

# THE GROWTH OF UNIVERSITIES IN KENYA AND THEIR ROLE IN ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

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Increased access to higher education has greatly contributed to the country's socio-economic growth, albeit with sustained accusation of churning out half-baked graduates

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**Category:** [EDUCATION](#)

In the last three decades, higher education in Kenya has grown exponentially. People born in the 80s and earlier would perhaps understand this better. They know how difficult it was to secure a slot in the university, and the prestige that came with it. A person who attained a university grade was highly regarded as the true son or daughter of the soil whose graduation ceremony the village attended to the last man.

Universities were few and far between. You could count the number of universities in the country on one hand. Fast forward to 2020 and everywhere you turn there is a university, a campus or a college. Today, some graduands do not even bother to turn up for their graduation ceremony, leave alone their parents and villagers. Joining university is no longer the stuff of legends.

When I was growing up, attaining a university degree was one of the major avenues of ducking poverty, strictly speaking. We braved the morning chill and walked for miles to school. Woe unto you if the teacher on duty got to school before you. Those were the good old days of *Maziwa ya Nyayo*. On joining high school, the vision was clearer and prospects of clearing school to become a casual laborer in the tea and coffee farms jolted one to work harder. The goal was to attain a university pass mark, especially if you came from a humble family that could not afford to pay for college or university fee. When one attained the pass mark, they were assured of government sponsorship, then known as “Boom”—the modern-day HELB. It is such struggles that made the process—and the prize—worthwhile.

**The growth of university education has greatly contributed to Kenya’s economic development. Indeed, multiple studies have attributed economic growth (in Kenya and other African nations and beyond) to investment in a highly skilled workforce and university education. The investment in higher education has earned Kenya the name the Silicon Savannah. University education has played the critical role of training skilled manpower to spur a knowledge-driven economy.**

University education in Kenya dates back to 1947, when the colonial government rolled out a plan to establish a technical and commercial institute in Nairobi. The plan mutated to encompass the East African region, aiming to provide higher technical education for the three territories, namely: Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania.

In 1951, the Royal Technical College of East Africa received a Royal Charter. The College offered certification courses, culminating in the Higher National Certificate offered in Britain. The college opened its doors to the first batch of students (A-level graduates for technical courses) in April 1956. This became Kenya's first higher education institution. In 1961, the college was transformed into the second Inter-territorial university college in East Africa and renamed Royal College of Nairobi.

After Independence in 1964, the Royal College was elevated to the University College of Nairobi, following the establishment of the University of East Africa with constituent colleges at Makerere, Dar-es-Salaam and Nairobi. In 1970, the University of East Africa was dissolved and the University College of Nairobi was transformed into the University of Nairobi by an Act of Parliament.

In 1972, Kenyatta College, then a teacher-training institution was elevated to a constituent college of the University of Nairobi. In 1984, Moi University was established as the second Kenyan university, followed later by Kenyatta University and Egerton University, which were elevated to full University status in 1985 and 1987, respectively.

**From the 1990s, the country experienced the fastest growth of public universities as demand for access to university education skyrocketed. This resulted in an increase in number of the institutions from four fully-fledged varsities in 1987 to seven in 2007. These additional ones were the Jomo Kenyatta University of Agriculture and Technology (1994), Maseno University (2000), and Masinde Muliro University of Science and Technology (2007).**

The number of public universities stands at 23 today, with the most recent one being the Bungoma-based Kibabii University which was granted its charter in 2015. Between them, these universities also have several constituent colleges.

Like the public institutions of higher learning, private universities have mushroomed in a similar fashion. Kenya's private higher education has a relative longer history than in other countries on the continent. The demand for university education (or rather degree holders by employers) coupled with government's limited funding to public universities saw private universities established to plug the deficit. Private universities emerged as a viable alternative in the 1990s.

*The United States International University-Africa*, Kenya's oldest private university, opened its Nairobi campus in 1970, offering degree programmes under the umbrella of the US-based parent university. USIU was established as a fully-fledged university in 1989. In 1978, the University of East Africa, Baraton, was established, followed by the *Catholic University of Eastern Africa* in 1984. Some theological institutions such as St. Paul's University, have much longer histories.

Like public universities, the rapid growth of private universities happened in the 90s. By the end of 1995, private universities had risen to 12. Today there are 27 private institutions of higher education in the country.

**While the growth of universities has contributed to overall economic development and improved literacy levels, the mushrooming has on the flipside contributed to the erosion of quality of higher education. Kenyan universities have been accused of churning out half-baked graduates, most of whom lack employability skills, technical mastery and other work-related skills. Simply, put they are ill-equipped for the labour market.**

It's worth noting that while the higher education has registered some remarkable progress, it has yet to achieve the vision set out in law and policy. To achieve industrialization as set out in Vision 2030, there is need to debunk the obsession with degrees. The obsession has disregarded scientific rationale on cost-effectiveness, among other factors. Some universities lack requisite equipment and spaces for some courses which require practical knowledge as opposed to theory. Others lack functional, up-to-date libraries.

To its credit, however, the government has set out to streamline the sector, with Education Cabinet Secretary George Magoha ordering universities to scrap irrelevant degree courses. The government is prioritizing programmes that are tailored to address local economic challenges by producing graduates with skill sets required in the labour market.

In his study on higher education in Kenya, [Damon Lamb](#) recommends the need to focus on equipping students with valuable skills. This way, we produce apprentices with relevant skills to the labour market.

**There are no comments yet.**