

THE RATIONALE OF THE INITIATIVE ON

LEVERAGING THE AFRICAN CONTINENTAL FREE TRADE AREA (AfCFTA) FOR HIGHER EDUCATION INTEGRATION

BACKGROUND NOTE FOR THE FIRST BIENNIAL CONFERENCE
(IRIC – PAU, YAOUNDÉ, 7TH AND 8TH OF APRIL 2025)

Introduction

The rationale of the Initiative on ‘Leveraging the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) for Higher Education -HE- Integration’ can best be explained by reference to the [materials developed by the HAQAA Initiative](#).

HAQAA has developed, enlarged and adapted to the African context an Analytical Framework that OBREAL had previously conceived for Latin America to critically analyze social reality and the policies in which it focuses. This framework assumes **that policies are not unidimensional nor unidirectional**: they develop in a space with a series of **dimensions** in which they advance (or regress) and start from **preconditions** that they shape (with greater or lesser success) with certain **instruments** (whose management is not easy) to achieve a series of **objectives** (which must be articulated to avoid dispersion and misuse of resources).

The use of this analytical framework makes it possible:

- to differentiate the dimensions of the different aspects of social policies,
- to understand the preconditions and the instruments they share, and
- to discover and discuss the coincidence in at least some of the objectives of the policies that are developed to shape them.

In the [HAQAA Materials on Continental and Regional Integration in Higher Education](#) this analytical framework is applied to both Continental and Regional Integration and to Higher Education policy.

Economic and Higher Education policies share many features not only at the national level but also, and particularly, in terms of continental integration

This undeniable commonality can be adequately discussed in terms of HAQAA’s Analytical Frameworks.

- **Preconditions**

Most preconditions are common to both policy areas: history (with the consequences of the colonial past); demography (in particular, with the arrival of youth to both the labor market and to higher education); the geographically different conditions; the different political structures and transversal policy approaches.

- **Dimensions**

Effective Content is one of the four essential dimensions of Economic Integration. And AfCFTA’s content, in particular that of its Protocol on Services, by replicating GATS/WTO’ article I.2 in its article 1.p), embraces Higher Education.¹ This has two consequences:

- Even if the Higher Education sector were not included in the lists of specific commitments, the Protocol’s general obligations would apply to it, articles 4 on Most-Favoured-Nation Treatment and 5 on Transparency being the best examples.
- It covers foreign direct investment and establishment of professionals, both hidden under the GATS expression “commercial presence”. Thus, a key issue for the establishment of professionals in the AfCFTA context is also an essential issue for Higher Education policy: that of recognition of professional qualifications.

¹ The organizers of the Conference will produce for it an enlarged version of this Note in which the explanation summarized in this paragraph will be provided more in detail.

On the Higher Education policy's side, *Internationalization* is also accepted as one of its main dimensions, and it is undoubtful that regional and continental integration is the primary space in which Universities must move forward to internationalize in the African content.

Further, it seems also indisputable that

- progress along African integration in Higher Education will contribute to advance in two additional dimensions of Continental and Regional Integration: *Strength* and *External Dimension*; that
- progress in continental economic integration will contribute to the advance not only in the dimension of the Internationalization of African Higher Education but in some other dimensions, from *quality* to *employability*; and that
- if the AfCFTA process must achieve its objectives, a massive effort of training is required, in different formats, addressed to politicians and public officials, to people in the private sector and to academics, in order to allow them to acquire the needed knowledge of an agreement that is complex and not easy to understand. Only the Higher Education system is able to provide such massive training.

- Instruments

There are also a great deal of commonalities concerning the instruments to be used. In fact, three of the four main instruments discussed for Continental and Regional Integration are also to be used in the Higher Education area and in its regional and continental integration: *Legal rules*, *Subsidization of public activities* and *Diplomatic activities of dialogue and networking*.

- Objectives

Finally, we arrive to the main commonality between African Continental and Regional Integration and African Higher Education policy (both at the national and the African level). The HAQAA Materials mentioned in the Introduction

- emphasize that *Objectives must be adequately articulated: this is probably the greatest policy challenge concerning objectives. It is very easy to list a series of objectives in which more or less everyone would agree, but this is nearly meaningless: the longer the list of objectives, the higher the risk of dispersion of efforts and of not reaching any one of them;*
- suggest that *The articulation has two main aspects: First, most likely, the objectives in the list cannot be pursued, even less be reached, all at the same time; and not all of them must be considered equally important: which are the priorities to be established among them? Second, the time-dimension and the interdependence between the objectives must be very well analysed. Which comes first, second and third? Which ones must be considered not so much as ends in themselves but as intermediate objectives to the service of the more important overriding ones.*
- And advise to determine *One or two overriding and concrete political objectives and a few intermediate ones.*

Main Conclusion

This line of argument leads to the main justification for the launch of the initiative on 'Leveraging the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) for Higher Education Integration': **the intermediate objectives of building an AfCFTA and developing a Higher Education policy are certainly different, but the overriding political objective is the same for both: for the efforts in both are identical: Development.** Professor Olusola Oyewole,

the Secretary General of the Association of African Universities (AAU), the main African partner in the HAQAA implementing team, has very forcefully and convincingly argued and defended this approach in one of the HAQAA Policy Briefs: [Policy Brief number five on 'Giving greater effectiveness to African Continental Integration in and through Higher Education: Empowering Universities as development and integration agents'](#).