Portfolio: Higher education and research
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The higher education and research sector plays a fundamental role for achieving all SDGs, incl. ending poverty, protecting the planet, and fostering democratic values and equality.

**Why a portfolio for the specific topic?**

Throughout Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), the academic sector struggles to deliver on its social mission - commonly divided into three main tasks: 1) to provide society with a quality workforce adopted to the needs of the labor market, 2) to produce research-based knowledge and innovation and 3) to engage with societal actors by sharing knowledge and contributing to debate that inform policies and practices. This is demonstrated by the gross enrollment ratio to higher education[[1]](#footnote-2) and the number of researchers[[2]](#footnote-3), scientific publications[[3]](#footnote-4) and patents[[4]](#footnote-5), on which SSA scores the lowest in the world.

The low performance on the above parameters is associated with a set of interconnected factors. Inadequate systems for quality assurance at both institutional and national level and inadequate staff qualifications pose the most significant quality challenge to the academic sector[[5]](#footnote-6). The qualifications of staff are declining, particularly the percentage of faculty holding doctoral degrees[[6]](#footnote-7). This limits their role as lecturers, supervisors, researchers, and mentors. It also affects the quality and relevance of study programs, which is demonstrated by the mismatch with the needs of the labor markets as well as low qualifications of graduated students.

Despite the fundamental role the academic sector plays in *any* country’s development, domestic investment in the sector in SSA is low. There is thus a high reliance on external funding, which is often ear-marked, project-based and fragmented[[7]](#footnote-8). This poses a challenge for strategic planning, coordination, and relevance - and ultimately sustainability - of the academic sector at national level.

Most international funding to higher education goes to scholarships for individual students taking their degrees at universities in donor countries[[8]](#footnote-9). Accordingly, only a limited amount of the support is targeted towards strengthening academic institutions in SSA. External funding is also typically dominated by external priorities, involving North-South collaborations often strongly influenced by Northern donors and researchers’ interests and priorities[[9]](#footnote-10). These funding models have contributed to African researchers collaborating significantly more with researchers from other continents than with fellow researchers in the same country or region [[10]](#footnote-11). South-South exchange is however important as African countries often face similar challenges. It is also useful for reducing risks in relation to crises and conflicts e.g. allowing for student and scholar mobility.

The academic sector is also a persistently unequal sector. Women, people with disabilities, cultural and ethnic minorities, and indigenous groups are particularly underrepresented. At a time when several states in SSA are moving in an authoritarian direction, academic freedom is also under increasing pressure.

**What will Norad contribute to?**

The portfolio on higher education and research will contribute to **an academic sector able to deliver on its social mission**. The focus will be in the region with the most pressing needs, i.e. the SSA region. Norad will focus on three outcomes:

1. Academic institutions in SSA provide high quality education and research
2. Funding to the academic sector focuses on institutional capacity and local agenda-setting
3. Coherence in the academic ecosystem in Tanzania

**How will the interventions contribute to goal achievement? (Theory of Change - ToC)**

With a partnership approach that adopts multiple strategies and intervention categories, Norad’s portfolio for higher education and research aims to promote systemic change and thus more sustainable effects at sector level. Assumptions have been identified and needs for further investigation and follow-up have been incorporated into the portfolio’s Knowledge Plan. One of the assumptions is that national authorities in SSA monitor the needs of the academic system (incl. the labor market) and are able to make priorities and implement adjustments accordingly. This will be followed closely in Outcome 3. Another is that more faculty holding PhDs and increased availability of research funding will enhance the quality of the educational programs and research. This will be followed up under Outcome 1.

Through financial support to capacity strengthening of higher education institutions and research councils/institutions in SSA, Norad will strengthen the quality education and research delivered (Outcome 1). Support may also be provided to other actors key to the academic ecosystem. Specific interventions may include:

* Strengthening the **competence of faculty** at higher education institutions through scholarships at post-graduate levels, mentor programs, research schools etc. Degrees will mainly be taken nationally/regionally in SSA.
* Strengthening of **systems for quality assurance** of educational programs and research, incl. small-scale infrastructure development
* Increasing the **availability of research funding,** the quality of research management systemsand publications.
* Promotion of **South-South collaboration** between strong and less advanced universities and research councils.
* Support to initiatives to enhance **inclusion** and **academic freedom**.

Through strategic engagement with other donors (incl. emerging and philanthropic), Norad will initiate **discussions about the sustainability of dominant funding models** (Outcome 2)**.** We will promote funding models that target both higher education and research, and support institutional capacity strengthening, rather than individual scholarships only. This may include **co-funding**, efforts to promote meaningful **donor harmonization and alignment**, as well as **collaborative research** and **development of knowledge products**.

Lastly, Norad will test a holistic approach to the academic sector at national level – starting with Tanzania (Outcome 3). Tanzania has been selected due to:

* Norway’s well-established partnerships with key institutions in the academic sector
* the embassy has expressed interest
* the potential for synergies with several other Norad portfolios
* established relationships with other key donors
* the section’s extensive knowledge and understanding of the Tanzanian society.

An iterative approach will be applied to ensure learning and adequate adjustments during the implementation. As a first step, Norad will conduct a **mapping of actors and a political economy analysis** of the sector in Tanzania. Through dialogue with selected actors, we will explore opportunities for **strategic collaboration** and consider **supporting “spot activities”** to fill gaps. We will also explore the potential for **increased national resource mobilization** to the sector.

1. In 2020, SSA recorded 9,4% enrollment rate compared to global average of 38% (UNESCO-IESALC, 2023: The right to higher education in Africa. Briefing note compendium). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. For example, in 2018 SSA was home to 14% of the global population but only 0.7% of the world’s researchers. (UNESCO, 2021: UNESCO Science Report: the race Against Time for Smarter Development. S. Scheegans, T. Straza and J. Lewis (eds.). Paris: UNESCO Publishing). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Africa’s share of the global research publication is 4,5%. (Mouton, J. et al 2023. Research funding flows in and for Africa. SGCI – unpublished). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. Africa’s share is 0,06% of patents globally. (Ezeh, A. and J. Lu, 2019. Transforming the institutional landscape in sub-Saharan Africa: Considerations for leveraging Africa’s research capacity to achieve socioeconomic development. CGD Policy Paper 147). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. UNESCO-IIEP, 2024: Quality assurance in Ugandan and Tanzanian higher education: Follow-up on the 2021 IIEP-NORHED online course on Internal Quality Assurance (IQA). M. Martin: Paris. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. Zeleza, P. 2021: Quality higher education “indispensable” for Africa’s future. University World News, 06 July 2021. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. Maasen, 2020: Landscape for research and higher education in Africa: key trends and challenges. Internal seminar FORSK/Norad, October 28, 2020. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. UNESCO, 2022: Exploring international aid for tertiary education: recent development and current trends. Paris: UNESCO Publishing. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. Agence Francaise de Development, 2020: Rethinking international funding of African research. Towards a coalition of stakeholder. AfD Policy Paper 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. Mouton, J. et al 2023. Research funding flows in and for Africa. SGCI – unpublished. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)