

## Briefing Note



# Transforming African Universities and TVET Systems for Youth Skills, Entrepreneurship, and Inclusive Development

## Executive Summary

Africa's rapidly growing youth population presents both a historic opportunity and a significant policy challenge. By 2050, the continent is projected to account for nearly one-quarter of the global workforce, making investments in skills development essential for economic transformation and social stability. However, existing education and training systems—particularly Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) and higher education—remain insufficiently aligned with labour market demands, technological change, and entrepreneurship opportunities. Initiatives such as the Transforming African Agricultural Universities to Meaningfully Contribute to Africa's Growth and Development (TAGDev 2.0) programme and its daughter platforms such as the Agri-food Systems and Entrepreneurship Centers (ASECs) and the Innovation Transfer Partners (ITP) model demonstrate promising approaches to address these gaps. These initiatives strengthen partnerships between universities, TVET institutions, and industry to expand practical training, mentorship, entrepreneurship development, and innovation scaling. Despite these advances, systemic challenges persist, including outdated curricula, weak institutional capacity, fragmented governance frameworks, limited industry engagement, and inadequate inclusion of marginalized populations. Addressing these challenges requires coordinated reforms that modernize curricula, strengthen university–TVET–industry collaboration, promote lifelong learning, and expand innovation ecosystems across Africa.

## Background to the Issue

Africa's demographic transformation presents a major opportunity for economic growth if supported by strong investments in human capital. Continental frameworks such as the African Union Roadmap on Harnessing the Demographic Dividend emphasize education, skills development, entrepreneurship, and youth empowerment as critical pillars of development. The African Union TVET Strategy 2025–2034 further highlights the importance of lifelong learning systems, technological adaptation, and stronger integration between education systems and industry to support industrialization and economic transformation across the continent. However, significant implementation gaps remain. Approximately 12 million young people enter Africa's labour market each year, yet only a fraction secure stable employment due to persistent skills mismatches and limited industrial growth. Universities and TVET institutions often operate in isolation from productive sectors, limiting opportunities for experiential learning, innovation, and entrepreneurship.

Programs such as TAGDev 2.0 illustrate the potential of university-led initiatives to strengthen youth employability and innovation ecosystems. The programme has reached over 181,000 young people, strengthened academic programmes, and supported start-ups that have created thousands of jobs. Similarly, the Innovation Transfer Partners model leverages alumni entrepreneurs and industry partnerships to deliver practical training, mentorship, and market access to youth and communities, particularly those outside formal education systems.

## Key Challenges

Several structural constraints continue to limit the effectiveness of Africa's education and skills development systems.

- a) Skills mismatch and outdated curricula: Many universities and TVET programmes remain theory-driven and insufficiently aligned with labour market needs and technological change. Graduates often lack practical, digital, and entrepreneurial competencies.
- b) Weak university–TVET–industry linkages: Limited collaboration between education institutions and the private sector reduces opportunities for internships, apprenticeships, and work-based learning.
- c) Institutional capacity constraints: Many institutions face inadequate infrastructure, outdated equipment, and insufficiently trained instructors to deliver competency-based training.
- d) Fragmented governance frameworks: Weak coordination among institutions and regulatory bodies hinders effective implementation of skills development strategies.
- e) Limited inclusion and access: Women, refugees, persons with disabilities, rural youth, and out-of-school youth face significant barriers in accessing education and employment opportunities.
- f) Insufficient financing: Skills development initiatives remain heavily dependent on constrained public budgets with limited private sector engagement.

## Emerging Opportunities

Despite these challenges, several opportunities exist to strengthen Africa's skills development ecosystem.

- a) Africa's youthful population provides a large workforce capable of driving innovation and economic growth.
- b) Universities are increasingly emerging as hubs for entrepreneurship development, innovation, and technology transfer.
- c) The Innovation Transfer Partners model demonstrates how alumni entrepreneurs can scale practical training, mentorship, and market access for youth.
- d) Flexible learning systems such as modular and stackable credentials support lifelong learning and workforce adaptability.
- e) Regional networks such as RUFORUM facilitate knowledge sharing, policy coordination, and scaling of innovations across universities.

## Recommendations

To strengthen Africa's education and skills development systems, the following strategic actions are recommended:

- a) Strengthen university–TVET–industry partnerships: Establish structured collaboration platforms for

joint curriculum development, apprenticeships, and innovation ecosystems.

- b) Modernize curricula and training systems: Adopt competency-based and market-oriented programmes that integrate digital skills, entrepreneurship, and experiential learning.
- c) Promote lifelong learning pathways: Develop modular and stackable credential systems that allow individuals to continuously reskill and adapt to evolving labour market demands.
- d) Strengthen institutional capacity: Invest in training and research infrastructure, digital learning platforms, innovation hubs, and instructor development.
- e) Strengthen product-oriented research: shift the paradigm of research and training by designing interventions that have a definite product discovery and investigation from conception.
- f) Support youth entrepreneurship: Expand business incubation programmes, mentorship networks, and access to financing for youth-led enterprises through a stronger university-TVET and industry programming.
- g) Promote inclusive participation: Design inclusive as well as targeted programmes that increase participation of women, refugees, persons with disabilities, and marginalized youth.
- h) Strengthen monitoring and evaluation systems: Develop data-driven systems to track employment outcomes and programme performance, as well as inform continuous improvement.

## Implementation Considerations

Effective implementation requires coordinated action among governments, universities, industry actors, development partners, and regional organizations.

- a) First, strong institutional coordination is necessary to align national and regional initiatives. Platforms such as RUFORUM can facilitate collaboration among universities, policymakers, and industry partners to scale successful models across Africa, such as the ASEC platforms and the ITP model.
- b) Second, national education and skills policies should align with continental frameworks such as the African Union TVET Strategy and Agenda 2063.
- c) Third, innovative financing mechanisms—including public–private partnerships and development finance institutions—should support infrastructure development, innovation ecosystems, and entrepreneurship programmes, especially through industry-funded product research and development.
- d) Fourth, capacity development initiatives are needed to equip instructors and institutional leaders with the skills and mindset required to implement competency-based education systems.
- e) Finally, strong monitoring and evaluation systems should guide implementation through clear performance indicators, accountability mechanisms and learning for improvement.

## Conclusion

Africa stands at a critical moment in its development trajectory. The continent's expanding youth population offers immense potential for innovation, productivity, and economic transformation. However, without strategic reforms to education and skills development systems, this demographic advantage could become a source of unemployment and social instability.

Strengthening collaboration between universities, TVET institutions, and industry is essential to equip Africa's youth with relevant skills for the evolving world of work. Initiatives such as TAGDev 2.0 and the Innovation Transfer Partners model demonstrate that university-led innovation ecosystems can significantly enhance youth employability, entrepreneurship, and inclusive development.

Through coordinated policy action, strategic investments, and strong partnerships, Africa can harness its demographic dividend and build a resilient, innovation-driven economy led by skilled and empowered young people.

## References

- African Union Commission. 2017. Roadmap on Harnessing the Demographic Dividend through Investments in Youth. Addis Ababa: AUC.
- African Union Commission. 2025. Continental TVET Strategy 2025–2034. Addis Ababa: AUC.
- African Development Bank. 2023. Education and Skills Development Strategy. Abidjan: AfDB.