

**Committee IV**  
The Modern University in Transition

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**THE AFRICAN UNIVERSITY: IDEALS AND REALITIES**

by

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## African Universities: Ideals and Realities

### ABSTRACT

The University as an institution of higher education has a critical role to play in the progress of the community.

Perhaps one of the best descriptions of the mission of the university is ~~Shan~~ Gandhi's. The university, he says, must be dedicated to humanism, tolerance, reason, effervescence of ideas and the quest for truth. It must be dedicated to the progress of mankind and service to the nation.

In the early 60s the independence of Africa left entirely unresolved the important issue of qualified manpower resources as a foundation of national development and the establishment of universities became an urgent task facing the new States of Africa. However, the infant universities of Africa generated more problems than they could solve. Beside the foreseeable economic constraints resulting as it were, from the initial economic predicament of Africa, the newly established universities must struggle with a host of other crucial problems. Among these, adaptation to the local environment in order to bring about the desired contribution to national development and growth while maintaining a high degree of independence vis à vis the political power structure, assumes a paramount importance.

Adaptation to local environment requires inter alia, that university institutions in Africa engage in research project that are relevant to the circumstances of the continent, viz agricultural development to feed the ever growing population, eradication of debilitating tropical diseases through priority development of African pharmacopoeia and the creation of appropriate technology for industrial take-off.

It is argued that the African University must in the nature of things follow the wind of the "democratic transition" and shift from overcentralization to a decentralized structure based on the concept of autonomy and academic freedom.

Academic ~~per~~ excellence has become today a rare commodity in the African universities (and certainly so in other universities around the world) for the acquisition of degrees are highly valued over the attainment of true knowledge out of purely materialistic contingencies; a desire to secure a safe place in the labour market.

## Abstract

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Yet, the capacity of the African internal markets cannot be overexpanded to accommodate year in year out the ever increasing number of university ~~great~~ graduates, hence the added potential of tensions and social conflicts borne out of the discrepancies between expectations, aspirations and economic realities.

In this context, the diversion of much needed resources from military purposes to civilian economy will undoubtedly go a long way to alleviate the financial constraints upon the African universities.

Last but not least, it is also felt that the African universities in order to survive in a world of economic crisis must overcome their nationalistic outlook and devise ways and means of viable regional integration that would make their operations cost-effective through the pool of material and manpower resources.

M.A. ADJANGBA

# THE AFRICAN UNIVERSITY : IDEALS AND REALITIES (DRAFT)

## INTRODUCTION

The word "University" is coined from the Latin word "Universitas" meaning a community or corporate body. The university is seen then as a community of teachers and students engaged in the pursuit of knowledge and the advancement of ideas. It trains students in a variety of fields to enable them to rationally assess the local and external environment and to make optimum contribution to national development. In addition to teaching and research, the university is also supposed to be a storehouse of retrievable knowledge serving as the backbone for publication of materials and dissemination of ideas and truths.

The credibility of a university is based on the quality of its teaching and research activities.

Besides teaching and research, a third mission of the university is service to the nation.

Perhaps one of the best description of the missions of the university is Gandhi's. The university, he says, must be dedicated to humanism, tolerance, reason, effervescence of ideas and the quest for truth. It must be dedicated to progress of mankind and service to the nation.

Needless to say that the university can prove equal to this mission if and only if it meets certain preconditions which appear to be, inter alia, a high degree of integration of the university in its local environment, a

considerable measure of independence from political power and other organizations or pressure groups, appropriate material conditions conducive to efficient training and research and last but not least sound criteria of student selection.

## **I. THE MALAISE OF THE AFRICAN UNIVERSITY**

I use African university to refer collectively to the various national universities. Compared to European and universities in other parts of the world, the African university is a recent phenomenon of the early 60s. One of the earliest approximation of a university in black Africa was the University College of Ibadan, Nigeria, which came into being in 1947 followed by the University of Lovanium in the former Belgian Congo in 1954 and the University of Dakar, Senegal in 1957. At that time, most European universities had had behind them some four hundred years or more history (Portugal, Germany, Britain and France). No sooner was the African university created than it found itself in deep crisis which has worsen over time. While some of the symptoms of the university crisis in Africa may be to a varying degree common to all universities in the world, e.g. the difficult economic constraints under which they operate in modern times, some are peculiar to the African university e.g. the servile imitation of alien model as a result of the colonial acculturation.

