

# First Conference on Leveraging the African Continental Free Trade Area for Higher Education Integration

7-8 APRIL 2025

INSTITUT DE RELATIONS INTERNATIONALES DE CAMEROON

SALLE AMPHITHÉÂTRE 500

YAOUNDÉ, CAMEROON

THEME FOR THE FIRST CONFERENCE:

**SETTING THE STAGE AND LAUNCHING THE INITIATIVE**

## Conference Conclusions

The first conference on *Leveraging the African Continental Free Trade Area*, hosted at the Institut des Relations Internationales du Cameroun (IRIC), co-organized by OBREAL Global, the Association of African Universities (AAU) and the Pan African University (PAU), co-funded by the EU-financed 'HAQAA Initiative'<sup>1</sup> and with the support of the Government of Catalonia, represented a tremendous effort to connect policy and academic actors around a common agenda.

### 1. Preparation and Rationale

The organizers had produced and circulated a background note on the Rationale of the Initiative. It emphasized that Economic and Higher Education policies share many features not only at the national level but also, and particularly, at the continental level. In terms of the Analytical Frameworks presented in the HAQAA Materials on Regional and Continental Integration in Higher Education<sup>2</sup>, this concerns their four pillars: Preconditions, Dimensions, Instruments and Objectives. As the sharing of preconditions is obvious, the note concentrates on

- *Dimensions*, because the content of AfCFTA's Protocol on Trade in Services embraces Higher Education insofar as
  - The notion of 'trade in services' is not limited - like that of 'trade in goods' - to international exchanges of services but covers also '*commercial presence*' - GATS<sup>3</sup> and AfCFTA's so-called "mode 3" - (what in other contexts would be labelled Foreign Direct Investment or Establishment).
  - The notion of '*service supplied in the exercise of governmental authority*' is defined very restrictively, so that the Protocol applies to Public Universities in most, if not all, African countries.
  - The notion also covers the '*presence of natural persons of a State Party in the territory of any other State Party*', an issue that overlaps with that of the mobility of staff, which has been of high interest to this conference.
- *Instruments*, as three of the four main instruments of Continental and Regional Integration are also to be used in the HE area and in its regional and continental

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://haqaa3.obreal.org/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://haqaa2.obsglob.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/Materials-on-African-Regional-and-Continental-Integration-in-Higher-Education-1.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> GATS refers to the World Trade Organization -WTO - General Agreement on Trade in Services, whose approach and set of definitions were adopted by the AfCFTA Agreement.

integration: Legal rules, Subsidization of public activities, and Diplomatic activities such as dialogue and networking.

- And, most importantly, *Objectives*, as **Development can be assumed to be the main political objective in AFRICA, both for continental economic and higher education integration**

## 2. Highlights from interventions and key messages

The Conference's first day was organized around live and pre-recorded interventions from important political and economic organizations and actors that each has a stake in this agenda. The rich video content and presentations are made available on the website of this initiative for all participants and collaborators to study, digest and act upon.

Nonetheless, these conference conclusions must provide some highlights, as certain interventions have been critical to the conference's messaging:

**The first keynote speech by the AUC Deputy Chair Person, H.E Selma Haddadi**, a mis l'accent sur trois questions. D'abord, elle a souligné l'objectif politique majeur que les politiques d'intégration continentale et d'enseignement supérieur partagent : LE DEVELOPPEMENT. Ensuite elle s'est référée aux deux points qui, à son avis, sont essentiels : a) la recherche et la mise en place de ponts entre la politique d'intégration et celle d'enseignement supérieur, b) la nécessité d'un effort énorme de formation sur l'interaction entre intégration continentale et politique d'enseignement supérieur.<sup>4</sup>

Another important intervention – that of **Deputy Director General of the World Trade Organization, Ambassador Xiangchen Zhang** – has referred to the “turbulent times” we are living in and emphasized how the objective of promoting **Development** is at the heart of the WTO and is explicitly recognized in the first paragraphs of the WTO Agreement. He has concentrated on answering a single simple question: Can any policy succeed without the foundation of knowledge and the promise of training? He has emphasized that education and training must be considered a long-term endeavour and committed the WTO Chairs Programme to contribute to it.

---

<sup>4</sup> The conference provided English-French interpretation, but we leave this passage in French, the language used in the presentation, to highlight the importance of Multilingualism, an issue addressed as a priority in the conference (see below the reference to prof. Chumbow's intervention). The translation in English of the paragraph is the following:: *H.E Selma Haddadi focused on three issues. First, she highlighted the major political objective that continental integration and higher education policies share: DEVELOPMENT. Then she referred to two points that, in her opinion, are essential: a) the search for and establishment of bridges between integration policy and higher education policy, b) the need for a huge training effort on the interaction between continental integration and higher education policy.*

An additional keynote has been provided by the **Minister of Tertiary Education, Science and Research of the Republic of Mauritius, Dr. Kaviraj Sharma SUKON**. He has shared the thesis that continental integration and Higher Education policy have a common main objective, that is, once again, DEVELOPMENT, and that a huge effort in TRAINING is required for the process on African continental integration to deliver upon its full positive potentialities. To contribute to Development, participants have been challenged to revise traditional approaches that tend to organize education in separate silos, in particular the distinction between higher education, on one side, and technical and vocational training and long-life training, on the other. He has also stressed the importance of enhancing innovation through University – Industry Collaboration.

