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LANGUAGES AND AFRICAN REGIONAL AND CONTINENTAL INTEGRATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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INTRODUCTION

This policy brief represents a first attempt at analysing the connection between languages and the regional and/or continental integration of higher education institutions (HEIs) in Africa within the broader framework of regional or continental integration processes. It is driven by the assumption that no collaborative framework involving high-stake collaboration between institutions of higher education can ignore the cultural and, in particular, linguistic implications of the collaboration process. There are too many examples of the failure of the technicist approach that leaves these cultural implications aside. In fact, the African Union Continental Education Strategy for Africa (CESA) 2016 – 2025, which targets the development of quality human resources, stresses the importance of African core values to achieve the vision of the Union.

THE OVERALL LANGUAGE SITUATION IN AFRICA AND THE MULTILINGUAL HERITAGE

This brief takes into account the overall language situation in Africa. It is well known that Africa is the most diversified continent in terms of languages. It is estimated that there are about 2,000 different languages spoken on the African continent and that these make up one third of all languages spoken worldwide. This being said, the situation can vary from one country to another: Cameroun has a population of around 27 million, with over 250 different languages spoken as first languages alongside English and/or French. On the other hand, more than 99% of Rwandans speak Kinyarwanda, a Bantu language and the country's mother-tongue, but the country has three other official languages, namely, French, English and Swahili.

In terms of language policy, the situation is also, of course, highly complex. For example, after the apartheid system in South Africa was dismantled, all 11 languages spoken by different population groups were declared official languages in the 1996 Constitution, but this would be impossible in Cameroun and in particular in Nigeria where 525 native languages are spoken. Other countries have followed a different approach, particularly those, such as Mauritius, which were colonised by the British and which have opted to avoid adopting a *de jure* official language policy.

It is against this complex sociolinguistic background that decisions concerning languages and their link with the regional or continental integration of HEIs will be discussed. To end this section on a very positive note, **it must be underlined that the African continent has a widespread historical tradition of managing multilingualism for both official communication and social integration.**

THE LINK BETWEEN LANGUAGES AND INTERNATIONAL/REGIONAL COOPERATION

This brief does not aim to propose a 'model' for decision-making processes concerning the role and functions that languages can and in fact should play with regard to regional integration in higher education. Rather it first identifies a certain number of issues which should be taken into account if project leaders decide to examine the language question in view of the policy

guidelines that may be provided to decision-makers on the continent. Once these issues have been examined, a number of recommendations will be made based on certain assumptions which will be presented.

ISSUES TO BE TAKEN INTO ACCOUNT

1. Taking into account the amount of resources (both human and technical) needed for regional and continental networking, would it be feasible, achievable and, more importantly, politically acceptable to adopt one language as the main medium of continental co-operation for all HEIs on the continent? An adequate answer to this question is important because of the debatable claims made by certain researchers. For example, Hernández-Carrion (2011)[1] states that the continuation of the reform process, which started in European Union countries following the implementation of the Bologna Process, implies that there is a need to accept the expansion of the English language. Would this stance be compatible with the current combat for decolonisation on the African continent? What would it entail for countries with no Anglophone tradition? The answer seems clearly negative: The (failed) project in Madagascar to Anglicise its education system in the 1990s could serve as an illustration of the unsurmountable difficulties faced by such an approach.

2. If it is assumed, on the basis of the answers to the questions raised in the previous paragraph, that African decision-makers are not ready to bear all the technical, human, educational and social costs of moving to a monolingual language policy in Africa, and that it is much preferable to have a multilingual policy because of its numerous advantages, would it be possible to identify a series of cross-border languages conducive to strategic regional and continental integration? What would be the exact meaning and scope to be given to this multilingual language policy? These issues may be worth discussing with different stakeholders involved in African HEIs.

3. In particular, to what extent could English, French, Portuguese and Arabic (classical Arabic or one of its dialectal varieties used in North Africa) facilitate regional integration (with English serving as a tool for targeted strategic continental co-operation)?

4. As far as the management of administrative and technical (non-academic) exchanges is concerned, would it be suitable to adopt one language formula for all institutions or will a bi-/or trilingual policy be achievable? What would be the cost implications of the different decisions which can be taken?

The issues raised can form the foundation of language policy decisions relating to the regional or continental integration of HEIs. While the nature and extent of the collaboration will determine the linguistic implications to be taken into account, it is proposed that a top-down, non-flexible approach should be avoided as language issues are particularly sensitive and can have visible and invisible cost implications.