### **i) Servile imitation**

Prior to 1960, most Africans must be content with secondary level of education which was the apex of the educational system. A very small number of them had the opportunity to attend university education in the colonial metropoles (France, Britain and Portugal). The former Belgian Congo, today's Zaïre had practically no university graduate when it

acquired independence in 1960. The creation of the African university was thus designed to fill the gap in the educational system and to help train the manpower for the task of socio-economic development. Yet the African university prove unable to extirpate itself from the network of cultural dependence. The systems of reference and scales of values were defined according to metropolitan standards leading to a stronger dependence on their language, pedagogical methods and experts. As a result the African university though physically present in an African environment became but an extension of the metropolitan university abroad. In short, the African university proved unable to "africanize" itself. The un-African nature of the African university is clearly revealed in the content of its courses, syllabi, and degrees which have little symbolic links with the local cultures. Because of this colonial orientation of the African university, research and training activities are not geared toward the solution of national and African problems.

Take for instance the teaching of Law, the social sciences and literature in the francophone African universities. In law, the programme deals squarely with study of French jurisprudence, commentary of judgements in French tribunals, the French legal system, etc. In literature students continue not only to learn French stlistics and syntax, but even "ancient French" spoken in earlier centuries.

There arises therefore the need to reassess and reshape the programmes to infuse more African concerns through a pedagogy that would aim at focussing on the human and developmental problems of post-colonial Africa.

Thus, it would be appropriate that the teaching and research in social sciences reflect upon the issues of poverty, social injustice, corruption,

abuse of power and lack of democratic structures, the place of Africa and Africans in the contemporary and the ways to resolve present contradictions in order to improve the living conditions of the people. But since the university language is different from the local language, the potential of the university to disseminate ideas and promote desired transformation of social structures is circumscribed by the linguistic barrier between the scientists using foreign medium of communication and the illiterate masses.

## ii) Fall of educational standard

The standard of education has fallen at all levels of education in content, scope and measurable output. In most cases, the causes of the fall of academic standards in African universities stem from the deficiencies in the first and second degrees of the educational system. In the primary and secondary schools, the number of students in classrooms may range from 60-70, making it difficult for the teacher to have a proper control of the classroom and therefore the required concentration and share of attention needed for each pupil. This situation results from the insufficient government investment in school infrastructures as the number of pupils of school age increases as a result of the rapid demographic growth and legislations relating to compulsory education up to the age of 16. The gross primary school enrollment ratio in the late 1980s came close to 85 % as an average for the 6-12 age group in Africa and the school pupil teacher ratio was 73 pupils for one teacher. The primary school which prepares for the other levels of the educational cycle is deficient in its teaching methods and learning techniques. The curriculum based on the study of foreign languages, basic arithmetics, biology, history and geography relies mainly on recitation, repetition and drill learning. The lack of adequate

textbooks and education technology, and the equal lack of motivation of underpaid and at times unqualified teachers give an unwholesome spectacle of the educational system. The secondary education does not fare better as far as student-teacher ratio and the ability of students to deal with problems which their assumed acquired knowledge was thought to have equipped them for. This has ultimately a direct bearing on the quality of education at the university level. The university students represent about 5 % of the total student population at all degrees of the educational system and the teachers about 7 %. Not only is the African university maladjusted and out of tune with the real needs of development, but the products of these universities show considerable deficiencies in original thinking and problem solving ability. As a consequence, the rate of failure is considerably high and averages for all levels of education 35 % - 40 %. In the case of the university of the Republic of Togo statistical data of the services of student affairs indicate the following rates of success for the various disciplines in the faculty of sciences for the first year students during the 1989/90 academic year : mathematical sciences 18.46 %; physics and chemistry 9.52 %; biological sciences 23.49 % (compared with french literature and civilization in the humanities 40.65 % and Economics 22.60 %).

It is therefore apparent that the educational system produces a high rate of dropouts and the social implication concerning the fate of the dropouts becomes an existential question. Since the system is not conceived to impart practical knowledge that would help the dropouts to shift for themselves on the highly competitive labor market where so many people compete for very few job opportunities, the latter have no other option than to enter the informal sector or to swell the growing number of "street people".



The fall of standard in the African university is caused not only by the unfavourable student-teacher ratio or the inadequacy of university infrastructure such as buildings, laboratories and other facilities. It must also be sought in the paucity of scientific information, written or computerized. The fundamental requirement to train students in optimum conditions of efficiency is however, the abundance of scientific documentation.