This message was also reflected in the speech pronounced by Dr. B.S. Chumbow, president of the Cameroun Academy of Sciences, who has stressed the role of multilingualism and the preservation of language diversity in Africa's integration. He also posed the important question '**What kind of development do we want for Africa**'. Peter Kwasi Kodjie of the All African Students' Union (AASU) has answered this with 'inclusive development', and challenged participants to think about Africa's informal economy and the risk that AfCFTA may leave many behind. Thus, when discussing training initiatives, a plea was made for 'inclusive training'.

A high-level academic contribution was made by **Peter van den Bossche**, available by video. Three main topics are addressed by him. First, the dangers, for the whole world, and in particular for Africa, of the offensive against the multilateral system launched by the current US administration, as seen so invasively in the media now. Second, the possible complementarity of the AfCFTA and the multilateral trading system if both are oriented to Development. Third, and once again, the need for an enormous effort of training. He suggested a "training of trainers" approach, as issues on trade law and policy, in particular at the international level, are, on one side, very difficult to comprehend and master and, on the other, must be very broadly known, at least in their general aspects. It was recalled that the HAQAA initiative has and continues to promote this very approach, through a variety of different courses.

During the academic part of the Conference in the second day, more than 20 papers were presented and discussed in five panels. The number and quality of the papers and the interest of participants have demonstrated that there is a sufficient number of qualified experts (both academics and practitioners) willing to contribute to knowledge creation-and-dissemination for this Initiative. In the coffee breaks and corridors, it was noted that many have expressed their interest in hosting or promoting future activities in the framework of the Initiative and in the follow-up of the Conference.

### 3. One main conclusion: The need for training

Prof. Mohammed Belhocine, the former African Union Commissioner for Education, Science, Technology and Innovation, has spelled out, eloquently, some of the core conclusions on day 2 of the event. He has suggested that the African Union Commission and its specialized institution, the Pan African University, serve as a platform to unite the different actors that have converged around this initiative. The PAU can anchor collaborative activities on training, in particular on “training the trainers”, through specialized online courses which target policy makers and civil servants, at national and regional economic community level. These courses can integrate the rich materials that HAQAA has already produced under its policy component; and the WTO Chairs Programme and the WTO Deputy Director General responsible for it have also shown their willingness to collaborate in this effort, as have the Association of African Universities and OBREAL Global.

This ambitious programme of “training the trainers” must entail

- A very huge effort of sensitization, as the interface between African Continental economic integration and African Higher Education Integration remains largely unknown to members of both epistemic communities.
- A continuous flow of production and dissemination of new knowledge that maintains and enlarges the exchanges initiated in the Conference.
- Multilingualism and inclusion, and concerted focus on indigenous, African knowledge and its role in commerce, innovation and education.

### 4. Key partnerships for integration

Finally, the organizers were honoured to see the extremely positive response received on the European Union side, captured by the presence of colleagues from the EU Commission and the willingness to situate this event in the HAQAA policy component. EU-funded partnership programmes, like Erasmus+ (Capacity Building for Higher Education, Jean Monnet Networks), Intra-African Academic Mobility Scheme, and support for the African Continental Qualifications Framework (ACQF) are a tremendous opportunity to further shape and realize African higher education integration. The EU’s Global Gateway and the preparation of the new EU Multiannual Financial Framework show that the EU is a unique partner to Africa, investing consistently in continental economic and higher education integration, in close cooperation with African institutions and organizations, especially the African Union Commission. The positive influence of higher education EU-funded projects must also be framed in terms of economic impacts, which is another concrete action for the Initiative in the immediate future.

The objective of all this work should be the development of a virtuous circle, even better: a spiral, of positive interaction between African economic integration, mainly in the framework of AfCFTA, and African integration in Higher Education.

## 5. Next steps

The organizers, the AAU, the PAU and OBREAL, will first produce a tentative list of future activities, share it with all participants and get in touch with those who have expressed their interest in hosting or promoting new activities. They will also update the conference website and provide participants with a “map” of the different organizations that have supported the conference and its key messages, explaining their significance for the agenda. The website will include references to important EU cooperation projects on higher education as a motor for regional and continental integration. It will also be instrumental for all the activities of training, whether led directly by the organizers, or in collaboration with other international partners like the WTO Chairs and the United Nations University or with specific Universities in the world.

Many thanks were said to the many partners and actors that have made this event a reality. But a last tribute was made to students who attended so actively, and who are the future leaders of this agenda, and of the dynamic African continent.

[Click here to access all relevant documents for the Initiative](#)