Broken Pipeline: Higher Education and the Production of African Development Researchers*

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Abstract

Any meaningful effort to address the underrepresentation of African voices in development research must begin with the teaching, mentorship, and inspiration of young scholars that happens in African universities. This is where the pipeline of African researchers is created and where scholars are equipped with the training required to produce research that can shape policy debates and guide decision making. In this paper, we draw on original survey and interview data to characterize the challenges faced by African universities in producing development researchers. We discuss the factors that cause so many promising scholars at the undergraduate level to choose not to continue their training at the graduate level. We assess the quality of the training that is available for the students who do elect to continue their studies in Africa. And we discuss the attractiveness of, obstacles to, and implications of acquiring graduate training outside of the region.

Keywords: higher education; Africa; development research

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> African scholars are virtually absent from the debates that ultimately shape development scholarship and policy about the continent.
>
> Grieve Chelwa, *Does Economics Have an "Africa Problem"?*

Introduction

African voices are underrepresented in development research. Notwithstanding the recognition that local knowledge is critical for addressing Africa's many pressing development challenges (Sawyerr 2004; Mkandawire 2017; Jerven 2015; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2020; Olufadewa, Adesina and Ayorinde 2020; Chelwa 2021), the vast majority of the research that informs policymaking in Africa is produced by scholars from outside of the region. A recent survey found that Sub-Saharan Africa, which accounts for 16% of the world's population, produced less than 1% of the publications in the top ten economics journals between 2016 and 2021 (Aigner, Greenspon and Rodrik 2025). The United States, by contrast, with just 4% of the global population, produced 66%.[1] This imbalance can be seen not just in the share of articles published by African researchers but in their citation rates (Aigner, Greenspon and Rodrik 2025), the composition of journal editorial boards (Cummings and Hoebink 2017; Chelwa 2021), and the articles assigned in undergraduate courses and included on PhD comprehensive exam reading lists at leading universities, which contain very few works by African scholars (Zimbalist 2020). In Grieve Chelwa's memorable phase, economics—and, by extension, much of the social science literature that might inform development policymaking on the continent—has an "Africa problem."[2]

Any meaningful approach to addressing this problem must begin with the teaching, mentorship, and inspiration of young scholars that happens in African universities. This is where the pipeline of African researchers is created and where scholars are equipped with the training required to produce research that can shape policy debates and guide decision making. At present, however, too few of the best and brightest young African students are choosing to pursue careers in international development research, and too many of those who are making this choice are handicapped in their ability to contribute to scholarly debates by inadequate mentorship and training. The pipeline is broken.

This article brings new evidence to bear on this dilemma and concludes with some thoughts on a way

[1] Other studies documenting the underrepresentation of African and/or Southern authors in policy-relevant, social science journals include Briggs and Weathers (2016), Cummings and Hoebink (2017), Chelwa (2021), Amarante et al. (2022), and Amarante and Zurbrigg (2022).

[2] A similar point is made by Mulisa (2021). As a telling indicator of this "Africa problem," Chelwa (2021) points to the fact that, between 2005 and 2015, "the *World Bank Research Observer*, a journal whose primary purpose is to synthesize research findings for the purposes of policy, did not have a single Africa-based author."

forward. Drawing on original data from surveys and focus groups with African students and university lecturers and researchers, we address three key issues. First, we discuss the factors that cause so many promising scholars at the undergraduate level to choose not to continue their training at the Masters or PhD levels. Next, we assess the quality of the training that is available for the students who do elect to continue their studies at African universities. Finally, we discuss the attractiveness, obstacles to, and implications of acquiring graduate-level training outside of Africa. Perhaps not surprisingly, in all three areas, we find funding to be the main obstacle. Inadequate stipends for graduate students and higher earning potentials outside of academia dissuade many promising students from pursuing PhD-level studies. Low salaries and insufficient administrative support for academic staff undermines the ability of faculty to provide the intensive mentorship that graduate education requires. For these reasons, opportunities for studying in Europe or North America are coveted, but scarce funding again makes this route infeasible for all but a handful of the most promising young scholars.

Data and Approach Used

Our analysis leverages a mix of quantitative and qualitative sources. The first is an online survey undertaken as part of the broader Collaboration for Inclusive Development Resarch (CIDR) initiative, of which our research was a part.[3] Students and faculty in the social sciences, research professionals, and development practitioners from across Africa—largely, although not exclusively, part of the Network of Impact Evaluation Researchers in Africa (NIERA)—were invited to participate in the survey. We received 542 valid responses, 81% of whom were living in Africa at the time they were surveyed.[4]

We supplemented the CIDR survey with two additional data collection efforts that allow us to speak directly to the role that higher education may play in addressing the underrepresentation of African voices in development research.[5] The first is a survey of undergraduate and masters-level students enrolled in university courses that serve as pipelines toward careers in development research. Our objective in surveying these students was to learn about the factors that shape their choices about

[3]The CIDR Initiative is a comprehensive investigation into the barriers and opportunities for meaningful participation of African scholars in development research, organized by the Network of Impact Evaluation Researchers in Africa (NIERA) and the Center for Effective Global Action (CEGA) at the University of California, Berkeley. In addition to higher education, the initiative also addresses the topics of training and mentorship, the challenges African researchers face in publishing their work and funding their research, and the obstacles to impacting policy.

