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

Policy Brief n.8

HIGHER EDUCATION'S CONTRIBUTION TO THE STRENGHTENING OF MULTILATERALISM AND GLOBAL GOVERNANCE

AAU's and OBREAL GLOBAL Collective work
March 2025

INDEX

INTRODUCTION[1]

Higher Education (HE) is a strategic sector: it directly impacts social and economic development and it creates knowledge and international research-and-cooperation culture. However, international cooperation is particularly difficult in it as two types of actors must be addressed simultaneously: the regulators (governments) and the regulated (Universities / HE Institutions - HEIs), which, albeit in a variable amount, enjoy a degree of autonomy that makes them a relevant policy actor.

But governments are reluctant to engage in meaningful international cooperation and commitments in an area so sensitive. Experience (including WHEC 2022) proves that UNESCO, the specialized multilateral forum, finds very difficult to induce governments to cooperate in HE policy design and implementation. And UNESCO cannot effectively reach either HEIs, too numerous and too diverse to be brought together into a single international framework.

OBREAL Global and the AAU propose to face this difficulty by promoting South-South-North(s) dialogue and cooperation at an "intermediate" regional level, able to underpin and give better foundation and outreach to UNESCO. This Interregional dialogue has already been initiated between regional associations of Universities in Africa, LAC, ASEAN, Europe and India, a "region" in itself because of its diversity and population; as well as between regional integration and cooperation international organizations in Africa and LAC. In January 2024, in a meeting held in Barcelona, UNESCO expressed its interest in this work.

Which is the best distribution and articulation of topics to be dealt at the interregional and multilateral levels, assuming that many important aspects of HE policy must remain confined at the national level, where governments and HEIs interact? The Brief opens this policy discussion.

1.- DIAGNOSIS OF THE PROBLEM

"Internationalization" is unanimously recognized as a defining dimension of higher education in the XXIst century.

In fact, international dialogue and cooperation between the two main actors in HE policy (Universities, and Higher Education Institutions – HEIs- and Governments) have always existed and are certainly intensifying. Many thousands of agreements link Universities from all over the world, and many University associations exist with very different approaches concerning scope, membership, and international outreach. And Governments also cooperate internationally on

---

[1] This Policy Brief was initially prepared as a contribution to the T-20 research and academic activities that accompanied the G-20 Summit held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, in November 2024 and follows the structure and format suggested by their organizers. It has been revised and updated in view of the recent debate on multilateralism generated by the measures envisaged and put into practice by the new US Administration.

higher education and research and have set up international specialized organizations with different geographical scopes.

However, the issue of how best to articulate international cooperation in higher education remains open. HEIs are far too numerous to be brought under a single global umbrella in an effective way. Governments are reluctant to engage in forms of deep cooperation that can reduce their regulatory margin of manoeuvre.

In other economic and social areas, this issue is a classical one, both in terms of policy and of academic analysis. In the economic area, in particular in that of trade and investment relations, the distinction between unilateral, bilateral, regional, plurilateral and multilateral approaches and the discussion on their positive and negative consequences have occupied thousands of pages of academic literature and as many thousand days of policy discussions. **But this is not the case with HE. It seems that, in this area, the appeal to "internationalisation" erases the need for such analysis and discussions.**

However, this is obviously not true. Bilateral or plurilateral approaches to cooperation risk, in the HE sector as in all the other, the exclusion of institutions and countries that are not covered by them and/or lack capacity, dimension, and strength, or political will to engage. And, very often, the increase in the number of the initiatives runs opposite to the augmentation of their effective content and impact; the negative effects of the "spaghetti bowl" of intertwined and overlapping agreements appear in the higher education sector as in international trade. And the complications created by the simultaneous application of different regimes of recognition of qualifications are not lesser than those created by the very well-known problem of overlapping rules of origin in the trade sector.

At present, international cooperation in HE takes place at different levels. Leaving aside the cooperation that stems from the unilateral action of Governments and institutions, a distinction can be established between

- The *UN/multilateral* level headed by UNESCO, an organization of the UN family that has a very wide scope (education, culture and science) and includes higher education that organizes, with an approximate ten-year periodicity, World Higher Education Conferences - the last one in Barcelona, Spain, in May 2022- and promotes Regional and Global Conventions on Recognition;

- The main *global "undifferentiated"* frameworks bringing together HEIs do exist, for example, the International Association of Universities (AIU) and the Global University Network for innovation (GUNi).

- *Plurilateral* frameworks are numerous.

  o Some of the more important are typically based on linguistic and historical considerations, both at:
    ▪ the *intergovernmental* level (international organizations that embrace the area of HE): Iberoamerican (SEGIB https://www.segib.org/ and OEI https://oei.int/), Commonwealth (https://thecommonwealth.org/), Francophonie (https://www.francophonie.org/).
    ▪ the *level of HEIs*: Associação das Universidades de Lingua Portuguesa (AULP http://aulp.org/), Agence Universitaire de la Francophonie (AUF https://www.auf.org/), Association of Commonwealth Universities (ACU https://www.acu.ac.uk/).

