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Higher Education as a Pathway toward Peace in Burkina Faso: New Policy Perspectives

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RECOMMENDATIONS

POLICYMAKERS

- **Create awareness campaigns** on the importance of technical training, entrepreneurship, and STEM-focused activities;
- **Facilitate university-industry partnerships** and establish mechanisms to track graduates and their market-entry.

UNIVERSITIES

- **Prioritize career guidance** and make it accessible for all students;
- **Embed cross-disciplinary skills** into curricula to prepare students more effectively for complex demands of the 21st century.

INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY

- **Direct funds** toward professional development, research, and training for faculty;
- **Provide universities with greater financial and technical support** to streamline administrative processes and reduce repetition and overcrowding.

Higher education plays an important role in promoting inclusive democracies and driving social and economic change. Many African universities, however, face key structural challenges including limited Internet, outdated curricula, overburdened faculty, and archaic infrastructure. These systemic issues have been exacerbated by rising enrollment rates in the wake of global pressures to expand access and ensure quality of education for all. As governments and multilateral institutions look to capitalize on the continent's demographic dividend, it is important to rethink, revitalize, and restructure African university systems, particularly in (post-)conflict settings.

This policy brief is based on a report prepared for the Ministry of Higher Education, Scientific Research, and Innovation in Burkina Faso. It identifies a mismatch between the supply of skilled graduates and labor market demands, bearing in mind Burkina Faso's ambition to become one of three main knowledge hubs in West Africa and the ongoing crisis in the Sahel region. Research was conducted between September 2019 and April 2020 and included three weeks of qualitative research in the capital city, Ouagadougou, involving focus groups and semi-structured interviews with 67 individuals. Findings suggest that increased collaboration between the education and economic sectors will enhance both student learning experiences and professional practices, thereby enabling more peaceful and democratic futures.

ADDRESSING MARKET FAILURE

Rising enrollment rates place enormous pressures on academic institutions in Africa and impact student outcomes. In Burkina Faso, public universities alone

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have grown 11% annually in the last decade, resulting in an average student-teacher ratio of 112:1. Meanwhile, the rate of unemployment among higher education graduates in-country is highest at 34.5%.¹ The agricultural sector, which accounts for one-third of the country's GDP and 60% of employment, offers high labor potential—yet only 0.9% of university students study agriculture, compared to 48.4% studying social sciences, commerce, and law.²

Though employers seek to hire electricians, plumbers, masons, and technicians, these vocational pathways are perceived by many Burkinabé youth as careers for those who have failed school. This market failure can be attributed to poor information about the types of jobs available post-graduation. Training centers also tend to be located in the capital, which puts rural students at a disadvantage. Employment prospects are further complicated by the fact that many graduates are hired based on social, familial, or cultural connections, creating a major hurdle for an already competitive and oversaturated formal labor market.

BARRIERS TO HIGHER EDUCATION

Virtual education has the potential to enhance university experiences in Africa through innovative information and communication technologies. There are serious concerns, however, regarding its implementation. In Burkina Faso, more than 90% of the population lacks Internet access, with connectivity being mostly confined to larger cities. Additionally, only 30% of university students make it to their final year. Multiple factors contribute to this high dropout rate, including tuition fees and the opportunity cost of being out of the labor market for an extended period of time. Women in particular, who are already less represented in the university system, face other responsibilities resulting from early teenage pregnancies and adolescent marriage, forcing many to quit school.

A combination of low salaries, lack of research funding and equipment, and limited autonomy provide little opportunity or incentive for many African university faculty to engage in professional development and pedagogical training. In Burkina Faso, overcrowded classrooms and poor working facilities place significant burden on lecturers' teaching, grading, and mentoring commitments and capabilities. Many have been forced to seek supplemental income elsewhere, either by moonlighting or through

¹ International Monetary Fund, *Burkina Faso Economic Development Documents*, Country Report No. 18/85 (Washington, DC: International Monetary Fund, 2018).

² Bouquin, H, *Tableau de Bord 2016-2017 de l'Enseignement Supérieur* (Burkina Faso: Ministry of Secondary and Higher Education and Scientific Research, 2017), 54.

private consultancies. Not only does this impact graduation rates, but it is also detrimental to student learning. In 2019, for example, 24% of undergraduate students and 18% of Master's students did not have access to an academic supervisor for their dissertations.

Of equal concern is the ongoing violence and escalating humanitarian crisis in the Sahel. With roughly 20% of the population between the ages of 15 and 24, and 71% living in rural areas, many young Burkinabé are vulnerable to recruitment by violent groups. As the number of attacks on educational facilities and personnel escalate in Burkina Faso's rural north, many schools have been forced to close or converted to military purposes. Such deterioration of security hinders the government's ability to attract private companies to invest in both educational and employment opportunities. It also discourages university graduates from working in these areas, which they associate with high risks and terrorism.

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