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EDITORIAL

Education, Skills and Innovation in Africa: Evidence, Power and the Politics of Knowledge

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ABSTRACT

This inaugural editorial introduces the African Journal of Education, Skills and Innovation (AJESI), a diamond open access, double-blind peer-reviewed journal published by the African Skills and Innovation Network. AJESI is conceived not as a conventional scholarly outlet but as an intellectual project: a platform for rethinking the role of education, skills and innovation in Africa and across the Global South. The editorial makes three connected arguments. First, that the dominant policy framing of Africa's education and skills challenge, organized around measurable shortfalls against external benchmarks, is analytically weak because it treats as technical what is substantially political, and obscures the colonial inheritance and neoliberal restructuring that shaped the systems now under scrutiny. Second, that the empirical picture nonetheless matters, and that four interlocking deficits define the field the journal seeks to serve: a foundational learning deficit, a transition deficit, an innovation and knowledge-application deficit, and a deficit in the production of knowledge about Africa by scholars based in Africa. Third, that these deficits cannot be addressed within the disciplinary and epistemic boundaries that currently divide the field. Drawing on evidence from the African Union, the African Development Bank, the International Labour Organization, UNESCO, UNCTAD, the World Bank, UNDP and the International Telecommunication Union, alongside peer-reviewed scholarship in higher education studies, vocational education research, innovation studies and scientometrics, the editorial sets out five founding commitments and the journal's editorial standards. It concludes by inviting scholars, policymakers, educators, industry leaders, development partners and practitioners to contribute.

KEYWORDS

African education policy; skills development; TVET in Africa; higher education reform; innovation systems; future of work; knowledge production; decolonizing knowledge; digital transformation and AI; diamond open access; Global South; Agenda 2063

Introducing AJESI: an intellectual project, not merely a journal

Africa is among the most intensively researched regions in the world, and among the least represented in the journals that publish that research. That combination is not an accident of scholarly geography. It is a structural condition, and it is the condition this journal was founded to address.

Consider what the pattern looks like even in its more benign forms. Low and colleagues (2023) examined 313 articles produced by a Southern African research collaboration, a partnership designed from the outset to be equitable, and one in which the authors found little evidence of the outright authorship parasitism documented elsewhere. Researchers based in low and lower-middle-income countries nonetheless accounted for just 21 per cent of the 1,064 contributing authors, and were markedly less likely than colleagues in high-income countries to occupy the first and last positions that determine promotion, funding and scholarly reputation. They appeared instead in the middle of the byline. If that is what a deliberately equitable collaboration produces, the question of what the rest of the field produces answers itself.

It is therefore with conviction, and with some urgency, that I introduce the African Journal of Education, Skills and Innovation. AJESI is a platform committed to rethinking the role of education, skills and innovation in Africa and across the Global South. It emerges not as a conventional scholarly outlet but as an intellectual project grounded in critical scholarship, policy relevance and transformative practice. Our purpose is to challenge orthodoxies, widen the frontiers of inquiry and democratize knowledge production in ways that place African experience, epistemologies and aspirations at the centre rather than the margin.

Every new journal makes an implicit claim: that there is something worth saying which existing outlets do not adequately say, and a readership underserved by what already exists. AJESI makes that claim deliberately, and we think defensibly. We should be careful, however, about how the claim is made. It would be both inaccurate and discourteous to suggest that AJESI arrives into a vacuum. African scholars have built and sustained serious journals, presses and research networks across the continent for decades, frequently under conditions of severe resource constraint and with little of the institutional recognition their work has earned. We understand ourselves as joining that tradition rather than correcting it. What we observe is not an absence of African scholarship but a persistent mismatch between where the questions are lived and where the answers are published, indexed, cited and funded.

That mismatch has a particular shape in our field. Research on education, skills and innovation in Africa is fragmented across disciplinary communities that rarely read one another; it is disproportionately framed by the priorities of external funders; it is published in venues that increasingly charge authors several thousand dollars for the privilege; and it is assessed against benchmarks derived from economies with entirely different histories. Each of these is a problem in its own right. Together they produce a literature that is simultaneously voluminous and oddly unhelpful to the people who most need it, which is to say ministries designing curricula, institutions reforming their programmes, firms trying to find skilled workers, and young people deciding what to study.

It follows that there are things AJESI declines to be. We are not a house journal for any government, agency, foundation or funder, and we will publish work that is inconvenient to all of them, including work inconvenient to us. We are not a venue for deficit reportage, meaning the steady production of studies documenting how far African systems fall short of somewhere else, a genre that

is easy to fund, easy to publish and largely inert. We are not a platform that will ask African scholars to pay for the right to publish knowledge about their own societies, which is why the journal charges no fees to authors and none to readers. And we are not interested in critique as a substitute for evidence, or in evidence presented as though it were innocent of the assumptions that produced it. The premise of this journal is that the two obligations are one obligation.

