

Do most politicians understand the importance of the university in society?

The following words were inspired from the opening ceremony for the leadership development workshop, and in particular those of the Minister of Higher Education and Research of Senegal, organized by the [Association of African Universities](#) (AAU) and [University Cheikh Anta Diop](#) (UCAD) in Dakar, Senegal on 17 October 2009. Participating in the workshop were over 20 university leaders from eight francophone countries, from Senegal and Cote d'Ivoire to Rwanda and Madagascar. These university management and leadership development workshops have been organized by AAU since 1991. The current AAU Executive Secretary, Goolam Mohamedbhai, attended one of the workshops in Cape Town in 1997, when he was Vice-Chancellor of the University of Mauritius.

“Since becoming minister of research and of higher education in Senegal this year, I realize that too few people in decision making positions in our countries understand the place and importance of universities in society,” said the Senegalese Minister of Higher Education and Research, Professor Amadou Tidiane Ba. He went on to explain that university people – who take for granted the importance of the university as a training ground for future leaders and decision makers – need to learn to speak in plain language and need to be able to show how higher education and research contribute to Africa’s development.

The minister explained that while the Dakar campus of University Cheikh Anta Diop may seem to be overflowing with students, because of the inadequacy of physical infrastructure to host them, Senegal, according to standards published by UNESCO, should have not just 100 000 university students but double that number. Higher education in Senegal and across the continent has a long way to go.

Over the last several decades, those responsible for primary and secondary education in Africa have reflected profoundly and used research findings on questions related to access and quality to begin to adapt the systems to the evolving needs of society. While these efforts were underway, however, investments in higher education were neglected. Africa’s shining stars such as the University of Dar es Salaam lost their brilliance.

During this period of neglect, a plethora of private universities, drawing in part on resources of public universities and the state, cropped up and began offering masters and other degrees. Within public universities in particular and society in general, there needs to be an internal adjustment between degrees currently offered and the evolving needs of society. This requires spaces for reflection and research. The Association of African Universities (AAU) is an African space for learning and sharing experiences on reforming and managing higher education in Africa. The minister explained how AAU, in addition to having observer status within the African Union, should be active within regional structures such as ECOWAS and UEMOA so as to constantly bring higher education and research issues to bear on the development issues of the continent. University people need to leave their ivory towers and engage more actively with society.

The minister referred to the *Programme de Troisième Cycle Interuniversitaire* (PTCI) as a promising example of how African universities are federating resources to train the next generation of economists, as opposed to sending students abroad for training. No one university in West or Central Africa has sufficient human resources to train students to doctorate level. PTCI brings together professors of economics from 18 universities in 18 countries to train students. Currently, 180 students are preparing their masters degree and 91 their doctorate. The students, professors, and resource persons have just completed a two-month stay in Dakar, hosted by UCAD, for lectures and preparation of fieldwork in their respective countries.

But why do we need persons trained to that level for the development of Africa, you, the reader, might ask? This level of training provides the type of rigour necessary to address the developmental challenges of the region. It ensures that solutions are homegrown by those intimately familiar with local conditions and dynamics and who often understand them better than external consultants who jet in and out. The PTCI students are researching issues directly related to the continent's developmental challenges, such as micro-credit and its effect on poverty reduction; trans-boundary trade; the effect of migration and remittances on household incomes and local and national economies; the relations between property rights and economic growth; the effectiveness of budgetary policies; and the economic impact of enhanced rain.

Minister Amadou Tidiane Ba explained how he delivered President Wade's message to the PTCI students, which was to recognize the value of investing in young people and their creativity. The minister insisted that each masters and PhD thesis should be a response to a development issue in Africa.

The main financial contributor to the AAU workshop was the African Capacity Building Foundation (ACBF). In addition to UCAD, which was represented by its Rector Prof. Abdou Sall, other contributors included the *Association Universitaire de la Francophonie* (AUF), represented by its Vice Rector Bonaventure Mvondo and Regional Director Emile Tanawa; UNESCO/BREDA, represented by Mariama Sarr-Ceesay, Planner and Policy Analyst at the Higher Education Division; and IDRC.

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Kathryn Toure, Regional Director

[International Development Research Centre \(IDRC\)](#) of Canada
Dakar, Senegal