

## Policy brief

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# Improving gender equity for entrepreneurship and employability:

Policy options for African  
universities

May 2025

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# Policy options for African universities

This policy brief is an output of the Higher Education Gender Analysis research project, commissioned by the British Council and conducted by the African Network for Internationalization of Education (ANIE) and its network of researchers across Sub-Saharan Africa.

# Introduction and context

Over the past few decades, Africa's higher education sector has experienced significant growth and transformation (Jowi, 2021; Woldegiorgis & Scherer, 2019). Despite this progress, persistent disparities and inequalities continue to limit equitable access and participation for women (World Bank, 2019), undermining the transformative potential of higher education. Across Sub-Saharan Africa, women in higher education institutions continue to face substantial barriers to entrepreneurship and employability opportunities.

This policy brief draws on findings from a study covering universities in Kenya, Ghana, Nigeria and South Africa that highlights gender disparities in access, participation and achievements in education, employment and entrepreneurship. Although national and institutional policies exist, weak enforcement, socio-cultural norms and inadequate support systems hinder their effectiveness within universities. High unemployment rates among graduates (AfDB, 2020) have prompted some universities to introduce entrepreneurship education and employability-focused programmes. These challenges to employability and entrepreneurship opportunities are more pronounced for female students and therefore require policy attention.

# Important findings of the study

- **Gender-based discrimination:** Female students experience various forms of gender-based discriminations, sexual harassment and exclusion from leadership roles and employment and entrepreneurship opportunities.
- **Weak implementation of gender policies:** While most of the countries and universities in the study have adopted gender policies, implementation and enforcement remained weak. Awareness of these policies remains low, especially among students who should benefit from them, revealing a discernible disconnect between policy and practice.
- **Limited financial support:** Women entrepreneurs face significant obstacles in securing startup capital and accessing financial services. There are limited opportunities for female students to access financial support, especially startup funds to enable them to engage in entrepreneurship activities. Many female students within the higher education institutions struggle because of their socio-economic backgrounds and challenges accessing financing.
- **Societal norms and cultural barriers:** In nearly all the countries studied, deep-rooted societal norms, cultural practices and stereotypes limit women's employability and entrepreneurship. These barriers also manifest in women's access to certain study opportunities, especially in STEM disciplines.
- **Graduate unemployment crisis:** While there is rising unemployment in all study countries, female graduates face higher unemployment rates than their male counterparts, exacerbating the employability gap. Structural barriers in competitive labour markets across countries further hinder women's entry and progression.
- **Weak university–industry links:** Limited collaboration between universities and industry reduces job placement and entrepreneurship opportunities for students. Only a handful of universities, mainly in South Africa, maintain mutually beneficial engagements with the industry and private sector. Access to practical training, skills development and work experience from industries during university education is limited, especially for women.
- **Lack of gender-sensitive support systems:** Most universities do not provide targeted support services for female students, such as daycare, flexible learning schedules or mentorship programmes.
- **Slow curriculum reforms:** University curricula have not evolved to meet the demands of the digital economy or adapt to shifting job market trends. Although some universities offer entrepreneurship training programmes, they have not realised their full potential and are not accessible to all students.

# Policy problem and rationale

The barriers identified in this study are mainly experienced within the higher education institutions and systems. Persistent gender disparities limit women's ability to engage in entrepreneurship and contribute to the labour market. Most of these challenges require actions and interventions from universities, particularly from leadership, faculty, support units, students and external agencies, including industry and development partners.

Bridging these gaps requires comprehensive policy actions at the institutional level in addition to collaborative efforts with private sector and development partners. Therefore, policy development and implementation at the institutional level is critical, especially for progressive gender policies and for students from backgrounds where cultural norms significantly influence the participation and success of girls. While many universities have adopted proactive gender policies, challenges in implementation remain widespread. Additional support units and academic programmes focused on entrepreneurship and employability are also emerging, but policy gaps and weaknesses persist.

Based on this rationale and the main findings presented above, the section below presents important policy recommendations for higher education institutions.

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# Policy recommendations for African universities

## Strengthen entrepreneurship and employability training

- Integrate entrepreneurship education across disciplines with a focus on women's participation.
- Establish business incubation centres within universities to support student startups and innovation.
- Strengthen mentorship programmes connecting female students with successful entrepreneurs and industry professionals.
- Provide practical training in business planning, financial management and market strategies.

## Improve institutional gender policies and implementation

- Enforce existing gender policies with clear accountability and oversight mechanisms to improve implementation.
- Implement affirmative action measures in student admissions and faculty recruitment to rectify gender imbalances.
- Develop robust monitoring and evaluation systems to track the progress of gender-sensitive initiatives.
- Establish and strengthen anti-harassment policies, including clear reporting channels, protection measures and redress mechanisms, within universities.

## Increase financial access and support for female entrepreneurs

- Establish university-led microfinance initiatives focused on female students.
- Develop on-campus funding mechanisms, including business grants and startup accelerators.
- Introduce scholarships and grants supporting female students pursuing business and entrepreneurship programmes.

## Strengthen university–industry collaboration

- Establish internship and apprenticeship programmes for female students.
- Encourage joint research projects between universities and businesses to drive innovation.
- Develop career guidance services tailored to female students' employment needs.

## Deal with socio-cultural barriers and awareness within institutions

- Conduct on-campus awareness campaigns to challenge gender stereotypes in education and employment.
- Introduce female mentorship programmes featuring successful female professionals and faculty members.
- Promote student networking events to foster peer-to-peer learning and collaboration.

## Use digitalisation for gender equity in higher education

- Expand digital skills training in university curricula and include female students.
- Increase investment in information and communications technology infrastructure and digitalisation to improve internet access for female students.
- Encourage blended learning approaches to accommodate flexible education schedules.

## Improve student support services within universities

- Establish gender-responsive support centres offering counselling, career guidance and financial literacy training.
- Develop childcare facilities on campuses to support female students with families.
- Implement flexible learning schedules to accommodate female students.

# Action strategies for universities

These policy recommendations require actions and interventions from various stakeholders within universities.

## University leadership actions

- Establish dedicated gender offices to oversee policy implementation.
- Develop institutional frameworks for monitoring and evaluating gender equity initiatives.
- Strengthen university–industry partnerships to increase job placements and mentorship opportunities.
- Revise curricula to integrate entrepreneurship, financial literacy and digital skills.

## Faculty and administration actions

- Implement gender-sensitive teaching methods that foster inclusivity.
- Provide faculty training on gender-responsive pedagogy and mentorship practices.
- Promote research on gender disparities in higher education, employment and entrepreneurship.

## Student and community engagement actions

- Develop peer mentorship programmes to build confidence and professional networks for female students.
- Support student-led initiatives that promote gender equity and entrepreneurship.
- Establish partnerships with alumni networks to provide career mentorship opportunities and industry connections.

# Conclusion

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Women and female students in Sub-Saharan African universities continue to face challenges, including deep-rooted barriers to accessing employability and entrepreneurship opportunities. Despite progress, significant gaps remain in implementation and support.

This policy brief foregrounds the policy actions and actors needed to bridge gender gaps in higher education institutions and promote women's access to employability and entrepreneurship opportunities. A comprehensive and multi-stakeholder approach is critical. Universities must take proactive leadership in enforcing gender policies, strengthening financial and mentorship support and fostering collaborations with industry and development partners.

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