[4]Respondents were from 34 African countries, with the largest shares from Nigeria (16%), Kenya (14%), Ethiopia (11%), Tanzania (11%) and Uganda (10%). Two-thirds of the respondents were men. Non-African respondents are dropped from the analyses presented here.

[5]Human subjects approval for these additional data collection efforts was secured from the IRB at the University of California, Berkeley as part of the approval for the broader CIDR project of which our research was a part (Protocol No. 2022-10-15761). For the classroom survey implemented at the University of Pretoria, we secured separate approval from the University of Pretoria's Survey Coordinating Committee, as required under South African law.

whether or not to continue their studies at the PhD level and to eventually launch careers in the field of development research. Although the CIDR survey offers some insight into the obstacles and cross-pressures that students face at this stage of their development, our classroom survey reaches students at exactly the time in their careers when choosing whether or not to continue on the path toward becoming development researchers.

To implement the classroom survey, we first identified ten African universities that have records of training students who have gone on to pursue careers in development research.[6] We then identified lecturers at each of these universities who teach undergraduate and Masters-level gateway courses to higher level studies in development-related fields (Economics, Statistics, Public Health, Development Studies, etc) and asked them to distribute the survey to their students via a link to an online platform. Students completed the survey on their phones or laptops. We received 754 responses.[7]

The second novel data source is a short survey designed to collect information relevant to a frequently mentioned obstacle to graduate training in African universities: the uneven availability of faculty mentors, caused in part by their need to take on outside consulting work to supplement their regular salaries. To gauge the significance of this problem, we invited African researchers in NIERA, the East Africa Social Science Translation Collaborative (EASST), and the Development Impact West Africa (DIWA) networks to complete a brief anonymous survey in which we asked about the share of their total income over the past year that came from sources outside of their regular university salary. We also asked about the work time they devoted to teaching/mentorship, their own research, and consulting/research for others in order to earn additional income. We received 64 responses, of which 51 were from faculty employed by African universities.

Our analysis also reflects learning from focus groups and semi-structured interviews with university faculty, students, and research professionals from Ghana, Uganda, Botswana, Nigeria, Ethiopia, Tanzania, and Kenya.[8] These interviews serve to round out and aid in the interpretation of the quantitative data from the other sources. We draw on them extensively in the analysis that follows.

[6]These universities are Addis Ababa University (Ethiopia), Kenyatta University (Kenya), Makerere University (Uganda), University of Ghana, University of Nairobi (Kenya), University of Rwanda, the Institute of Social Work (Tanzania), University of Dodoma (Tanzania), University of Pretoria (South Africa), and Obafemi Awolowo University (Nigeria). Our sample is not representative of African universities as a whole; it skews toward research-focused public institutions, which are more focused on graduate training than private universities (Tamrat and Teferra 2025).

[7]Fifty-eight percent of respondents were men; 41% were women; 1% preferred not to say. 67% were undergraduates, 24% were Masters students, and the remaining 8% were PhD students, MD students, or other.

[8]These interviews and focus groups were conducted over Zoom and lasted approximately 30-60 minutes.

Pursuing Graduate Studies

Building a pool of highly skilled African development researchers requires that promising African students continue their studies at the PhD level after they have completed their undergraduate and Masters-level training. Our classroom survey, which was administered to undergraduate and Masters students at precisely the moment in their educational careers when they are likely to be contemplating whether or not to continue their training at the next stage, provides encouraging findings. Eighty-three percent of respondents said they thought it was somewhat or very likely that they would work in a development-related field and 77 percent said they were probably or definitely considering continuing their education after they completed their current degree. Among those indicating an intention to work in a development-related field, 30 percent said they imagined working in an academic field, 56 percent said they imagined working in a non-academic setting, and 13 percent were unsure. Interestingly, all of these responses were very similar (within one or two percentage points) for men and women.

For those intending to continue their training at the graduate level, the principal obstacle is funding.[9] In response to a question about what might be done to increase the likelihood that the best students who are interested in international development choose to continue their studies at the PhD level, a focus group respondent provided a succinct answer: "It's simple: provide scholarships." This was a recurring theme in our interviews and focus groups. As one focus group participant put it: "If I don't get a scholarship then what will I do? Personally I have witnessed very many who have started on the PhD process [and] once they fail with the scholarship, then that's the end of the PhD."

These sentiments were strongly reflected in our quantitative data as well. Ninety percent of Masters-level respondents in the CIDR survey cited funding as the most important factor affecting their decision about whether or not to continue their studies at the PhD level. Roughly half (47%) said that money required for applications was also a factor in deciding whether to even apply for admission to PhD programs. In the classroom survey, funding/sponsorship was also far and away the most mentioned response to our question about the factors or obstacles that affected students' thinking about whether to continue their education after they have completed their degree. Fifty-seven percent of respondents mentioned it as their first response and 38% mentioned it as their first or second response. Men were slightly more likely than women to point to funding as their top-most obstacle to continuing their studies, but not by much: 63% vs. 55%. The other most frequently mentioned top reasons were the preference to enter the job market (5%), the lack of information about job possibilities that an

[9]Tuition alone (not including accommodation, meals, or course materials) runs close to $3,000 per year for PhD studies at Makerere University in Uganda. In Ghana, students pay somewhat less, about $1,000 per year (Ayam 2023).

advanced degree would open up (4%), child care responsibilities (4%), and family commitments other than child care (4%). It is noteworthy that funding/sponsorship concerns were mentioned *more than ten times as often* as any of these other reasons for continuing one's education.