The stakes are not abstract. The decisions that will determine whether the next African generation inherits functioning education and skills systems are being taken now, in ministries, universities, firms and multilateral negotiating rooms, and often on the basis of evidence that is thin, poorly contextualized or produced elsewhere. Scholarship cannot make those decisions. It can determine the quality of the reasoning available to those who do, and that is a serious responsibility rather than a modest one.

What follows sets out the case in three parts, corresponding to the three terms of this editorial's title. The first is empirical and begins with arithmetic: Section 2 establishes the demographic and policy conditions that make this a moment of unusual consequence. The second is analytical and concerns power: Section 3 sets out how this journal proposes to read the evidence, and why the dominant framing of Africa's education challenge mistakes a political problem for a technical one. Section 4 then presents the evidence itself, organized around four interlocking deficits in foundational learning, school-to-work transition, innovation and knowledge application, and knowledge production. Section 5 registers three correctives that the aggregate numbers conceal. The third part is institutional and concerns the politics of knowledge: Sections 6 and 7 set out the journal's five founding commitments and the editorial standards through which we intend to honour them. Section 8 is an invitation, and it is meant literally.

The arithmetic, and what it does not settle

Sub-Saharan Africa's population is projected to grow from roughly 1.5 billion in 2024 to about 2.5 billion by 2050, adding more than 600 million people to the working-age population, so that by mid-century one in every three people aged 15 to 34 anywhere in the world will be African (World Bank, 2025). The African Development Bank (2025) puts the continental median age at 19, the lowest of any world region. World Data Lab, Mastercard Foundation, and University of Cape Town Development Policy Research Unit (2026) count approximately 532 million Africans aged 15 to 35, more than 22 per cent of the global youth cohort, of whom some 304 million were working in 2025. Between 10 and 12 million young Africans enter the labour market each year, while formal economies generate roughly three million jobs to receive them (African Center for Economic Transformation [ACET] & Mastercard Foundation, 2025). The International Monetary Fund's estimate, reported by the World Bank (2025), is that the region needs to create around 15 million jobs annually simply to keep pace.

These are not obscure statistics. They circulate widely in policy documents and conference keynotes, often accompanied by the phrase "demographic dividend", which is doing a great deal of unexamined work. A dividend is a return on an investment. Whether Africa's youth bulge yields one depends almost entirely on decisions taken now about education systems, skills formation, innovation capability and the institutions that connect them to work. The demographic fact is settled. The dividend is not.

What makes this moment distinctive is that African policy architecture has begun to catch up with

the arithmetic. Agenda 2063 committed the continent to building human capital as the foundation of transformation (African Union, 2015), and the operational frameworks have finally started to arrive. In 2025 the African Union Commission launched the Decade of Accelerated Action for the Transformation of Education and Skills Development in Africa (2025 to 2034), together with six connected frameworks including a new Continental Education Strategy for Africa covering 2026 to 2035 (African Union Commission, 2025). That strategy is organized around six strategic areas running from foundational learning and teacher professionalism through higher education and technical training to lifelong learning, gender and inclusion (African Union, 2025). In February 2026 the Science, Technology and Innovation Strategy for Africa 2034 was launched in Addis Ababa with a costed implementation plan of 6.8 billion United States dollars (AUDA-NEPAD, 2026). These are serious documents with measurable targets. They will succeed or fail on the quality of the evidence, analysis and institutional learning that surrounds them.

That is the space AJESI intends to occupy. Not as a house journal for any government, agency or funder, and not as a venue for restating continental strategy in academic prose, but as a place where the claims embedded in these frameworks can be tested, refined and, where necessary, contested.

Reading the crisis critically: political economy, inheritance and the deficit trap

Before turning to what the evidence shows, it is worth being explicit about how this journal proposes to read it. Three analytical commitments shape everything that follows.

Education is never neutral. From financing regimes to curriculum content, the governance of education reflects and reproduces broader political and economic relations (Apple, 2004; Tikly, 2019). Across the continent, the challenges confronting education and skills development are systemic rather than incidental. Governments and international agencies regularly affirm the importance of education for development, skills for growth and innovation for competitiveness, yet the structural and epistemological frameworks shaping those discourses often go unexamined. The inherited architecture of colonial education systems, the neoliberal restructuring of public services from the 1980s onward, and the uncritical adoption of external knowledge hierarchies have together produced a landscape that is fragmented and, in important respects, exclusionary. A research agenda that takes financing, aid conditionality and domestic elite interests as background conditions rather than objects of study will misread most of what it observes.