The allocation of university resources between the various units indicates however that teaching activities take the lion's share, on the average 48 % of the capital and recurrent expenditures of the african universities, compared with 3 % for scientific information and research, and 19 % for administration.

Finally, ethnicity is also a major factor of regression in the level of performance of the African university. In effect, the process of student selection has been permeated in many countries by political influence and as a result merit has been put aside in the allocation of scholarships and intellectually able students have been by-passed on the ground of ethnicity.

"Today, many African universities are educating mediocrity and arming them with laurels and credentials which they cannot defend. Africa has youths that can be turned out through university education as first rate in any disciplines of their choice but because of political considerations, the doors of our universities are shut against a large proportion of these brilliant ones. In this type of situation, standards are further lowered and in places sacrificed to ensure that these half-baked individuals leave the university with degrees. Then they flood the African social, economic and political systems to add to their underdevelopment. (Ernest, n. Emenyonu, *New Perspectives for African Universities*, in *Relevant Education for Africa* ; eds. Brahim D. Kaba and Lewis Rayapen, p.227, PWPA BOOKS, Cameroun, 1990).

### iii) Educational demands and Employment Opportunities

The relationship between educational demands and employment opportunities is yet another strand of the general crisis of the African university. It is the result of the massive influx of new students into the university system. This situation is more serious in the francophone universities where the High School Certificate gives automatic entry to university. The conferment of degrees to the bulk of ill prepared graduates leads to the devaluation of these degrees. At the same time the economic crisis resulting from the persistent worsening of the terms of trade and decline of export earning for basic commodities traded by African countries on the world market constrains the job market and entail unemployment. Initially, unemployment was a plight that affect the uneducated and the prospect of high-paid job opportunity correlated with the level of education, a tendency which in the 1960s and 1970s put a high premium on university education. However, over time the university student who successfully completes the necessary schooling for entry into the modern sector labor market has little probability of getting a urban job even though he/she be willing to scale down his/her aspirations and take jobs requiring lower level of education. The inadequacy between training and job opportunity is revealed first of all by the discrepancy between available and projected manpower development and the profile of supply on the labour market. The discrepancy is due to the fact that the educational system as a whole is geared toward the training of highly qualified manpower because of the theoretical nature of the training at the expense of practical knowledge attuned to the social environment of african countries. This environment should emphasize indeed as a matter of priority technical training designed to cope with the immediate task of development the more because highly specialised training for the modern

sector represents only 6 % of the overall job opportunities in most african countries.

With regard to the distribution of students according to areas of specialization, there is also a marked imbalance between science disciplines and humanities in african universities. The latter absorb about 70 % of the graduates but have little employment opportunities. With respect to the universite du Benin in the Republic of TOGO, the following diagram clearly reveals the disequilibrium in the enrollment of students : **(diagram 1 see Annex)**

Another imbalance is that obtaining between male and female registration at the african universities that tends therefore to exclude women from certain highly paid professional activities. **(table 1 see Annex)**

In order to adjust the training in african universities to the requirement of the labour market in africa, it is imperative to implement a two-pronged reform of the african educational system. On the one hand, there is need to thoroughly revise the teaching programmes to adapt them to the socio-economic realities of african countries and on the other hand an effort must be made to change the ratio of student registration between science and applied science disciplines and humanities. Furthermore, the adaptation of training to the requirement of the labor market in the african context necessitates the implementation of an educational strategy based inter alia on :

- elaboration of flexible educational programmes that are easily adaptable to changing circumstances that allow decision-makers to give priority to specific fields of study at specific moments ;

- Planning training on the basis of an overall development policy ;
- creation of technical universities and reduction of the number of existing universities ;
- initiation of training programmes on behalf of the informal sector which is the largest purveyor of jobs in africa.

The imbalance between the educational demand and supply in the context of growing unemployment engenders yet another crisis at the level of the African university : political demonstrations against the sociopolitical order. In fact, students are spearheading most the democratic changes underway in African countries to secure a future that enables them to find a job after completion of their studies or to be given the material means to create jobs for themselves. However, the political elite, unable to find an appropriate solution to the legitimate demands of the students prefers to resort to "temporary closing" of the universities.

#### iv) The African University : Autonomy and Academic Freedom

The African university in its institutional form belongs to the category of centralized systems compared to the decentralized systems of the developed nations. The centralized system leads unavoidably to a difficult relation between the political power and the university community.