Financial considerations affect students' decisions about continuing their studies not just through the challenge of paying for their schooling but also via concerns about their earning prospects after completing the PhD. Uncertain job prospects after graduation and opportunities for earning more money in sectors like banking and finance push students away from continuing their studies at the PhD level. One African scholar we spoke with put it bluntly: "There is no money in academia." Another lamented that "everyone wants quick money in the bank and the financial sector. The private sector [jobs] are the most attractive ones." Another, who had already received a Masters and was considering leaving his job to go back for a doctorate, told us: "When you are already working, like myself... you kind of weigh two options. You weigh the option of leaving the job, resigning and you go for further studies. And then you realize that even when you come back with your PhD, you are not assured of a job. So you have to weigh carefully... You can go and attain that PhD, but you come back and be on the street for a good number of years." One African scholar we interviewed told us: "We all know that a career in academics is not going to pay you that much compared to the NGO world or other sectors." These considerations are reinforced by the minimal salary differences between those who have completed a Masters versus those who have continued their training and finished a PhD. While a doctoral degree may be required for a university position, many jobs in the NGO and consulting sectors are available to Masters degree holders, and with little difference in compensation rates.

Societal pressure and family responsibilities further complicate many students' abilities to pursue training at the PhD level. Many women feel social pressure to marry and must balance their studies with care taking of children. Both women and men feel pressure to provide for both their immediate and extended families. First generation students face particular constraints in this regard. Whereas 81% of second generation students in our classroom survey indicated that they were probably or definitely planning to continue their education after completing their current degree, this share dropped to 75% for first generation students.[10]

These constraints create a formidable ecosystem of challenges that make pursuing a PhD not just

[10]Second generation students are defined as those for whom at least one immediate family member (i.e., brother, sister, parent, aunt, uncle, grandparent) completed a Masters degree or a PhD. The results are broadly similar when we define first and second generation students in terms of their parents' schooling levels. Among respondents for whom neither parent completed secondary schooling, the share who say they have probably or definitely considered continuing their education after their current degree is 76%, compared to 78% for respondents at least one of whose parents completed secondary school or more.

an academic decision but a complex negotiation of personal, professional, and societal expectations. This negotiation is made all the more challenging by the fact that, as noted, the academic route is uncertain, entails a significant delay before one can begin earning a salary and, even once one has a job, is often less well paid than alternative career paths.

These challenges were mentioned by several of our interviewees and focus group participants. As one Masters-level focus group participant put it: "Here in Uganda, when you start a PhD, it's a lifetime...Here is a young girl who does not have a family... at 26 you start a PhD. At 35 people will start asking now what? You're not married. You are just studying and all those things." Another echoed this theme: "We see a lot of under-representation in terms of the female gender, particularly in the economics field... When you look at it, it boils down to gender roles... [Women] are really forced to look [after] their families [and]...take care of children." Another interviewee noted similarly that "we have a culture where...if you have been able to be trained to the PhD level and you are at the university teaching, then you have to support your family, extended family. And under that circumstance, you see that apart from your teaching work, you also have a very large responsibility, contributing to your community, contributing to your family."

While family pressures and earning potential are certainly important factors in the decisions of many promising students not to continue their training at the PhD level, our data suggest that these considerations are drastically overshadowed by students' uncertainty about their ability to finance their graduate education. As noted, 77% of the respondents in our classroom survey indicated that they were probably or definitely considering continuing their education after they completed their current degree and, among those indicating an intention to work in a development-related field, 30 percent said they imagined working in academia rather than in a non-academic setting. Such high aspirations for PhD-level training are inconsistent with students putting too much weight on family considerations and higher earning potentials in non-academic careers—as reflected in the low share of classroom survey respondents mentioning family commitments (4%), child care responsibilities (4%), career prospects (3%), or a preference to enter the job market (5%) as the top factors affecting their thinking about whether to continue their education after they have completed their current degree. By contrast, funding/scholarship was mentioned first by 57% of respondents.[11]

[11] These patterns are similar if we look just at female respondents, who one might think may be more strongly affected by family and childcare obligations: funding/scholarship was the top-mentioned factor (55%). Career prospects (5%); preference to enter the job market (5%); child care responsibilities (4%); family commitments other than child care (4%) were far less likely to be mentioned as the most important factor.

Quality of Graduate Training

The pipeline of African scholars in a position to produce research that shapes policymaking is fundamentally determined by the quality of graduate training available at African universities. The availability of high quality training affects both the decisions of students who are contemplating continuing their studies at the PhD level and the value of the scholarship those students produce once they have received their degrees.