The contradictions are institutional, not accidental. African higher education institutions are managing pressures that cannot all be satisfied at once: massification without commensurate resources; internationalization without epistemic sovereignty; and performance metrics that reward citation indices over social impact. Teferra and Altbach (2004) diagnosed the first of these more than two decades ago, arguing that African universities faced expansion mandates without the financing, staffing or research infrastructure to meet them. Cloete et al. (2015) later documented the full set of contradictory functions imposed on flagship institutions, which are simultaneously expected to widen access, produce internationally competitive research, serve national development and generate their own revenue, with resourcing adequate to none of these tasks. Technical and vocational education and training sits under a related but distinct set of pressures: persistently underfunded, socially stigmatized, and disconnected both from the realities of informal economies and from the frontiers of technological change (Akoojee & McGrath, 2007; McGrath, 2012).

The deficit framing is a trap. The rapid advance of digital technologies and artificial intelligence is reconfiguring the nature of work, knowledge and human capability (Chakravorti et al., 2021), and much policy response remains locked in framings organized around lack rather than potential, around catching up rather than reimagining. Linear models of skills matching and digital literacy dominate, and they underplay questions of power, inclusion and epistemology. Africa is too often cast as a passive recipient of technology rather than a co-creator of digital futures. AJESI rejects that framing. The continent is not merely a site of implementation and adaptation; it is a space of theorization, experimentation and epistemic creativity.

None of this is an argument for ignoring evidence of poor outcomes. It is an argument for reading that evidence as the product of particular historical and institutional arrangements rather than as a natural condition awaiting technical remedy. The sections that follow attempt to hold both things at once: the numbers are serious, and so are the questions about who produced them, against what benchmark, and to what end.

Four deficits, and why they belong in the same journal

Education research, skills and vocational studies, labour economics and innovation studies have long operated as separate scholarly communities with their own journals, conferences and citation habits. That separation makes little sense in the African context, where the problems refuse to stay in their disciplinary lanes. AJESI is organized around four deficits we regard as analytically inseparable.

The foundational learning deficit

Before any discussion of employability, digital skills or innovation capacity, there is the uncomfortable matter of whether children can read. The World Bank and partner agencies estimated that 86 per cent of children in sub-Saharan Africa were in learning poverty in 2019, meaning they could not read and understand a simple text by age 10, rising to an estimated 89 per cent in pandemic-affected simulations, against a low- and middle-income country average that climbed from 57 to 70 per cent over the same period (World Bank et al., 2022). The African Union's own assessment is blunter still, noting that "up to nine in ten children may be learning poor in sub-Saharan Africa" (African Union, 2025, p. 12).

We should be careful with this indicator, and AJESI would welcome papers that interrogate it. Learning poverty is a composite measure combining out-of-school rates with below-minimum-proficiency rates, and its African estimates rest on comparatively thin assessment coverage, so the headline figures carry wider uncertainty bands than their presentation usually suggests (World Bank et al., 2022). There is also a prior question, which the metric cannot answer, about which literacies are being measured and in whose language. The direction of travel, however, is not seriously in dispute.

The consequences compound. Fewer than one in three African children are enrolled in pre-primary education, and just one in ten young people of the relevant age group are enrolled in higher education (African Union, 2025). The Human Capital Index for Africa averaged 0.42 in 2020, implying that a child born in the region may realize only 42 per cent of the productive potential she would have achieved with complete education and full health (African Union, 2025). The African Union further estimates that early school leaving and insufficient skills could cost sub-Saharan Africa between 19 and 26 per cent of GDP.

Behind these outcomes sits a workforce problem that receives less attention than it deserves.

UNESCO (2024) calculates that 44 million additional teachers are needed globally to achieve universal primary and secondary education by 2030, of whom 15 million are required in sub-Saharan Africa alone, the largest regional shortfall in the world (pp. 18, 37). The same report records a pupil to trained-teacher ratio of 52 to 1 in low-income countries against 15 to 1 in high-income countries, and global primary teacher attrition nearly doubling from 4.6 per cent in 2015 to 9 per cent in 2022 (UNESCO, 2024, p. 19). A learning crisis of this magnitude is not primarily a curriculum problem or a technology problem. It is a teacher supply, preparation, remuneration and retention problem, and the research literature has not yet matched the scale of the policy attention.

There is a tendency in policy discourse to treat foundational learning as a basic education problem, to be solved before the more interesting questions about skills and innovation are addressed. This is a category error. A tertiary system built on a cohort with weak foundational literacy and numeracy will produce graduates whose credentials outrun their capabilities, which is precisely the pattern that employer surveys across the continent report (McCowan et al., 2016). Foundational learning is not a precondition for the skills agenda. It is part of it.

The transition deficit

The second deficit concerns what happens when young people leave education. The International Labour Organization (2024) reports a youth NEET rate of 21.9 per cent for sub-Saharan Africa in 2023, representing 53 million young people not in employment, education or training, with projections of 21.9 and 21.8 per cent for 2024 and 2025 respectively. That figure has barely moved in a decade, having stood at 22.4 per cent in 2019.