- The *bilateral* ones are the result of hundreds of agreements between governments and thousands of MoUs between specific HEIs.

Main Conclusion from the diagnosis.

The issue of how best to articulate this complex and multi-layered institutional setting is not solved. In fact, it has not even been addressed in the literature as an issue deserving analysis.

But experience shows that the lack of articulation has, in the higher education sector, the same typical negative effects it has in other social and policy areas:

- **Overlapping (often contradictory), which generates at the same time double-emplois and holes, with a consequent loss of effectiveness.**
- **Exclusion, because poor institutions and countries cannot integrate effectively in such a complex (and relatively costly) setting.**
- **Unequal and unfair distribution of relative power as, in such a confuse setting, power and hegemony remain in the hands of the most powerful players.**

2.- RECOMMENDATIONS

To advance in the solution of the problems diagnosed in the previous section, two issues must be addressed: the first concerns the actors and the institutional setting; the second, its content and lines of action in terms of policy.

Concerning the first, a clear-cut recommendation is advanced: promoting the setting-up of a sustainable inter-regional framework of dialogue and cooperation involving associations and networks of universities with a well-defined geographical scope and outreach (regional but also in some cases national) that, at least potentially, are open to all the different HEIs in each country and region. And promoting also, in parallel, a dialogue on HE between the continental / regional integration processes that exist in the world (taking the very big countries as a region in themselves) and between them and UNESCO.

This recommendation is grounded on four facts:

- Regional integration processes do exist in the world (however different they can be in nature, objectives, depth and breadth): the European Union (and the broader EHEA in the area of higher education), the African Union (with sub-regions), the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States – CELAC- (with sub-regions), ASEAN... And, from this perspective, some countries can be considered as "regions" in view of their complexity, huge population and power (India, China and the US).

- And, for these regions, regional associations and networks of Universities do also exist: the European University Association (EUA), the Association of African Universities (AAU), ENLACES (Espacio Latino-Americano y Caribeño de Educación Superior – that brings together all the national associations of the region, the ASEAN University

Network. The Association of Indian Universities – AIU- encompasses all Indian regions, and there are also China and US-wide associations.

- There already are bi- regional relations (both at HE and broad political levels) between some of these regions.

- In the multilateral governance level, UNESCO has shown, in 2024, its willingness to engage in a multilateral – interregional initiative, recognizing that it could enlarge and strengthen its outreach.

Concerning the second, the discussion must remain open but some lines of discussion can be offered on the basis of one principle and one example.

The principle is simple: The policy content and the policy priorities cannot be the same in the different levels of policy action. First, because the logic and objectives of each level are different from those of the other. Second, because their "institutional hardware" is not equally powerful and able to process all possible policy softwares**. Therefore, the policy challenge is not how to superimpose all the international levels of action on the national one and on each other but how to articulate actions of different scope at all these different levels for development and the benefit of the greatest possible number of citizens.**

The example concerns "Recognition", a topic that has been typical of international relations in HE. Usually, it is tackled as ONE topic failing to perceive that, in fact, it covers THREE different issues that have three different policy contexts and must be tackled with three types of instruments at three different levels:[2]

- The _professional_ effects of academic diplomas are, in most if not all countries, a heavily regulated area (with, very often, different regulations for the different diplomas/professions) and with powerful institutions and bodies (mainly professional bodies) behind them. Their context is not that of Universities but that of the organization of economic activities. In terms of continental and regional integration, that of market integration (or in other terms, that of the creation of an internal market). And, as instruments are concerned, the production of some regional or continental rules is absolutely necessary if it has to be tackled at these levels.

- The _academic_ effects of a) diplomas and b) partial qualifications in order to pursue studies are much less regulated (depending on the degree of autonomy conferred in each country to Universities and HEIs). And, in any case, it belongs to Universities and HEIs to apply the regulations.

    o The context for _diplomas_ is mainly "inter-University"; and for the _academic effects of the components of diplomas_ (credits / disciplines), is not so much "inter- University" but "inner-University". Indeed, it is very difficult to imagine that a Department is unable to "recognize" the courses accomplished in other Universities (or even other Faculties or Schools in the same University). The problem boils down to the willingness of Departments and lecturers to do it.

---

[2] HAQAA Policy Brief n.1 discussess this question more in depth (see: https://haqaa3.obreal.org/publications/ and, in particular, https://haqaa3.obreal.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/POLICY-BRIEF-1-on-RECOGNITION.pdf

- o In terms of instruments,
  - Are there rules limiting explicitly the freedom/autonomy of Universities to accept graduates of other Universities for higher level programmes of studies or to "recognize" the courses accomplished in other Universities? If this is the case, shouldn't they be removed or modified / harmonized?
  - Can the interest (of students and Universities) in academic movement be incentivized by adequate continental and regional programmes of support and diplomatic instruments favouring dialogue and collaboration?