The CIDR survey asked staff at African universities whether courses in social science research methods (such as impact evaluation) were offered at their university and how they evaluated the quality and rigor of those courses. Only about half of respondents (54%) said that such courses were offered and, of those indicating that they were offered, just 10% judged them to be high quality and rigorous.[12] About half of respondents (52%) said that they had incorporated, or knew of efforts to incorporate, rigorous social science methods into course curricula at their university. This may overestimate such efforts, as the sampling procedures for the CIDR survey leaned heavily on members of the NIERA network, which likely over-represents university lecturers who are committed to teaching rigorous research methods. Indeed, the efforts made by some lecturers to deliver teaching in causal inference tend to be self-driven rather than products of the formal curriculum at their institutions. Other efforts to expose students to rigorous methods of impact evaluation have been patchy, usually taking the form of intense training delivered for a short period by visiting lecturers from Europe or North America. Lack of funding and incentives discourage faculty from incorporating rigorous impact evaluation methods into the curriculum.

These findings are reflected in the views of one of the African scholars we interviewed, who told us that "when I was making my decision to study a Master's, I looked around and discovered that there are not too many universities that offer good choices related to courses in terms of policy." He continued: "The teaching methods need to be changed...[T]he way they teach us is the same way they taught a long time ago, so a lot of the time when you sit in that econometric class, it is difficult to understand what is going on."

Notwithstanding these shortcomings, the students we surveyed were surprisingly satisfied with the quality of training they received. The CIDR survey asked respondents about the extent to which their coursework prepared them to conduct impactful and/or policy relevant research, communicate their research findings, teach courses, and obtain a job. For all four of these outcomes, nearly all of the

[12] Thirteen percent said the courses were of uneven quality and rigor; 42% said they were of generally low quality and rigor, and 35% said they were not sure or did not know.

responses are at the top (i.e., "very much so") end of the spectrum, indicating that students feel that their coursework prepares/prepared them well for a career as a development researcher (see Figure 1). When asked directly whether their coursework and general experience in their program made them more or less likely to pursue a career in global development research, 76% of respondents said it made them more likely, compared to 11% who said it made them less likely and 13% who said that it did not change the likelihood that they would pursue a career in this area.

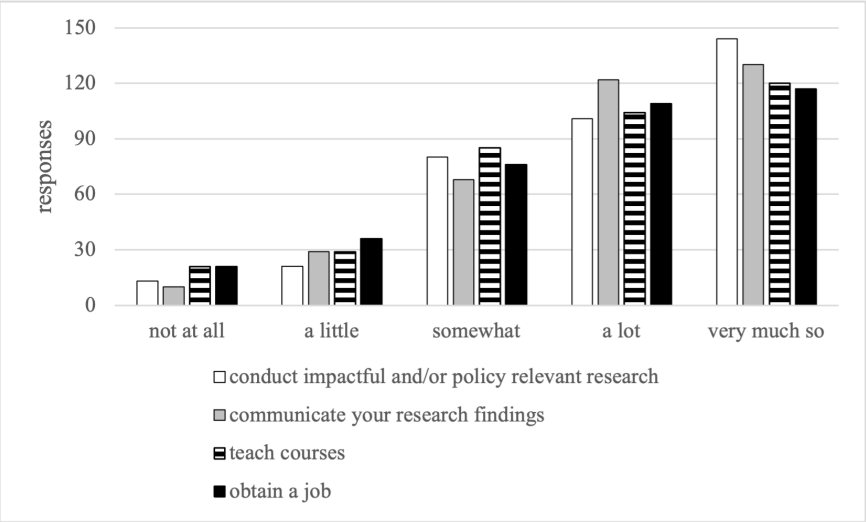

Figure 1: To What Extent Do You Think Your Coursework Prepares/Prepared You to...
(CIDR Survey; N=374)

A possible objection to taking these findings at face value is the fact that, as noted, the non-random sampling of respondents in the CIDR survey may bias the sample toward respondents who are currently involved in development research and are thus more likely to have had a positive experience during their graduate training. However, the fact that these results are largely reproduced when we turn to the classroom survey, whose sample is composed of potential development researchers who have not yet made the decision about whether to continue their studies, suggests that this possible bias may not be particularly large. We asked respondents in the classroom survey the same question as in Figure 1, only with the scale shifted from 1-5 to 1-100. Restricting the sample to graduate students, whose experience is more relevant to the question of whether their training prepares them to pursue careers in development research, we find evidence that students feel generally well prepared. Although there was some variation across respondents, graduate students on average judged their preparation to conduct impactful policy relevant research, communicate their research findings, teach courses and obtain a job

to be somewhere within the range of 70-80 out of 100.[13]

As in the CIDR survey, we also asked students whether their coursework and general experience in their program thus far made them more or less likely to pursue a career in global development research. Looking this time at all respondents (undergraduate and graduate), 75% answered "more likely," while 10% said it did not change their likelihood of pursuing a career in development research. There were some noteworthy differences across gender lines in responses to this question. Whereas 79% of men said that their coursework and general experience in their program made them more likely to pursue a career in development research, only 69% of women indicated that they felt this way. Similarly, whereas just 12% of men said that their coursework and experience made them less likely to pursue a career in development research, 20% of women said this.

While these scores suggest a generally high level of satisfaction with their preparation, students did point to a number of holes in their training when given the opportunity to highlight them. In response to an open-ended question in the classroom survey about additional coursework that was currently not available but that students would have found useful for their training and career objectives had it been offered, a large number of students mentioned courses on information technology, machine learning, programming and other training on the nuts and bolts of data analysis. While the hunger for coursework in this area no doubt reflects the value of such skills in the private sector, it also reflects the centrality of data analysis in contemporary academic research. Either way, the students' responses point to a deficiency in the training offered in many university programs.