The more revealing number is not unemployment but the quality of work. Youth unemployment in sub-Saharan Africa stood at 8.9 per cent in 2023, well below the global average, for the straightforward reason that most young Africans cannot afford to be unemployed (International Labour Organization, 2024). They work, and the work is overwhelmingly insecure. Nearly three in four young adult workers aged 25 to 29, some 71.7 per cent, were in employment classified as insecure in 2023, a share that has fallen by only 0.6 percentage points over twenty years (International Labour Organization, 2024). Roughly 90 per cent of employed young Africans work informally, with formality reaching just 2 per cent in agriculture against 20 per cent in services (World Data Lab et al., 2026).

Two further findings from the ILO deserve more scholarly attention than they have received. School attendance among 15 to 19 year olds across seventeen countries rose from 58 per cent in the early 2000s to about 67 per cent by 2023, yet two-thirds of young workers hold qualifications mismatched to their occupations (International Labour Organization, 2024). Expanded participation has not produced better matching. The cumulative growth of the youth labour force between 2023 and 2050 is estimated at 72.6 million, which means the transition problem is set to intensify rather than resolve itself.

Higher education expansion illustrates the pattern with unusual clarity. McCowan and colleagues (2016) documented enrolment across sub-Saharan Africa rising from 2.3 million students in 1999 to 6.6 million in 2013, while gross enrolment ratios remained at roughly 8 per cent against a global average approaching 33 per cent. Their four-country study of Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria and South Africa concluded that over half of all graduates in the sub-region were inadequately prepared for employment, and recorded competition intense enough that 80,000 candidates applied for 1,000 Kenyan judiciary posts in 2015. Notably, they also found graduate unemployment in South Africa

falling unevenly along racial lines, at 8.6 per cent for black graduates against 3 per cent for white graduates, a reminder that aggregate transition statistics conceal distributional questions that matter enormously and that are not reducible to skills supply.

Technical and vocational education and training is where policy hope is most concentrated and evidence is thinnest. A six-country study by ACET and the Mastercard Foundation (2025) covering Côte d'Ivoire, Ethiopia, Ghana, Niger, Rwanda and Uganda found chronic underfunding, with TVET receiving around 2 per cent of Ghana's education budget and under 10 per cent of Ethiopia's; 93 per cent of Rwandan students in the sample identified outdated equipment and deteriorating infrastructure as significant barriers; and persistent stigma casting TVET as a destination of last resort. The study recorded weak coordination between governments and employers and curricula misaligned with labour market demand. These findings echo, at continental scale, what Akoojee and McGrath (2007) documented in the South African further education sector nearly two decades earlier, which raises its own question about why so little has shifted.

The scholarly literature has been circling this problem for some time. McGrath (2012) argued that vocational education and training for development was a policy in need of a theory, dominated by human capital assumptions and a productivist logic that could not account for what young people actually valued or what informal economies actually required. The critical capabilities approach subsequently developed by McGrath et al. (2022) offers a more defensible foundation, reframing vocational education around the expansion of human capabilities in the tradition of Sen (1999) rather than the servicing of projected labour demand. AJESI regards this theoretical work as unfinished and actively invites contributions that extend, test or challenge it with African evidence, particularly from the informal apprenticeship systems through which a large share of the continent's artisanal skill is actually transmitted.

The innovation and knowledge-application deficit

The third deficit concerns what happens to knowledge once it is produced. African research and development expenditure averages between 0.33 and 0.4 per cent of GDP against a continental target of 1 to 2 per cent, a gap that has persisted since the African Union first adopted the 1 per cent benchmark (AUDA-NEPAD, 2026). But the financing gap is the easier part of the story to tell, and probably not the most important.

Alabani et al. (2026) assessed national innovation system performance across 43 sub-Saharan African countries between 2005 and 2023 and reached conclusions that should unsettle a good deal of current policy. They find innovation performance in the region to be strongly path-dependent, shaped more by cumulative institutional learning than by recent policy shifts; institutional quality emerges as the most robust driver across all specifications; and research and development expenditure loses statistical significance once endogeneity is properly addressed, suggesting reverse causality in the naive estimates. Labour force participation and access to credit function as necessary complements, so that isolated increases in innovation inputs yield limited returns without a supportive institutional environment. Threshold effects separating low from high research-intensity economies mean uniform continental prescriptions are unlikely to work. This is an important corrective to the assumption that African innovation systems simply need more money. They need functioning connections and credible institutions. The finding sits comfortably alongside the broader development literature, in which Fagerberg et al. (2010) show that innovation capability is built through cumulative institutional and organizational learning rather than acquired through expenditure alone.

