

HAQAA-3 POLICY BRIEF SERIES on Continental and Regional Integration in African Higher Education

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GIVING GREATER EFFECTIVENESS TO AFRICAN CONTINENTAL INTEGRATION IN AND THROUGH HIGHER EDUCATION: Empowering Universities as Development and Integration Agents.

A policy-oriented contribution to the AU 2024 Year of Education

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Note: The HAQAA Policy Briefs are written in the HAQAA-3 framework but engage only their authors. Olusola Oyewole is the Secretary general of the Association of African Universities (AAU).

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SUMMARY

Africa has disintegrated through its long colonial history. This disintegration has hampered African development over many years and has certainly made it difficult for Africa to harness its rich natural and human resources for its development. There is an urgent need for Africa to wake up without simply blaming history. Africa needs to re-discover itself, and this can be done through the instrument of education.

African leaders have for a long-time recognized education, and higher education integration, as critical instruments for development. Various educational initiatives have been formulated by African leaders, but they have failed to sufficiently translate these policies into the facts. In this area, Africa needs to take concrete and effective actions able to promote its development and break the barriers of disintegration.

The Universities of Africa have for long remained the un-used strength that have been ignored by African governments and their peoples. Past Africa leaderships have sought knowledge from universities and researchers outside Africa. This can no longer be allowed to continue if Africa does not want to continue to repeat the mistakes. Africa needs to recognize its universities as a critical organ for its development and integration. But for universities in Africa to take their rightful place as agents of development and integration, they need to be empowered.

This Policy Brief presents a case for the Refocusing of continental integration **in and through** higher education and for the empowerment of African Universities as development agents.

1. INTRODUCTION

Africa is a continent highly endowed with human and natural resources, but, unfortunately, it has not been able to harness these rich resources for its development. And, today, Africa remains divided on colonial lines. While all African countries are independent, the facts on the ground indicate that their political independence has not been sufficiently translated to the economic and social spheres, and this has made many Africans to suffer from abject poverty and under-development. Africa and Africans need to break themselves from the shackles of disintegration. Broader, deeper, and more effective Regional and Continental Integration is urgently needed for Africa to re-discover itself.

2. CONTINENTAL INTEGRATION IN AFRICA

Simply put, Regional Integration is a strategy for development by removing divisions that impede the flow of goods, services, capital, persons, and ideas among people, as well as cooperation between nations. Many years of colonization have left Africa disintegrated over colonial lines. Colonization has also deprived Africans of their traditional values and their African culture. All this has hampered African development over many years. There is an urgent need for Africa to wake up. Africa needs to re-discover itself, and this can be done through the instrument of education.

Over five decades into independence in many African countries, it is becoming apparent that there is a need to break down the colonial integration/disintegration. The African Union has therefore been working on various initiatives to integrate the whole continent. The latest success at doing this is the establishment of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA). There is high hope that the AfCFTA will serve as an instrument to integrate the countries of Africa economically and improve the economic well-being of the various countries and peoples of Africa.

3. HIGHER EDUCATION AND CONTINENTAL INTEGRATION. A LOOK TO THE PAST

African leaders have always recognized the need of education as a critical instrument for its development. Education, in general, and higher education in particular, have not only been embraced as a policy area by African Regional Economic Communities. It has always been in the core of African Continental integration.

- *Educational and cultural cooperation* was one of the six fields in which, in accordance to article 2.2 of the constitutive 1963 Organization of African

Unity (OAU) Charter *Member States shall coordinate and harmonize their general policies.*

- Article 4.2.e of the 1991 Abuja Treaty includes also education within the list of policies in which the activities of the African Community must be promoted. Accordingly, the African Union, which replaced the OAU in 2001, highlights in its website (<https://au.int/en/directorates/education>) a clear definition of its mission in this area: *“To contribute towards revitalized, quality, relevant, and harmonized education systems responsive to the needs of Africa, taking into account Africa’s aspiration and capacity in terms of human and material resources; systems that produce Africans with appropriate attitudes, values, knowledge and skills to facilitate attainment of the AU vision; systems that generate applied and new knowledge and contribute towards its harnessing for meeting Africa’s challenges as well as placing Africa firmly within the core of the global knowledge economy”.*

Accordingly, various educational initiatives have been formulated by African leaders. The African Union, and the African Union Commission (AUC) in its behalf, have over the years launched ambitious initiatives to promote continental higher education integration:

- (a) Together with UNESCO, the 1981 Arusha Convention, revised in 2014 as Addis Convention on the Recognition of Studies, Certificates, Diplomas, and other Academic Qualifications in Higher Education in African states.
- (b) The Continental Education Strategy for Africa – CESA 2016 – 2015 - as part of the 2063 Agenda: “The Africa We Want”, which was adopted at the 26th ordinary session of the AU in January 2016. It seeks to ‘bring coherence and integration in the development of the various sub-sectors into a holistic system that addresses the needs of imparting knowledge, skills, and values required for systematic response to the socioeconomic demands in the 21st century. It encompasses all sectors of education and creates 12 thematic clusters for their treatment. One of these clusters embraces Higher Education and is coordinated by the Association of African Universities (AAU). This cluster is organized in 13 thematic sub-clusters.
- (c) The African Continental Qualification Framework, which is an AU-led initiative launched in September 2019 that plans to integrate the existing national and regional frameworks for comparability and equivalencies of qualifications into a continental framework.

- (d) The Pan African University, which sets to promote post-graduate studies and research in some strategic areas of development.
- (e) The adoption of African Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ASG-QA).
- (f) The Science, Technology and Innovation Strategy for Africa (STIGA).