Mentorship of Students

Equally important as graduate students' formal coursework is the training and mentorship they receive from their faculty advisors. Sawyerr (2004) argues that "particularly at the graduate level...individual research capacity develops principally 'on the job'...in the course of conducting research...It is in this process that the skills and insights acquired as part of formal training are sharpened and extended." Participation in such research "*especially under the mentorship of senior colleagues*, constitutes the most effective form of research capacity development" (Sawyerr 2004, emphasis added).

Yet despite the centrality of mentorship in students' scholarly development, only 49% of respondents in the CIDR survey said they were satisfied or very satisfied with the mentorship they received during their graduate program, with 26% saying they were not satisfied. This dissatisfaction was reflected in

[13] On average, respondents graded their preparation to conduct impactful policy relevant research at 76 out of 100; their preparation to communicate their findings at 79/100; their preparation to teach courses at 70/100; and their preparation to obtain a job at 74/100.

several of the comments we received in our focus groups and interviews. As one student complained: "Supervisors really don't have time for students...[E]ven when you come with your zeal, you want to finish in time, but you find yourself being frustrated." Another noted that "one of the challenges... is the fact that our professors here seem to be overwhelmed either by numbers or other assignments that really preoccupy them...[T]hey're juggling between consulting and doing so many other things and really giving very little time to guide the students." Yet another student complained that in their two years of coursework "never have we... completed the curriculum we were [supposed] to do within the given time limit...because the supervisor is busy doing other things."

These comments reflect one of the central legacies of the hollowing out of African higher education during the structural adjustment years of the 1980s and 1990s (Zeleza 2018): the shifting in government spending from university budgets to primary schooling (Samoff and Carrol 2003). The result has been a significant decrease in administrative support for faculty and a drop in the real income of African professors and lecturers. Both of these developments have reduced faculty bandwidth for mentorship by creating a heavy administrative burden and forcing many faculty to supplement their formal university salaries with income from other sources.

One of the African scholars we interviewed summarized the situation well: "One of the reasons why the quality of training in African universities is lower is because the professors don't have time to teach or to supervise. I have a friend who has done a PhD for 10-15 years... His supervisor is never there. His supervisor is making money instead of concentrating on providing training... [B]ecause the university does not provide fair compensation, he has to do other work. So he's ever outside the university." This characterization is echoed in Sawyerr (2004), who describes the typical "senior scholar who is too distracted by consultancies and project-oriented research to devote much time to graduate supervision or the mentoring of junior colleagues."

Faculty confirm that this is the situation they face. One told us: "If I look at my salary, it's less than $1,000 a month. How do I survive? I go to consult." Another said: "Most university professors don't get well paid. They do side business. 80-90% comes from consultancies. Sometimes over 200% the amount. A professor in Addis gets paid $200 per month. Everyone goes for consultancies and gets $3,000-$4,000 a month." Another told us: "For the academic career, most of us look at it as something that you can do on a part-time basis because I know a lot of my colleagues that have enrolled for a PhD but they are not thinking about that... [W]e all know that a career in academics is not going to pay you that much compared to the NGO world or other sectors."

Such comments are consistent with the stereotype of African university faculty being guided by

a "consultancy culture" in which they take on paid consulting work to supplement their insufficient university salaries, displacing the time they might otherwise have devoted to mentoring students or pursuing their own research agendas.[14] Although this situation is often discussed and lamented, little data exists to allow us to characterize how widespread an issue it may be.

To fill this gap, we invited African researchers from the NIERA and DIWA networks to complete a brief anonymous survey in which we asked about the share of their earnings over the past year that came from sources outside of their regular university salary. We recognize that our sample may not be representative of African university faculty in the social sciences writ large. The NEIRA and DIWA network members are more likely to be plugged into international research networks than other faculty and thus have more opportunities for outside consulting work. On the other hand, precisely because of these connections, such faculty will likely be the most valuable and sought-after mentors. Their unavailability therefore has an outsized consequence for graduate training.

Fewer than a third of faculty reported earning nearly all of their most recent year's income from their regular university salary (10% or less from outside sources). Forty-three percent report earning 50% or more from outside sources. The breakdown of responses is shown in Figure 2:

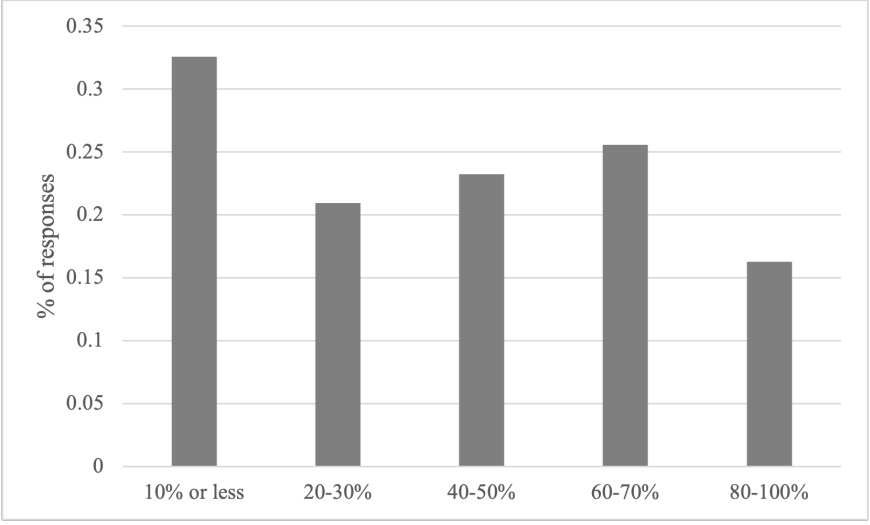

Figure 2: Share of Income from Outside Sources
(Survey of African University Faculty; N=51)

[14]These pressures are not unique to faculty. Graduate students also have to juggle their studies and research with the need to generate additional income. As one student told us: "Even if you are on a scholarship... quite often [it] is not sufficient to meet all your cost of living. So, you find yourself getting into other assignments to earn extra income to make ends meet. So, that balance between studies and having to look for survival really occupies one's time, and this also affects the commitments you would put into research, your coursework, and having to deliver on time and complete the course in time."

Our data speak to a significant dependence of many African faculty on outside income. This matters because, as suggested in the quotes presented earlier, faculty who are forced to earn outside income have less bandwidth to devote to their own research and to teaching and mentoring their students. We asked about this directly in a series of additional questions that invited respondents to report the share of their time they devoted to teaching and mentorship, their own research, and consulting or research for others to earn additional income. The breakdown of responses is shown in Figure 3:[15]

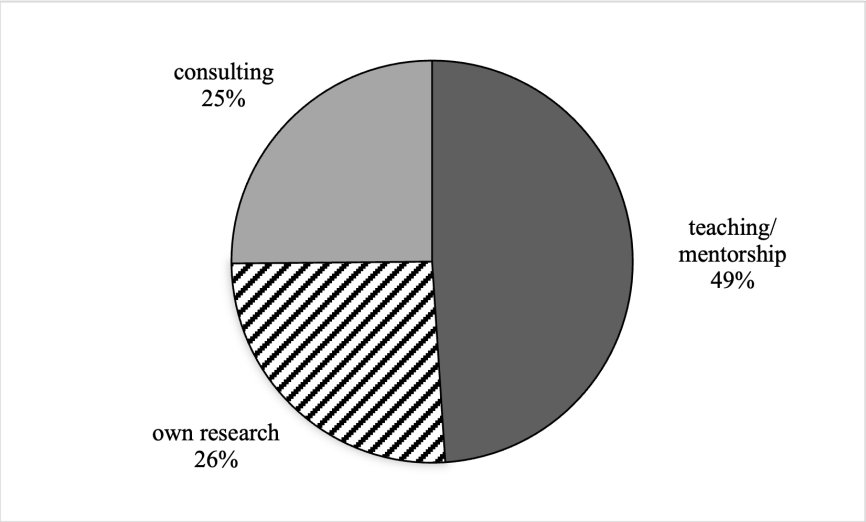

Figure 3: Time Allocation of African University Faculty
(Survey of African University Faculty; N=51)

On average, faculty report spending roughly half of their time on teaching and mentorship, and about a quarter of their time on their own research and on outside consulting, respectively. This distribution likely reflects the formal duties that faculty are expected to perform.[16] While this may superficially reflect a higher-than-expected time allocation to teaching and mentorship, it may be somewhat misleading with respect to the time spent advising graduate students. Most African faculty carry very heavy undergraduate teaching loads. As one university lecturer pointed out, "often, the teaching (visible) part may not be compromised [by the need to take on outside consulting work], but advising of [graduate] students does suffer generally."

Even leaving this nuance aside, the reported averages mask substantial heterogeneity. While the average faculty member in our survey reports spending roughly twice as much time involved in teach-

[15] Where the three responses did not sum to 100 percent (which was the case for 11 of the 51 respondents), we re-weighted the responses so that they would sum to 100 percent.

[16] A recent study on the barriers to research productivity among university faculty in Tanzania (Kadikilo, Nayak and Sahay 2024) reports that required teaching loads range from 7 to 10 hours per week, depending on the faculty member's rank.

ing and mentorship as consulting, at least some faculty devote much more time to outside income generation. As shown in Figure 4, nearly half of faculty report spending 30% or more of their time on consulting or research for others, and roughly 15% of faculty report spending half or more of their time consulting.