Those connections are weak at precisely the point where they matter most. Outamha and Belhcen (2020), reviewing the evidence across 31 African countries tracked in successive Global Innovation Index reports, found university to industry linkages thin, poorly institutionalized and substantially under-researched, with a marked gap between African and comparator regions in research collaboration between academia and firms. The consequence is that African universities produce graduates and publications while contributing comparatively little to the technological capability of the firms around them.

There is also the question of what innovation means in a continent where roughly nine in ten young workers are informally employed (World Data Lab et al., 2026). Innovation systems theory developed largely from observation of formal, firm-based, research-intensive economies in the industrialized North (Lundvall, 2010). Applied uncritically to African contexts, that framework renders invisible most of the actual technological and organizational learning taking place. The inclusive innovation literature offers one route out of this, treating the inclusion of low-income and marginalized populations as a design question for innovation policy rather than an afterthought (Chataway et al., 2014). AJESI is particularly interested in work that theorizes innovation in and through the informal economy rather than treating informality as a residual category, and in work that asks what national innovation systems scholarship must give up in order to travel honestly.

The knowledge production deficit

The fourth deficit is the one that most directly justifies founding a journal. Africa remains substantially under-represented in the global scholarly record, and the under-representation operates at four distinct levels simultaneously.

At the level of indexing, Kanyika and Kim (2026) analysed the growth of Scopus-indexed journals across Africa between 2013 and 2023 and found significant under-representation relative to other world regions, growth rates in both open access and subscription titles lagging global comparators, and a concentration of African journals in the third quartile with very few reaching the first. Egypt and South Africa dominate what representation exists. The practical effect is that African scholars seeking high-visibility venues must generally look outside the continent, which in turn shapes what they choose to study and how they choose to frame it.

At the level of authorship, the phenomenon variously described as parachute science or helicopter research persists. Odeny and Bosurgi (2022) set out the mechanics clearly: well-resourced researchers conduct studies in low-resource settings and depart without equitable partnership, while authorship hierarchies systematically exclude local scientists from the first and last author positions that determine career progression and funding access. Because external funders hold agenda-setting power, host country priorities are sidelined. Their remedy, adopted as editorial policy by PLOS Medicine, is to require that researchers based in the study region hold first or last authorship.

At the level of cost, article processing charges have converted the promise of open access into a new barrier. Butler et al. (2023) estimated that five commercial publishers collected 1.06 billion United States dollars in APC revenue between 2015 and 2018 alone, at average charges of 1,989 dollars for gold and 2,905 dollars for hybrid open access. Haustein et al. (2024) extended the analysis, estimating 8.35 billion dollars paid to six publishers between 2019 and 2023, with 2023 median charges actually paid reaching 2,450 dollars for gold and 3,600 dollars for hybrid articles. Set against research budgets in most African universities, those figures function as an exclusion. A publication model that removes paywalls for readers while charging authors several thousand dollars per article

does not democratize knowledge; it relocates the barrier from consumption to production, and it does so in a way that falls hardest on exactly the scholars whose contextual knowledge is most needed.

And at the level of epistemology, there is a longer-running argument about whose categories organize African scholarship at all. Connell (2007) demonstrated that the social sciences were built on a metropolitan division of labour in which the periphery supplied data and the centre supplied theory. Mbembe (2016) described the persistence of a Eurocentric epistemic canon that attributes truth solely to a Western way of knowing and treats a situated tradition as though it were universal. Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018) develops the argument further, framing epistemic freedom as the right to think and theorize from Africa rather than merely to be studied, and distinguishing the deprovincialization of African thought from the simple substitution of one canon for another. Gumbo et al. (2024) extend this to doctoral education specifically, arguing that African doctoral programmes reproduce Western epistemologies and calling for transformation running from admissions criteria through research methods and language of examination.

It is worth being careful here, because decolonization discourse can become its own orthodoxy. Laakso and Hallberg Adu (2024) interviewed political science faculty in Botswana, Ghana, Kenya and Zimbabwe and found that scholars who broadly agreed with the aim of reducing Eurocentrism nonetheless described post-2015 decolonization discourse as "overambitious or even patronising" in their contexts (p. 185). The obstacles they identified were material rather than theoretical: resource scarcity, publishing barriers, limited research funding, bureaucratic constraint and market pressure on curriculum design. They coped through informal classroom practice rather than formal institutional reform. That finding should discipline how this journal handles the topic. Epistemic questions matter, and so does the fact that a lecturer with a 400-student class, no library budget and an eight-hour teaching load faces constraints that no epistemological reframing will lift.

Three correctives: what the numbers do not say

Having set out four deficits, we should say plainly what this journal does not believe.

We do not believe that Africa is best understood as an accumulation of shortfalls measured against a European or East Asian benchmark. The deficit framing is analytically convenient and politically useful for resource mobilization, but it is a poor guide to research design. It encourages studies that ask why African systems fail to resemble something else, when the more productive question is usually how they actually work, for whom, and under what constraints. Three specific correctives follow.