Once these simple distinctions have been established, the policy recommendation for the interregional dialogue in HE becomes evident: what must be the priority: a) focusing the professional effects of diplomas and the costly and probably impossible harmonization of legal rules or, rather, b) enhancing what is possible and already exists: **promote inter-University collaboration by inducing, facilitating and empowering Universities to make the best possible use of existing divergent legislations in order to favour collaboration and mobility and make them true and cooperative development agents?.**

Quoting a Policy Brief written in the framework of the HAQAA project, we propose to "inter-regionalize and multilateralize" the following conclusion: The empowerment of universities as development and integration agents is the best possible contribution to both higher education and the strengthening of the multilateral system.[3]

Furthermore, 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.

And the empowerment of universities as development and integration agents can also bridge the divide that can exist (and certainly exists in many cases) between multilateral institutions, UNESCO in particular, and Universities, and Universities leadership.

3.- SCENARIO OF OUTCOMES

Section 2 above, puts forward two main recommendations, i.e.

- The setting-up of a sustainable inter-regional framework of dialogue and cooperation involving associations and networks of universities with a well-defined geographical scope and outreach (regional but also in some cases national) that, at least potentially,

---

[3] See: https://haqaa3.obreal.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/POLICY-BRIEF-5-ON-EMPOWERING-UNIVERSITIES.pdf

are open to all the different HEIs in each country and region. And promoting also, in parallel, a dialogue on HE between the continental / regional integration processes that exist in the world (taking the very big countries as a region in themselves) and between them and UNESCO; and

- **To promote inter-University collaboration by inducing, facilitating and empowering Universities to make the best possible use of existing divergent legislations in order to favour collaboration and mobility and make them true and cooperative development agents. And empowering** universities as development and integration agents.

Both recommendations are compatible with all present forms and frameworks of international cooperation in Higher Education. Their objective is not to undermine or impair them but to promote their adequate articulation: *ADEQUATE ARTICULATION* **is the master word.**

The criticism that this would further complicate this system is not warranted because the recommendations have an underlying premise (as also explained in section 5 above): The policy content and the policy priorities cannot be the same in the different levels of policy action. First, because the logic and objectives of each level are different from those of the other. Second, because their "institutional hardware" is not equally powerful and able to process all possible policy softwares**. Therefore, the policy challenge is not how to superimpose all the international levels of action on the national one and on each other. In terms of content, the recommendations are "ambitiously modest". Modest because the institutional hardware of inter-regional dialogue and cooperation is relatively weak and cannot adequately process policy softwares that are very complicated, difficult to handle or too conflictive. But ambitious because it intends to make more inclusive and effective international cooperation in higher education.**

It might be argued that the definition and implementation of the suggested recommendations will be opposed by institutions and countries that intend to keep the balance of international power tilted in their favour. We do not think that this will ever be the case because we assume that all countries do believe in what is unanimously asserted in the discourse about international cooperation in higher education, and defend the principle of multilateralism and the advance towards the full achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals, including in the area of higher education.

4.- COMMENTS ON THE LITERATURE. REFERENCES

Academic literature on Internationalisation of Higher Education is certainly not missing. But it addresses this issue mainly from the perspective of specific HEIs or specific national HE systems (or as an instrument of soft power), and not so much from that of how all or most of them could cooperate. That is the approach that underlies the whole Routledge's 26-book Series (2010 – 2020) *International Studies in Higher Education* (https://www.routledge.com/International-Studies-in-Higher-Education/book-series/ISHE).

The EAIE focused monographically the issue of *Weaving the future of Global partnerships* in its 2013 Conference; but neither the Conference *Starter* (https://www.eaie.org/our-resources/library/publication/Conference/conference-conversation-starter-2013.html) nor its development dealt with our research question.

The European University Association (EUA) promotes and publishes different series of publications (https://eua.eu/resources/publications.html) but they do not tackle the issue of how best to articulate and operationalize international cooperation in HE.

GUNi has promoted and published in April 2022, as an input for the UNESCO 2022 WHEC an extensive *Special Issue* of its *World Report* with the title *New Visions for Higher Education towards 2030* (https://www.guninetwork.org/report/higher-education-world-8-special-issue). The title of one of its introductory chapters, *Internationalization. Reinforcing partnerships to attain common goals*, seems to address our research question. But its reading proves that this is not the case.

The problem has also been discussed in the framework of the 2022 UNESCO World Higher Education Conference as well as in the framework of *ad hoc* meetings of the main European international cooperation agencies (the Donors Harmonization Group – DHG Group - https://cscuk.fcdo.gov.uk/10th-donor-harmonization-group-forum-2019/ -), and in the only meeting held by the Global Forum initiative launched in May 2022 by the European University Association (https://eua.eu/news/902:eua-and-international-counterparts-establish-global-university-associations-forum.html). However, no permanent institutional framework has been set up, and no agenda for it has been agreed.