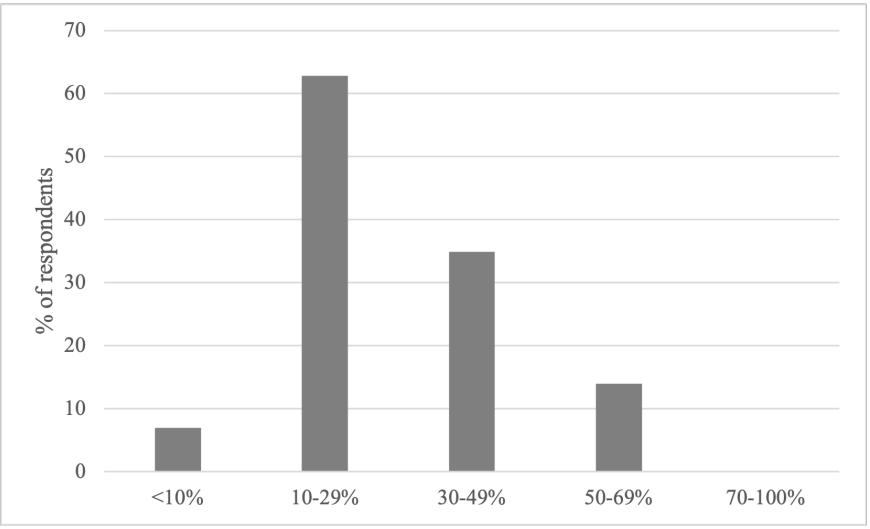

Figure 4: Share of Time Spent Consulting or Doing Research for Others
(Survey of African University Faculty; N=51)

Our data suggest that while many faculty are able to devote a significant share of their bandwidth to teaching and mentorship (and to their own research), at least some are forced to reallocate significant amounts of time to supplementing their regular university incomes with outside consulting work. Such faculty are less available to serve as mentors and advisors for their graduate students, and this undermines the training of the next generation of African researchers.

Pursing Graduate Studies Within or Outside Africa

Although the responses to our surveys suggest that many promising African students who are interested in careers in international development research consider continuing their studies at the graduate level, challenges related to funding, inadequate course offerings, the unavailability of faculty mentors, and the lengthy time it takes to receive one's degree dissuade many from continuing their studies at home. Many therefore prefer to try to pursue their PhDs outside of Africa, where these challenges are less acute. Eighty-six percent of respondents in the CIDR survey and 84% of respondents in the classroom survey report having considered pursuing their degree in Europe or North America. Seventy-two

percent of CIDR survey respondents say they applied to at least one non-African university for their training.

When asked about the factors that made it attractive to study in Europe or North America, 82% of CIDR survey respondents cited the quality of courses that were available, 50% pointed to greater job prospects after graduation, and 43% mentioned the experience of living in Europe/America. Responses to the same question in the classroom survey were similar, with the top response being that European or North American universities offered higher quality courses (52%). Other popular responses included job prospects after graduation, the experience of living in Europe/America, and the shorter duration of degree completion.[17] The extensive time to degree was a particularly central topic of discussion in our focus groups. At Makerere University in Uganda, a Master's program, intended to take two years to complete, can take up to five years. PhDs can take ten years to finish.

These patterns matched what we were told in our focus groups and interviews. A Ghanaian scholar we spoke with said: "They always say that when you go outside you are so fast to finish your program because the supervisor is there for you. The supervisor is there to guide you. The tools are there. The research materials are there. The learning materials are there. And as quickly as possible, within three to four years, you are through with your PhD as a young guy. But in Ghana if you try to do your PhD you end up spending about five or six years."

Echoing a common theme in the discussions, one African scholar noted that "there's a perception [that] when you look at the quality of work [across students that have studied abroad and at African institutions], it's different. When you look at the work done by, for example, [redacted name of African Scholar trained outside of Africa] compared to someone who trained locally, it's like day and night. It's easy to distinguish between the two. I can easily tell this person studied locally, this person was somewhere else." Another scholar made a similar point: "The academic content is the same for the PhDs which are tenured locally in Uganda or in Kenya or in wherever. But if it's done in America, Germany, US, or the UK, then there's a difference. You can even feel the difference in the person from the way they communicate and from the way other people appreciate the kind of messaging they are providing in their public policy space. They tend to have more respect, and people tend to listen better to their research than [those who were] locally trained. It's just an unfortunate thing in the market."

Perhaps because the training is stronger (or is perceived to be), the remuneration of foreign-trained scholars is also higher. One scholar told us: "Studying outside Uganda, studying in Europe, America,

[17]The pull of Europe and North America is also felt by faculty and recent PhDs who have completed their training and are contemplating where to work. Because many PhD holders choose careers outside of Africa, the pool of available mentors is diminished. Hence Chelwa's observation that "African economists are thin on the ground" (Chelwa 2021).

it's like a guarantee that your income is going to be very high compared to the average earnings of someone who studied locally... There's a guarantee that your lifestyle, your welfare and the lifestyle of the people around you, your children, is going to be much better. There's evidence to show that." Another scholar agreed: "If you undertake your graduate training in a European or American university, the opportunities are immense in terms of earning capacity. People who have studied in the West tend to attract jobs with higher compensation than those who have done their graduate degree locally." One scholar put it simply: "There is a premium attached [to] studying abroad."

Notwithstanding these clear advantages to pursuing one's graduate training abroad, most promising African students complete their PhD work at institutions within Africa, largely because the comparatively high cost of European or North American tuition makes scholarships necessary and because scholarships are scarce. African students do apply to institutions outside of Africa: the median CIDR survey respondent reports applying to two universities outside the region for their terminal degree. However, few actually attend these universities for their graduate studies because they are either not accepted into the programs to which they have applied (median acceptance = 1) or they do not receive sufficient scholarship support (median receipt of financial assistance = 0).