First, the continent is not a unit of analysis. Fifty-four countries with radically different colonial inheritances, state capacities, resource endowments, demographic profiles and educational histories are routinely aggregated into continental averages that describe nowhere in particular. The finding by Alabani et al. (2026) that threshold effects separate low from high research-intensity economies within the region is one statistical expression of a broader truth, and their conclusion that uniform policy prescriptions will fail across so heterogeneous a set of cases applies equally to uniform research designs. AJESI will favour work that is explicit about its cases and cautious about its generalizations, and we are especially interested in genuinely comparative work, whether within Africa or between African and non-African contexts.

Second, the leapfrogging narrative deserves scrutiny rather than repetition. The proposition that African economies can bypass industrial-era development stages through digital technology has

become a fixture of conference programmes and strategy documents. The evidence is mixed at best. The International Telecommunication Union (2025) estimates that around 36 per cent of Africa's population used the internet in 2025, the lowest of any world region, against a global average of 74 per cent and between 88 and 93 per cent across Europe, the Commonwealth of Independent States and the Americas. Globally, 94 per cent of people in high-income countries are online compared with 23 per cent in low-income countries, mobile broadband remains unaffordable in around 60 per cent of low- and middle-income countries, and the rural to urban gap stands at 58 against 85 per cent (International Telecommunication Union, 2025). A skills agenda premised on universal connectivity is a skills agenda for a minority.

The artificial intelligence variant of the same narrative warrants equal caution. UNCTAD (2025) projects the AI market reaching 4.8 trillion dollars by 2033 while noting that the top 100 firms, overwhelmingly based in the United States and China, account for 40 per cent of global corporate research and development spending, that fewer than one third of developing countries have a national AI strategy, and that 118 countries, mostly in the Global South, are absent from the major AI governance forums. UNDP's Human Development Report 2025 makes the related conceptual argument that what artificial intelligence delivers for development depends far less on the technology's capabilities than on the institutional and political choices made around it (United Nations Development Programme, 2025). Africa's position in the AI economy is being determined now, largely elsewhere, and largely without African participation in the rule-setting. That is a research problem as much as a policy one, and it is precisely the kind of question that a deficit framing, preoccupied with closing skills gaps, is structurally unable to ask.

Third, the resources question is not only about scarcity. The African Development Bank (2025) estimates that Africa lost approximately 587 billion United States dollars through financial leakages in 2022, comprising 90 billion in illicit financial flows, 275 billion in corporate profit-shifting and 148 billion in corruption, against total inflows of 190.7 billion. The same report estimates that improved policy could mobilize an additional 1.43 trillion dollars in domestic resources from tax and non-tax sources, and notes that Africa holds 30 per cent of global mineral reserves and pension assets of 1.1 trillion dollars. Set against continental education financing shortfalls, these figures reframe the problem. The binding constraint on African skills and innovation systems is not straightforwardly the absence of money. It is substantially about who captures it, and the governance arrangements that permit that capture. Research on education financing that ignores this is telling half a story.

Five founding commitments

The journal's scope is wide. Breadth without a point of view, however, produces a journal that publishes everything and stands for nothing. Five commitments define ours.

Education as a site of political economy

Education is never neutral, and neither is the study of it. We invite work that interrogates how neoliberal reform, aid conditionality and domestic elite interests shape educational systems (Apple, 2004; Tikly, 2019). Contributions foregrounding the political economy of higher education, particularly in relation to access, equity, institutional autonomy and financing, are especially welcome. This includes work on the governance of expansion, on the fiscal architecture of tertiary systems, and on the political settlements that determine whose children are educated for what.

Skills as situated, contested and socially constructed

Dominant framings reduce skills to quantifiable attributes, ignoring the social, cultural and spatial dynamics of skill formation. AJESI foregrounds perspectives that treat skills as situated practices shaped by gender, class and power. Grugulis and Vincent (2009) showed how the reclassification of competences as "soft skills" can extend recognition to women's capabilities while systematically failing to raise their pay or progression, which is a useful reminder that naming a skill and valuing it are separate acts with separate politics. The point applies with force to African labour markets, where the boundary between recognized and unrecognized competence largely tracks the boundary between formal and informal work. We welcome attention to the politics of recognition, to informal and indigenous learning systems, and to the governance of credentialing.

Innovation as social imagination and democratic capability

Mainstream innovation discourse privileges markets, patents and high-technology ecosystems. AJESI reclaims innovation as a collective and civic process. We are particularly interested in grassroots innovation, indigenous technologies, frugal and inclusive innovation, and university-society partnerships that advance public value over profit maximization (Chataway et al., 2014; Fagerberg et al., 2010). The empirical case for this is not merely normative: in an economy where most technological learning happens outside formal research and development, an innovation policy that can only see formal research and development will misallocate most of what it spends.

