectuals and businessmen as a private institution, the Catholic University of West Africa (UCAO), the Institute of Management of Bissau (ISGB), and the Jean Piaget University of Guinea. Lastly, in 2013, the Amílcar Cabral University was successfully reopened as the only public higher education institution in the country, offering undergraduate courses in law, information technologies, earth sciences and environment, languages, literature, and culture and master’s degrees in energy and natural resources law and telecommunications law (Lundy [2018](#)). Presently, the higher education system in Guinea-Bissau is thus comprised of one public university and five private universities. There are severe limitations regarding reliable data about the higher education system, but the gross enrolment rate is expected to be around 5% presently, with a majority of students enrolled in the private sector and a majority of male students.

Higher Education Governance and Funding

The rise of higher education in Guinea-Bissau predated the existence of a basic law to govern the establishment and functioning of HEIs, a legal vacuum which impacted the supervision of curricula and consequently the quality of higher education (Langa [2013](#)). The political instability of the country has prevented the adoption of a coherent national strategic plan concerning higher education, the approval of vital pieces of legislation regulating the sector, or even the fulfillment of the agreements between the State and private universities. Up until 2013, the evaluation of the higher education institutions operating in the country was based merely on the appreciation by the Ministry

of Education of a pedagogical report presented by the rector of the institution, which may or may not reflect the reality of that same institution (Sucuma [2013](#)).

Recently, a legislation was issued on the governance of higher education and scientific research that attempted to breach this gap between nominal and substantive accountability and to improve the effectiveness of regulation and the quality of provision in the sector. The new law on higher education and scientific research defines the prerequisites for the establishment, suspension, and cancellation of courses and programs, covering both the universities and other types of HEIs. The directorate general of higher education is the body that coordinates and supervises the activities and quality of higher education, and it is part of the organizational structures of the Ministry of Education. In that body lies thus the authority for the establishment of courses, as well as the power to suspend and cancel higher education courses. Among the requirements for creating a program, the Act lists the staff composition of the faculty, a presentation of a curriculum, and facilities for the provision of the course. However, data on the implementation of this legislation as well as on the actual governance of the higher education institutions and their relation to the State are extremely scarce. At the same time, there is no functioning system for quality assurance, accreditation of courses, or validation of diplomas, and the universities lack libraries, laboratories, and, overall, function in very precarious conditions (Ié [2016](#)). Even though Guinea-Bissau's higher education has been transformed from its late inception in the 1970s, the overall situation of higher education governance and management is still under consolidation, and these changes have not yet led to the constitution of an integrated higher education system (Teixeira and Videira [2015](#)).

In terms of funding, higher education in Guinea-Bissau faces inadequate public funding, and the contributions from households account for more than 50% of national expenditure on higher education (Langa [2013](#)). This contributes for increasing inequality in education provision since, even with scholarships, a very significant proportion of Guineans cannot afford the costs of higher education, even if these are relatively low. Another aspect of inequality relates to gender parity. Even though female representation varies by institution and program, the proportion of women in the student body is perceived to be low even in courses relating to teaching, traditionally a profession dominated by women, though there are no reliable statistics about enrollments.

As we can surmise from available data, higher education in Guinea-Bissau still faces huge challenges and is largely dependent on international donations and cooperation. The overall lack of conditions for the provision of quality higher education and research is widely acknowledged by public officials, and the most recent plan available for the development of education (2011–2013) covers a wide range of intervention areas from regulation to improving efficiency and quality provision as well as public investment in higher education infrastructures (Lundy [2018](#)). However, it is doubtful that this plan can be fully implemented in the foreseeable future.

Concluding Remarks

Higher education in Guinea-Bissau has developed rather late, even when compared to several of its neighbors. However, and similar to many of them, it also faces significant challenges in the development of an infant higher education system. These challenges are partly related to the initial stages of development, but also to challenges that are similar to many other higher education systems in developing countries. Among the latter, the system needs to cope with the pressures to expand access amid concerns with the quality and relevance of the education provided to a growing number of students. However, the way it has developed has added to the complexity, not the least given the prominent role that the private sector has been intertwined with government intervention.

The system is learning to cope with major challenges in the regulation of a rapidly expanding and privately dominated higher education system, a feature of higher education in many low- and medium-income countries (Teixeira et al. [2017](#)). Until now the funding of the higher education system has been based significantly on the contribution of the families, though this is neither equitable nor sustainable, especially regarding its pressing needs. Hence, it needs to find sufficient resources to sustain its capacity and expansion in a context of severe financial constraints that affect both expansion and quality improvement.

Cross-References

- . [Autonomy and Accountability in Higher Education, Africa](#)
- . [Financing Higher Education in Africa: An Overview](#)
- . [Higher Education Expansion in Africa and Middle East](#)

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