Among CIDR survey respondents who chose to stay in Africa, 44% cited the cost to attend foreign institutions, 37% cited a lack of information about external opportunities, 30% cited the cost of the application, and 22% cited uncertainty about how to apply as reasons for deciding to pursue their studies at an African institution.[18] Similarly, among respondents to the classroom survey, 31% cited either the unavailability of funding opportunities to support study outside of Africa or the cost of applying to foreign institutions as their top reason for wanting to pursue their degree at an African institution. Conversely, among those in the CIDR survey who found the possibility of studying in Europe or America attractive, 75% pointed to funding opportunities that were available to them, strongly suggesting that the attractiveness of going abroad is linked to the availability of resources to support one's foreign studies.

Although we found only modest differences in the responses provided by men and women in the CIDR and classroom surveys, our focus groups revealed women to be more concerned than men with family and childcare responsibilities, and thus more likely to look for ways to try to pursue their studies closer to home.

Finding funding to support study outside of Africa is challenging, but students who wind up

[18]Thirty-seven percent cited not wanting to be too far from home and family, 11% cited connections at African institutions, and 41% cited simply wanting to stay in Africa to pursue their studies. Respondents could choose as many factors as were relevant to their decision.

studying in Europe or North America are more likely to receive scholarship support than those who stay at home. The average respondent in the CIDR survey applied to more universities outside of Africa than within Africa (4 vs 1.5) but was accepted at fewer (37% vs 80%). However, among the graduate programs that accepted them for admission, respondents reported being more likely to be offered financial assistance at the European or North American universities (62%) than at the African universities (30%).

Conclusion

Our investigation into the contributions of higher education to the underrepresentation of African voices in development research—and, potentially, to reducing such under-representation—yields several clear conclusions. First, as many other studies have underscored (e.g., Chelwa (2021); Kadikilo, Nayak and Sahay (2024); Tamrat and Teferra (2025); Ngongalah et al. (2018), among many others), inadequate funding for both African students and faculty is the key constraint. The scarcity of resources creates disincentives for promising students to pursue graduate training in social science fields, and it reduces the availability of faculty as mentors. These factors are compounded by the low economic returns to investing in PhD-level training and the opportunity cost of working in academia rather than the business sector. Second, and not entirely separate from the first, the breadth and depth of course offerings in rigorous social science methodologies are generally insufficient to equip students in African universities to be significant contributors to policy-relevant research.

Although funding constraints are challenging to address, some progress can be made in matching resources to students and researchers by improving the flow of information about scholarships, education loans, and other funding opportunities. Information sessions on funding sources and their availability might help point students to sources of support that encourage their transition to graduate school. The disparity in compensation between university faculty and opportunities in the private sector may still dissuade many promising students from building and applying their analytical skills in academic fields. But providing additional information about funding opportunities to support graduate training in development related fields will aid in capturing at least some of the students who might otherwise have applied their abilities in other careers.[19]

Efforts could also be made to incentivize overburdened university faculty to prioritize mentorship,

[19]Student loan schemes have been shown to increase enrollments in higher education, especially for women (Gurgand, Lorenceau and Melonio 2023). However, willingness to take on such loans is undermined by considerations of earning potentials after acquiring one's advanced degree, and may have the net effect of ultimately pushing degree recipients out of academia to facilitate their loan repayment.

perhaps through grants for collaborative projects they are required to undertake with their students. Such support would achieve the dual objective of advancing the mentors' own research agendas while also providing valuable apprenticeship opportunities for their students. Insofar as the consulting work that university faculty undertake is for the government or international organizations, the calls for such work could include explicit requirements that PhD or Master's students be involved in the research, thereby aligning professors' incentives and students' training objectives, while also contributing to addressing national development challenges.[20] More general support for university faculty would also be helpful to the extent that it reduces the need to take on outside consulting work, which steals bandwidth from teaching and mentorship.

Both of the recommendations just outlined require money. Advocacy toward potential funding bodies (including governments) regarding the critical role that development research plays in the policy environment will therefore be critical. The argument must be made that good policy requires rigorous research and that the most useful research findings will come from work undertaken by scholars with deep understanding of the context in which they are working. This, in turn, will require an investment in local institutions of higher education, where students' local knowledge can be paired with high level training in social science research tools.

Imparting such tools, however, requires that the faculty who are doing the teaching have themselves acquired skills in rigorous impact evaluation methods. Unfortunately, the responses to our survey questions about course offerings, as discussed above, suggest that many faculty are ill-equipped to provide such training. Only a few recently graduated PhD staff are equipped to teach these methods well. Some universities have dealt with this lack of capacity by encouraging their students to watch YouTube videos or take advantage of open courseware. Another approach is to invite visiting faculty from Europe and the USA to offer classes, usually in the form of intensive two-week training courses. However, this is an imperfect solution—a band aid for a deeper problem. Students who attend these trainings receive an introduction to the skills they will need to acquire, but such short courses rarely provide the kind of hands-on experience in research design, data collection, analysis, and write-up that they will need to master to become contributors to development research. Finding a means of providing African university faculty with greater exposure to training on causal inference and research design, so that they can teach courses on these topics themselves, will be critical to increasing the pipeline of the next generation of African development researchers.

[20] We are grateful to Michael Ndayikeza for making this point to us.

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