Transdisciplinary, practice-engaged and methodologically serious

The journal welcomes work that crosses disciplinary boundaries and connects theory with practice, including empirical studies, conceptual development and engaged scholarship across education policy, STEM education, entrepreneurship, sustainability and institutional reform. We encourage collaboration among academics, practitioners and policymakers.

Two qualifications give this commitment teeth. First, we are interested in mechanisms, not correlations. The field has no shortage of studies establishing that education is associated with better labour market outcomes; it has far fewer that explain how particular institutional arrangements produce particular results in particular places, and why interventions that succeed in one setting fail in another. The path dependence and threshold effects identified by Alabani et al. (2026) are precisely the sort of finding that demands mechanism-level follow-up rather than another cross-country regression. Second, methodological pluralism is not methodological indulgence. Quantitative, qualitative, mixed-methods, ethnographic, historical and design-based work are all welcome; work in any tradition that does not meet that tradition's own standards is not. Small-sample qualitative work must be transparent about selection and analysis. Quantitative work must be honest about identification, a point Alabani et al. (2026) illustrate neatly in showing how an apparently robust relationship between research spending and innovation performance dissolves once endogeneity is addressed. Neither tradition is exempt.

Epistemic justice, without epistemic orthodoxy

AJESI is committed to epistemic justice. We challenge the marginalization of Global South scholarship and prioritize diverse voices, methodologies and theoretical traditions, including support for early-career researchers, community-based scholars and non-traditional contributions (Connell, 2007; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018). Following Odeny and Bosurgi (2022), we expect research conducted

in African settings to include African researchers in substantive authorship roles, and we will ask about this at submission.

We take context as a theoretical resource rather than a limitation. A study of apprenticeship in Kumasi, artisanal manufacturing in Nnewi or teacher deployment in rural Malawi is not a local curiosity awaiting validation against a Northern model. It is a site where general propositions about skills formation can be tested and, frequently, found wanting, as McGrath (2012) argued in respect of the human capital assumptions underpinning vocational policy. We ask authors to draw out those implications explicitly.

Being African-led does not mean being inward-looking. Sen's (1999) argument that development is properly understood as the expansion of substantive freedoms was not an African argument, and it has reshaped how African scholars think about education and capability. Lundvall's (2010) innovation systems framework emerged from Nordic conditions and has been productively reworked for African use. Intellectual traffic runs in both directions, and it should. What we insist on is the point Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018) makes about epistemic freedom: that scholars based in Africa are principals in the conversation about Africa, not informants to it. Equally, and in the spirit of the caution registered by Laakso and Hallberg Adu (2024), we will not treat decolonial vocabulary as a substitute for argument. A manuscript that invokes the right concepts without doing the analytical work will be declined like any other.

How we will work

AJESI operates double-blind peer review, with editorial screening for fit and quality, review by subject experts, and an editorial decision to accept, request revision or decline. We aim to notify authors of screening outcomes within one to two weeks and to reach a post-review decision within six to eight weeks. Accepted articles are published individually online following copyediting and author proofing, on a rolling basis rather than at fixed intervals. We practise developmental reviewing, particularly for early-career and first-time authors, and we uphold the Core Practices of the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE, 2019).

We publish research articles of 6,000 to 8,000 words, policy briefs of 1,500 to 3,000 words, commentaries and analytical essays of 2,000 to 4,000 words, case studies, and book reviews. Abstracts are capped at 250 words. Authors with a strong case for a different format should write to the editorial office before submitting. All articles carry structured metadata and ORCID identifiers, and we are committed to long-term digital archiving so that what we publish remains available.

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On the diamond model, a word of explanation is warranted, because it is a deliberate position rather than an administrative detail. AJESI charges no fees to authors and no fees to readers. UNESCO's Recommendation on Open Science (2021) frames open science as a global public good and calls for models that do not simply transfer cost barriers onto researchers, and diamond open access is the model most consistent with that principle.

We recognize the sustainability challenges, and it would be dishonest to launch without naming them. Bosman et al. (2021) surveyed the global diamond landscape and estimated roughly 29,000 such journals publishing some 356,000 articles annually, against approximately 453,000 from

APC-based journals. Their findings on fragility are sobering: around 60 per cent of diamond journals depend substantially on volunteer labour, 86 per cent report high or medium reliance on unpaid contributions, the median journal operates with fewer than one full-time equivalent staff member and an annual budget under 10,000 dollars, roughly 40 per cent break even while 25 per cent run at a loss, and nearly a fifth cannot say what their annual costs are. Their regional distribution is equally telling, with 45 per cent of diamond journals in Europe and 25 per cent in Latin America, while Africa barely registers as a category. AJESI is therefore entering a model that is both the most equitable available and the most precarious, in a region where that model is least established. We regard this as a problem to be solved through institutional partnership and transparent governance rather than a reason to charge scholars for the privilege of contributing to knowledge about their own societies.