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[1] Hernández-Carrion, J.R. (2011). "English Language for Successful Integration: Learning from the Bologna Process". *Annals University of Oradea-Economic Sciences*, 20,140-146, file:///Users/u04819277/Downloads/Hernandez-Carrion%20English%20Lang.%20Annals%20of%20the%20University%20of%20Oradea%20Economic%20Science%20Vol.20(2)140-147_%20018.pdf (downloaded 20/08/2023).

ASSUMPTIONS ON WHICH POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS CAN BE BASED

- **Language: the cornerstone of human communication and the key to global cooperation**

  The basic principle for the understanding of the linguistic and cultural implications of regional or continental co-operation is the following: because language is the cornerstone of human communication and is key to global cooperation, no process which involves the mobility of students and staff across or beyond the continent and/or the exchange of expertise and research results as well as the sharing of technical information on science and technology can ignore the linguistic dimension of such collaboration.

- **Promoting a bottom-up approach**

  One of the major assumptions of this brief is that there cannot and should not be a top-down approach to language issues that is **elaborated by consultants and imposed on states** which are sovereign in terms of language policy decisions. The policy guidelines will need to be

  - examined to assess whether they are compatible with the fundamental principles on which policy decisions are based in each national context;
  - workable within the regional or continental collaboration established;
  - monitored and evaluated after an initial period during which the proposals are piloted; and
  - flexible in order to allow stakeholders to choose the ones which resonate with their political and cultural policies as well as with the requirements of the goals set both in national contexts and in the collaborative framework envisaged.

- **Taking into account the cost of monolingualism**

  It would be politically, culturally and financially costly to impose the use of one language (e.g., English) on all institutions in order to enhance continental co-operation of HEIs on the African continent. African HEIs may end up consolidating globalisation from a linguistic and cultural perspective (Phillipson: 1997 & 2008). Furthermore, Anglicisation will place linguistic and financial burdens on the limited resources available for higher education on the continent. Apart from the costs mentioned above, two other significant costs need to be underlined.

  - First, from an educational perspective, Airey et al. (2017)[2] have demonstrated that students taught in a foreign language take more time to achieve results than those taught in a first language (L1). Further, Lehtonen et al.'s (in Airey et al.: *Ibid*.) investigations in Finland's two-year master's programmes have indicated that students display

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[2] Airey, J. et al. (2017). "The expansion of English-medium instruction in the Nordic countries: Can top-down university language policies encourage bottom-up disciplinary literacy goals?". *Higher Education*. 73: 561–576.

problems in using conceptual language when they use a language that is not their L1.

- Second, in countries which are in the first stages of democratising higher education, the use of a foreign language for teaching and learning may impact access to higher education of students from an underprivileged family background. In other words, the use of a foreign language may have significant educational and social costs.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Languages for Regional and Continental Integration**

The roles and functions of languages will depend on the nature and extent of the collaboration of HEIs targeted. These goals and objectives range, inter alia, from an approach of integration that refers to the most intensive form of collaboration to specific forms or collaboration such as the establishment of a common credit system for the mobility of staff and students and/or the development of standards and guidelines for quality assurance. Each of the examples provided has its own set of linguistic implications. In this regard, some of the major issues which could form the foundations of potential language policy decisions will now be analysed.

- **Universities and the Promotion of Indigenous Languages**

Within continental and regional frameworks of cooperation, African universities should contribute to the development of indigenous languages so that they may be used as vehicles of communication and knowledge in some specific spheres of modern life. Part of universities' mission could entail contributing to the standardisation and intellectualisation of languages that do not have a written tradition. Further, African languages, literatures and cultures could be included in the teaching programmes of all African universities. These languages could be used as medium of instruction in formal programmes or for supporting students with learning difficulties (taking into account their socio-cognitive potential). The argument concerning the positive impact of using indigenous languages wherever possible for teaching and learning is fairly well documented in the literature.

While the policy decision should be taken by entities responsible for the management of regional or continental integration of HEIs, its implementation would be the responsibility of national states and universities, although technical support could be provided by regional or continental bodies.

- **Cross-Border Languages for Intensive Regional Co-operation**

The promotion of cross-border languages for regional co-operation features should be prioritized as it figures prominently in the agenda of African decision-makers. For example, SADC created the Linguistic Association for SADC Universities (LASU) in 1984. One of its core objectives is to promote vehicular cross-border languages in the region, an objective that the association is still pursuing.