The African university has still to conquer its autonomy on the financial and administrative planes as it has remained so far tightly dependent on the State for financing and provision of direction.

Lack of Autonomy : During the period 1980-89, African governments have covered 90-100 % of the capital and recurrent costs of the universities, although in real terms the amounts have declined over the years, (e.g. in the case of the University of Ghana, fund allocated by the government in 1985/86 represented only 29 % of their 1980/81 level) this gave however a considerable leverage to the governments over the university affairs. This situation is more visible in the francophone universities where the tendency has been for the institutional head of the universities, the vice-chancellor/rector to be appointed by the head of State instead of being elected by his peers. Moreover, in some countries, by virtue of his office, he also becomes member of the central committee of the ruling political party. In addition, the university lacks control over its internal and external affairs due to frequent government interferences. There is usually no independent university senate in which academic matters are vested. The university council functioning as a clearing-house makes a mockery of the long tradition of university autonomy.

Academic freedom : Academic freedom is a concept different in content from university autonomy. It refers to the personal relation of the teacher to the institution and to other social entities, of which the state organs. It entails freedom to teach all subjects in accordance with scientific truth.

In the heyday of one party politics, academic freedom was trampled on in the African university and university teachers has been harassed, jailed and sacked on the ground of their professed opinions when these diverged from the official truth. This happened most frequently in the faculties of law and human sciences which are often tagged as subversive. Fortunately, the process of democratization and the need of transparenence in the affairs of the state has brought some relief and

academic freedom is being gradually restored since the late 1980s. This process can be seen as part of the global restructuring of social relations in Africa.

## II. THE AFRICAN UNIVERSITY IN ITS SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT

Julius Nyerere, former president of Tanzania, has epitomized the role of the African university (and for that matter, the role of universities in the developing countries as a rule), in the following words :

“The university in a developing society must put the emphasis of its work on subject of immediate moment to the nation in which it exists, and it must be committed to the people of that nation and their humanistic goals... We in the poor societies can only justify expenditure on a university of any type-if it promotes real development of our people... The role of a university in a **developing nation** is to contribute to give ideas, manpower, and service for the furtherance of human equality, dignity and human development” (J. Nyerere, The University's role in the Development of New Countries, Paper presented at the World University Service Assembly, Dar es Salaam, Tanzania June 27, 1966).

In order to meet these requirements, the African university must first of all pursue in its research activities the priority areas of the continent which are to date, **agriculture, health, and technology**. Besides, the African university must consider **continuing education** as an area of paramount importance.

i) The Implication of the University in Agricultural Development. The issue of agriculture and food production is so crucial for Africa, the part of rural life so essential that the relation of the African university to

rural economy should be squarely placed at the centre of the service function of the African university. During the last 30 years, food production in sub-saharan Africa increased only by 2 % per annum. Food exports decreased while the increase in annual food imports rose by 7 % on the average. But in spite of the increase in imports, hundreds of people were still undernourished, a situation which has been aggravated by climatic factor, especially drought.

In face of this calamity, what can the African university contribute ? Its first task should be the intensification of applied research in various fields, economic, social and technical that are relevant to agriculture as the major source of economic growth and food security in Africa. Concretely, these research should aim at creating high yield varieties of grains resistant to drought. At present, it is estimated that 20-30 % of harvests of cereals are lost to consumption after the harvests. The university should devise appropriate methods of conservation taking into account ecological conditions.

In the area of social sciences, there is also the need to conduct research into the socio-economic aspects of agricultural production including the impact of land tenure regimes on agricultural development and smallholder agriculture in Africa and into many other fields.

#### ii) The African University and traditional medicine and pharmacopoeia

The African university must above all overcome its servile identification to dominant foreign models in the very strategic field of health sciences and work on the basis of its own specificity. It must free itself from the classical methodologies inherited from the western cultural domination to embrace other knowledges and other problematiques rooted in local cultures. indeed, the African university

has a dual mission to fulfil : **to protect the cultural heritage of the continent and to explore new trails of modernity.** From this perspective the integration of "traditional medicine" and African pharmacopoeia as part of the university research activities is vastly important. The African university has a strategic role to play in the codification and systematic use of traditional medical practices. This is the more so because 70-80 % of the rural population still resort to traditional healers who are some time more efficient than the classical medical doctors when it comes to tropical diseases. Africa possesses a large variety of plants known for their therapeutical virtues. The rational exploitation of this capital by laboratories in African universities can help save a considerable amount of foreign currency that can be invested in other economic sectors. For the realization of this economic and social objective the governments should plan for the industrial cultivation of medicinal plants in the villages. They will also serve as a source of additional revenue to the empoverished farmers.