That institutional grounding matters. AJESI is the journal of the African Skills and Innovation Network, a multi-stakeholder platform bringing together universities, policymakers, industry actors and civil society. The journal is therefore embedded in a wider infrastructure for research, policy engagement and institutional collaboration, rather than standing alone as a repository of articles.

An invitation

This editorial has argued three things: that the dominant framing of Africa's education and skills challenge mistakes a political problem for a technical one; that the empirical picture nonetheless describes four deficits that are real, connected and inadequately researched; and that the infrastructure enabling African scholars to build the necessary evidence base remains inadequate. AJESI exists to help address the third, in the hope of contributing to the first two.

We therefore extend an open invitation.

To scholars and researchers, in African universities and beyond: we invite your intellectual labour and your political imagination, including work that does not fit comfortably elsewhere. Studies with negative or null findings, replications, methodological papers, historical analyses and theoretically ambitious pieces that challenge received framings are all welcome. Franco et al. (2014) demonstrated that null results are disproportionately abandoned before they ever reach review, distorting the published record in ways that no amount of downstream synthesis can repair. We would rather publish a well-designed study that found nothing than contribute to that distortion. Early-career researchers will find a developmental editorial process here rather than a purely gatekeeping one.

To policymakers and public officials, in ministries of education, labour, science and technology, in regulatory agencies and in regional bodies: we offer AJESI as a site of reflective practice and critical engagement, and we invite policy commentaries and analytical reflections on implementation. The gap between policy design and delivery is where most of the interesting knowledge sits, and it is systematically under-documented. We are also interested in hearing what evidence you need and do not have.

To educators, teachers, lecturers, trainers and institutional leaders: your practice generates knowledge that rarely reaches the published record. Given what UNESCO (2024) reports about teacher shortages and attrition across the region, the profession's own account of what makes teaching sustainable is among the most urgently needed evidence in the field. Case studies of curriculum reform, pedagogical innovation, institutional change and programme design are within our scope, and we will work with practitioner authors to bring such contributions to publishable standard.

To industry leaders, employers and entrepreneurs: the mismatch between what education systems

supply and what economies require cannot be characterized accurately without your evidence, and the thinness of university to industry linkages documented by Outamha and Belhcen (2020) is partly a research problem that only firms can help solve. We invite analytical contributions on skills demand, workplace learning, apprenticeship and industry-university collaboration, and we are especially interested in accounts of what has not worked.

To development partners, foundations, civil society organizations and multilateral agencies: we invite rigorous evaluative work, including work that reports disappointing results. The systematic non-publication of unsuccessful interventions is a substantial and avoidable distortion of the evidence base on which African education and skills policy now depends.

To students, community-based researchers and activists: we welcome you as co-creators of the narratives that will define Africa's educational and developmental trajectories, and we mean that as a working commitment rather than a courtesy.

To reviewers: a journal is only as good as its referees. Colleagues willing to review within their areas of expertise should write to us with their fields and affiliations. Reviewing for AJESI is a contribution to continental scholarly infrastructure, and we do not treat it as a favour lightly asked.

Submissions and enquiries may be directed through https://ajesi.org or to editorial@ajesi.org.

Building resilient, inclusive and innovative learning systems requires moving beyond siloed disciplines, beyond technocratic solutions and beyond inherited hierarchies of knowledge. Africa's youngest generation will make its decisions about learning, work and enterprise over the next twenty-five years, whether or not scholarship keeps pace. Our responsibility is to ensure that those decisions, and the policies shaping them, rest on evidence produced with the seriousness the stakes deserve.

To our readers, contributors and partners: welcome to AJESI. Let this be a space of critical hope, rigorous debate and intellectual solidarity. Let us rethink the futures of education, skills and innovation together, from the Global South, for the world. The stakes are high and the opportunity is now. Let the conversation begin.

Declarations

Data availability statement

This editorial is conceptual and analytical, drawing on publicly accessible policy documents, institutional reports and published literature. All sources consulted are cited in the reference list. No primary or proprietary data were generated or analysed.

Conflict of interest and funding

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Generative AI use

Generative AI tools were used during the preparation of this manuscript. Specifically, ChatGPT-5.5 (OpenAI) and Grammarly (1.170.1.0) were used for proofreading, summarizing, and improving clarity and coherence. These tools were not used to generate original research content or to interpret data. All outputs were reviewed and edited by the author to ensure accuracy and academic integrity,

and all sources were independently verified.

Ethics statement

No human participants or animal subjects were involved in the preparation of this editorial, and no ethical approval was required.

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