This objective is also in line with the African Academy of Languages' (ACALAN) main mandate which is to strategise the promotion of the major vehicular cross-border

languages on the continent for communication and integration. Indeed, in 2002, ACALAN (the linguistic arm of the African Union) was established with the aim of promoting the vehicular cross-border languages in the SADC region.

Five of the languages spoken in the SADC region, namely, Setswana, Chinyanja, Kiswahili, Malgache, and Lingala, were identified to serve as regional languages. However, of these five languages, the language which has the highest potential for cross-border collaborative initiatives in higher education is Swahili. This language has spread to more than 14 countries, namely, Tanzania, Kenya, Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, South Sudan, Somalia, Mozambique, Malawi, Zambia, and Comoros, as well as Oman and Yemen in the Middle East.

The other vehicular cross-border language which has assumed certain international and technical functions is Arabic, although a major distinction needs to be made between classical Arabic and the vernacular Arabic languages (I will leave this debate for another day). While English, French and Portuguese can serve as languages for the intensive regional integration of HEIs in the respective Anglophone, Francophone and Lusophone countries, a case may be made for an intensive (selective) regional integration using Arabic (classical or dialectal varieties) and, in the near future, Swahili.

- **Continental Co-operation in Higher Education from the perspective of Languages**

Cooperation in the field of higher education figures prominently on the agenda of African international organisations such as the African Union, the Association of African Universities and the Association for the Development of Education in Africa. From a sociolinguistic perspective, it would be easier to establish collaboration between the different linguistic blocs such as Anglophone, Francophone and Arabophone institutions and African HEIs or Lusophone institutions. If, however, decision-makers want to involve all African countries, they will first have to strategically identify the goals set, and, second, they will need to ensure that the linguistic (and cultural) implications of their decisions are taken into account.

- **Developing Academic hubs based on linguistic affinities**

It will be difficult to establish collaboration between all students and all scholars in all disciplines of all African Universities. Academic hubs need to be identified and constituted, and collaboration between these hubs can be established. For example, the University of Pretoria, which has developed international expertise in the field of veterinary sciences, can offer support to all relevant scholars and students wishing to benefit from the resources available at the university in that field. For this to occur, students and scholars will need to master English as it is this institution's language of teaching, learning and research. Although the author of this paper cannot determine the goals that will be set for a continental collaboration project of HEIs, one thing this author is convinced of is that it would be unrealistic to involve all HEIs in all collaborative projects.

Although mobility between linguistic blocs might facilitate exchanges, decision-makers should consider the possibility of the mobility of academic staff and students between different linguistic blocs for the obvious linguistic and cultural benefits of such exchanges. The benefits of exchanges between language, literature and cultural specialists obviously come to mind; however, specialists in other disciplines can also benefit from such exchanges.

NEW HORIZONS: ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

There is a belief among many academics that while Artificial Intelligence raises questions of academic integrity in higher education, it can also be critical for universities because of the opportunity that it can provide to increase their relevance and sustainability. In the field of languages, researchers are of the view that AI-powered language platforms can break down language barriers: real-time translation services can be offered, and students can learn from educators who speak different languages. More significantly, educators can use AI-powered platforms to create lessons in different languages, providing students with the opportunity to learn in their native language.

For these reasons, new education technology products will be available in higher education in the nearby future. These developments will put greater pressure on the higher education ecosystem. For reasons which will not be discussed here, this ecosystem is more fragile in the African Continent than it is in North America and most of the West European countries. To be more specific, in the years to come, African universities will have to try find the right balance between creating the guidelines and norms to prevent AI tools from undermining academic integrity and, at the same time, benefit from all that the new AI models can offer them not only by integrating them into their teaching, but also by using them for research and administration.

Regional/Continental integration of university education in Africa offers an opportunity that should not be overlooked as African University authorities address the issue of integrating artificial intelligence models into university programs and projects. They will then inevitably be confronted with the question of language, especially if African universities adopt a strategy aiming at pooling their resources and expertise. Some of the strategies mentioned when the issue of the linguistic implications of Regional/Continental integration was discussed can be extended to the question of artificial intelligence:

- **Identifying Cross-Border Languages which can serve for Intensive Regional Co-operation with regard to Artificial Intelligence;**

- **Intellectualising these languages so that they are fully equipped both in terms of vocabulary and syntax to serve the purpose of cross-border collaboration with regard to Artificial Intelligence;**

- **Developing Academic hubs based on linguistic affinities and extending collaboration in these hubs to Artificial Intelligence.**