### iii) The University and Continuing Education

One of the most visible way the university can be realistically integrated into its social environment is that it provides courses to those already engaged in an economic activity in order to broaden their intellectual horizons. In particular, if we assume that a major objective of the African university is to reduce the gap between the developed nations and Africa, the university can no longer confine itself in the narrow role of dispensing theoretical knowledge to a small elite, but should be open to the working people through the practice of continuing education that ensures the promotion and development of human resources so essential to development.



#### iv) The University and Appropriate Technology

Another area in which the African university must be involved is research into appropriate technology for Africa at the present stage of development of the continent.

Appropriate technology is intermediate between traditional technology and modern, sophisticated technology.

Africa is not at present an active participant in the exchange of scientific and technological ideas. The part of the GNP earmarked for scientific research is insignificant (less than 0.5 %). It depends, therefore, exclusively on the developed countries for transfer of technology for which it spends considerable amount of foreign currency on the world market. But the transfer of foreign technology does not as a rule take into account the real possibilities of its utilization and adaptation to local conditions, as some elements of the scientific progress achieved in the developed countries are often in contradiction to the situation prevailing in Africa. For instance highly productive technology imported at present in Africa is ill suited to the peculiarities of the continent's present circumstances such as the lack of qualified specialists, surplus of unskilled labour force, and the narrowness of the internal market.

Besides, technology transfer does not guarantee per se, the diffusion of scientific progress. There is always the imperative need to train the staff to assimilate the technology being transferred. This is a task in which the African university can play a decisive role. Moreover, it is also necessary that relevant departments of African universities be associated in the selection of the technologies to be transferred in order to assess their congruence to African culture and level of adaptation to

the African social environment. Finally, the African university should also be involved in the revalorization, and improvement of indigenous / traditional technology and other techniques devised in Africa. If the African university could live up to this task, it would enable the African continent to develop in the direction of its own creativity.

## **CONCLUSION**

This paper purports to underline the key issues facing the African university. In broad outlines, it is perceived that Africa has not been able to design a university that is adapted to its socio-cultural environment as the university remained tied to the western traditions of scholarship without concern for African problems. There is, therefore a pressing need for a shift of emphasis in the curricula and research activities. Indeed, as the President of Ivory Coast, Houphouët Boigny put it,

“La recherche de l'authenticité, de la préservation et de l'enrichissement de notre culture africaine est vitale, pour que nous sauvegardions notre identité devant les assauts du monde moderne qui tendent par ses médias à affadir ou faire disparaître les traits originaux qui font le capital de l'humanité”. (in A.G. JOHNSON op. cit. p.51)”.

According to another African head of State, the university is and must be the focus of national life reflecting the social, economic, cultural and political aspirations of the people. It links and must link its activities with the needs of the society of which it is a part (K. N'Krumah, as quoted by A.G. Johnson, 1992; P.22-23).

The demographic explosion (with an average annual population growth rate of 2.5-3 %) in Africa and the worsening social and economic conditions affect all levels of the educational system, but the