But these initiatives have not sufficiently succeeded to translate these efforts in concrete impactful actions. Africa needs to take concrete and effective actions that can promote its development and break the barriers of disintegration.

4. THE NEED FOR REFOCUSING AFRICAN INTEGRATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Many of these continental educational initiatives in Africa have not translated to development and integration in the continent for various reasons.

- **One major reason** is the lack of resources, which makes execution and action to be dependent on external funding, which is not sustainable.
- **Second, it** is an unfortunate remark to note that many items of the continental agenda have often been set by consultants at the service of organizations and institutions created or governed outside Africa, or directly by the services of these organizations and institutions. It has been difficult for African institutions and intellectuals to take ownership of many of these continental initiatives.
- **Third**, in other cases, and in many regions and countries of Africa, the consideration of relevant (even positive) experiences in other continents of the world, for example that of the EU and the wider European experience, has simply led to the uncritical adoption of their models in the African continental initiatives, which not necessarily are those best adapted to the African context.
- But the **fourth and main** major setback I want to emphasize is the inability of the continental initiatives to be transmitted to actions at the national levels and to engage educational actors, including the universities who ought to implement their tenets at the grassroots level.

5. FOCUSING ON UNIVERSITIES

Indeed, Universities of Africa have for long remained the un-used strength that has been ignored by African governments. Much too often, past African leaders have sought knowledge from universities and researchers outside Africa instead of searching for, and using, available African knowledge mainly within universities.

Universities are, for the countries and the local communities in which they are located, the best depository of knowledge able to promote development through teaching, research, and innovation (innovation, a function that all Universities can accomplish even if they are under-resourced) and community service (further than regular teaching).

Taking this duly into account, I want to emphasize, as Secretary general of the Association of African Universities (AAU) and a member of the Implementing Team of HAQAA-3, the urgent need to

- 1. Refocus continental integration in and through higher education.**
- 2. Empower African Universities as development agents.**

6. REFOCUSING CONTINENTAL INTEGRATION IN AND THROUGH HIGHER EDUCATION

We must take advantage:

- of the momentum being built on the implementation of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) as an instrument to promote economic and social development in all African countries, an instrument that cannot relinquish the contribution of higher education to its success (in general and in the particular area of services and movement of workers and professionals); and
- of the launch of 2024 as the African Union Year of Education.

Continental Integration in HE can be facilitated in and through higher education by:

- Intra-Africa Mobility Schemes for staff and Students
- Removal of Visa requirements for African students who want to study in other African institutions.
- The promotion of Joint Degree Programs
- The Recognition of Qualifications, degrees, and certificates across the continent, taking advantage of the existing national legislations.

- The Promotion of Pan African Research Funds and Research collaborations.
- The Promotion of the African Credit Transfer System.
- The re-engineering of Curricula .

In many on these areas the HAQAA Materials and Policy Briefs offer excellent advice and ideas.

7. EMPOWERING UNIVERSITIES AS DEVELOPMENT AGENTS

But to reach the full potential of the contribution of African Universities, they must be empowered:

- African universities should be empowered to decolonize their curricula.
- African universities should be empowered to do research relevant to the needs of Africa and not oriented by dictates of non-African institutions that funds and sponsors it.
- African universities should be empowered to re-orient their learners through evolution of learner-centred methods that promotes innovation and critical thinking.
- African universities should be empowered to evolve new values of themselves and the continent and should promote accountability, responsiveness, ubuntu-spirit and Africanisms in their operations.
- African universities should be empowered to promote new initiatives that will enhance the spirit of innovation and entrepreneurship in their programs.
- There is need to promote Academia-Industry collaboration.
- There is need to re-focus Universities to community development activities.
- African Universities should adopt learner-focused teaching methods and embrace technology in teaching and administrative processes.
- Diversity and Inclusion must be promoted to include technical and vocational studies, without neglecting the arts and social sciences, while creating room for all under-privileged and under-represented groups in educational benefits.

And Universities must also be reminded that their collaboration with other fellow Universities in other African States is not only a possibility all of them must consider (instead of concentrating only in the collaboration with non-African Universities) but an obligation, ethical and political. This twofold obligation stems from the assumption, unanimously accepted by all African political leaders and institutions, that Continental African integration is needed, as previously mentioned, to bring African nations to the level of development and world influence that they deserve.

And, as it was demonstrated in previous HAQAA Policy Briefs, making Universities aware of their own capabilities, encouraging them to use these capabilities and favoring their collaboration with well-designed support programs that promote the mobility of students through agreements between universities and unilateral action by each of them, can be done on the basis of already existing legislation.

8. CONCLUSION

The empowerment of universities as development agents can be the best possible contribution to higher education from the African continental institutional framework (including in its bi-continental relations with the European Union and its Member States). The emphasis on the possible and needed contribution of Universities to development allows to integrate in the best possible way the traditional three functions of Universities (teaching, research-and-innovation, community service) and allows also to integrate the national and the international dimensions of these functions: indeed, the empowerment of Universities as development agents opens a whole world of opportunities (and funding) beyond those offered by teaching and research-and-innovation international projects.

Continental and regional integration and higher education work together in a twofold apparently opposite but in fact complementary direction: Integration must strengthen Universities and Universities must strengthen Integration. This is why I use the expression “continental Integration in and through higher education”.

The empowerment of universities as development and integration agents can also bridge the divide that can exist (and certainly exists in many cases) between universities, and the Universities leadership, and the political world, in particular at the continental level. **The AU Year of Education 2024 is the adequate framework to discuss it and define it as the main focus of continental integration in and through universities.**