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Wisdom Tettey analyses the state of the African professoriate and implications for regenerating the academy.

While academic staff recruitment and retention constitute major challenges to African universities, there are growing concerns that the situation is worsening in terms of numbers and quality of the professoriate. To ascertain the extent of the problem and the veracity of the claims, we undertook a study of 15 universities and seven countries. The following analysis highlights some key findings.

The student enrolment-staff capacity gap
Since the early 1990s, African universities have seen steady increases in student enrolments, with the last decade recording explosive expansions. The University of Dar es Salaam (UDSM) in Tanzania, for example, saw its enrolment balloon by 73%, from 8,439 in 2003, to 14,637 in 2007. In the midst of this unprec-...
Unbridled growth in student–staff ratios can be very intimidating and discouraging to those considering an academic career.

The situation at the University of Education, Winneba in Ghana is very disheartening, as only around 8% of staff were under 40 years of age in 2008, while a little over 57% were above 50 years of age. National-level data for Ghana echoes the general concern with an ageing professoriate, with 41% of staff over 50 years old.

Calibre of the professoriate
The quality of any higher education system is determined not only by the number of people teaching in it, but also, even more importantly, by the qualifications of its academic staff. One significant measure of the capability of the professoriate to provide quality research and instruction is doctoral-level certification. The evidence suggests that there is a paucity of doctoral degree holders in the African academy. Apart from the University of the Witwatersrand in South Africa, where 53% of staff held doctoral degrees, less than half of all staff in the remaining institutions had doctorates. Only 19% of staff at the University of Education, Winneba had doctorates. In 2006, Master’s and doctoral degree holders, together, constituted only 58% of the total staff complement at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN).

Of even more concern is the trend of declining proportions of doctorate holders over the years. The University of Ghana saw the percentage of staff with doctorates go down from 49% in 2000 to 41% in 2008; UKZN registered a drop from 40% in 2001 to 31% in 2006; and UDSM experienced a downward slide from 65% in 2003 to 41% in 2007. The picture is even more sobering when we analyse staff qualifications at the national level (see Figure 4).

Gender representation within the ranks and implications for staff capacity
Figure 5 illustrates the extent to which women at various institutions are consistently under-represented within all ranks, and more so at professorial level. If upward mobility for female staff is seen as a difficult proposition, there is a strong likelihood that women will not see academia as a career worth pursuing, further diminishing the capacity of these institutions to increase the number of qualified staff.

Conclusion
From the foregoing, it is obvious that African universities are not only contending with significant shortages of academic staff, but are also debilitated by the dearth of academics with terminal degrees and a large ageing professoriate. The situation is accentuated by the pressures imposed on them by the phenomenal growth in student enrolment. This situation creates a huge challenge, since the ability of existing or new institutions to absorb the increasing student numbers will depend, to a very large extent, on an adequate pool of instructors. It is imperative that national tertiary bodies, universities, governments and development partners come together to address the problem of staff shortage and quality, if universities are to discharge their mandate satisfactorily.

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