**DIAGRAM 1**

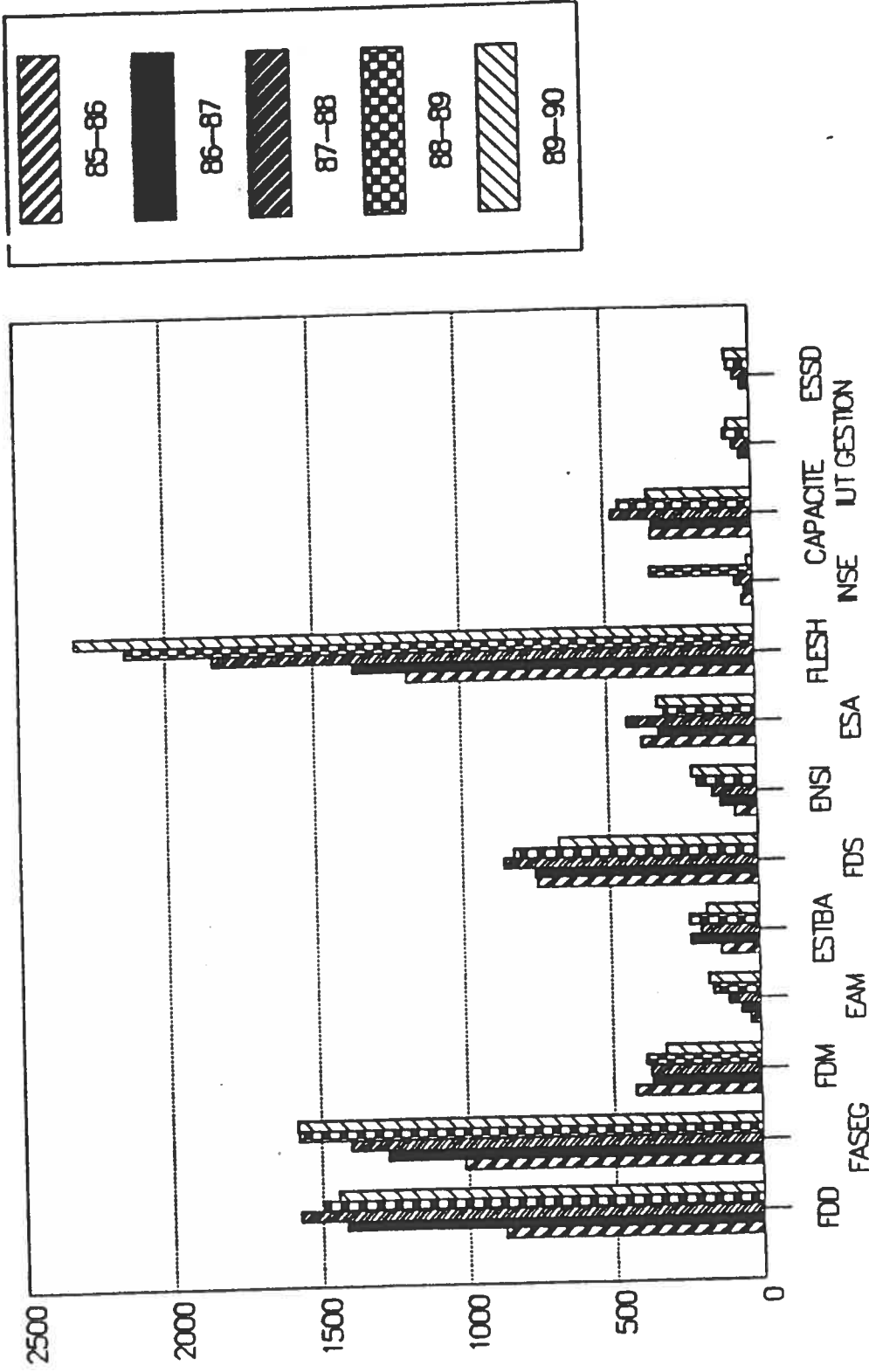
**Evolution of Student Population at the Université du Bénin  
1985 - 1991**

**(Statistical data by DAARS, Université du Bénin, Togo)**

# EVOLUTION DES EFFECTIFS / U.B.

## DE 1985 A 1990

U.B.



Etablissement

## PERCENTAGE OF WOMEN IN SELECTED AFRICAN UNIVERSITIES

**TABLE. 1**

UNIVERSITES	1988 / 89		
	Year of creation	Number of Students	Percentage of women
University of Addis Ababa - Ethiopia	1950	16995	n.a
University Ahmadu Bello Zaria, Nigeria	1962	13791	14
University of Burundi	1981	2091	n.a
Université Nationale de la Côte d'Ivoire	1959	18341	20
Université Eduardo Mondlane, Maputo Mozambique	1962	2632	26 <sup>1</sup>
University of Gezira Sudan	1978	1357	30
University of Ghana Legon	1948	3527	20
University of Obafemi Awolowo / Ife Nigeria	1961	14070	n.a
University of Zambia	1965	4886	13

NOTES : n.a. : non available

1 : figures for 1986/87

Source : Association des Universités Africaines  
op. cit. 1991 ; P.9.

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## DIAGRAM

### EVOLUTION OF STUDENT POPULATION BY FACULTY

FDD	=	Law Faculty
FDM	=	Faculty of Medecine
FASEG	=	Economics
EAM	=	Medical Auxiliaries
ESTBA	=	Biology and Nutrition
FDS	=	Sciences
ENSI	=	School of Engineering
ESA	=	Faculty of Agronomy
FLESH	=	Humanities & Social Sciences
INSE	=	Education
ESSD	=	Secretarial School
IUT.G	=	Management

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