

**OPENING SPEECH BY PROFESSOR USMAN BAKRI, PRESIDENT OF
THE ASSOCIATION OF AFRICAN UNIVERSITIES, AT THE FIRST
CONFERENCE ON LEVERAGING THE AFRICAN CONTINENTAL
FREE TRADE AREA (AfCFTA) FOR HIGHER EDUCATION
INTEGRATION**

Your Excellencies, Distinguished Guests, Respected Scholars, and Esteemed Colleagues,

It is both an honor and a privilege to stand before you today at this historic gathering—the First Conference on Leveraging the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) for Higher Education Integration.

The Association of African Universities (AAU) is honoured to be co-organizing this conference with Obreal of Barcelona, Spain, the Pan African University and other partners. I extend my sincere gratitude to all of you who are present, and who share a commitment to shaping the future of education and economic transformation in Africa.

The African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) is a game-changer for our continent. It is the most ambitious initiative for economic integration that Africa has ever undertaken, with the potential to unify a market of over 1.4 billion people, stimulate industrialization, and create millions of jobs.

However, the success of AfCFTA will depend not only on policies, trade agreements, and infrastructure but also on the capacity of our people to seize the opportunities it presents.

In this regard, higher education institutions (HEIs) have a fundamental role to play.

Today, I will highlight:

1. The need to promote regional integration in Africa;
2. The strategic roles of HEIs in advancing AfCFTA; and
3. The essential skills African graduates need to achieve AfCFTA's objectives.

(A) THE NEED TO PROMOTE REGIONAL INTEGRATION IN AFRICA

Africa is home to abundant natural and human resources, yet it remains one of the least integrated regions in the world. Trade among African nations accounts for only about 15% of total trade, compared to over 60% in Europe and 40% in Asia. This limited regional integration has constrained economic growth, job creation, and technological advancement.

The AfCFTA seeks to change this by eliminating trade barriers and fostering economic collaboration among African nations. However, for AfCFTA to be effective, regional integration must extend beyond trade—it must be rooted in education, research, and shared knowledge.

Higher education plays a pivotal role in fostering regional integration by:

- **Encouraging academic mobility** through cross-border education programs and student exchanges;
- **Facilitating knowledge transfer** across African universities, industries, and governments;
- **Standardizing academic qualifications** to enable graduates to work anywhere on the continent; and
- **Promoting a Pan-African identity** that strengthens economic and cultural ties.

Without regional integration in higher education, the vision of a unified African market will remain incomplete. Our universities must serve as the intellectual backbone of Africa's integration agenda.

[B] THE STRATEGIC ROLES OF HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS IN ADVANCING AfCFTA

1. Producing a Skilled Workforce for a Competitive Africa

The knowledge economy is the foundation of global competitiveness. Our universities, polytechnics, and research institutions must equip students with the skills necessary for a modern and dynamic labor market. AfCFTA will drive demand for expertise in trade, logistics, digital economy, artificial

intelligence, entrepreneurship, and sustainable development. Therefore, we must align our curricula with the realities of regional and global markets, ensuring that African graduates are not only employable but are also job creators.

2. Enhancing Research and Innovation for Industrial Growth

Innovation is the engine of economic transformation. Higher education institutions must serve as hubs for research and development that drive industrialization and trade. By fostering partnerships between academia, industry, and government, we can generate homegrown solutions to Africa's challenges, develop cutting-edge technologies, and strengthen the manufacturing and service sectors under the AfCFTA framework.

3. Promoting Academic Mobility and Regional Collaboration

Just as trade integration removes barriers to the movement of goods and services, academic integration must facilitate the free movement of students, faculty, and knowledge across borders. Through programs like the Pan-African University, the Intra-Africa Academic Mobility Scheme, and institutional collaborations, we must foster a culture of cross-border education, credit transfer, and mutual recognition of qualifications. This will not only enhance academic excellence but also create a unified African identity and workforce.

4. Strengthening Entrepreneurship and Business Education

AfCFTA is not just about trade; it is about empowering Africans to create wealth. Our universities and business schools must integrate entrepreneurship education into all disciplines, ensuring that students graduate with the skills to launch and sustain businesses. Business incubators, startup accelerators, and technology parks must be embedded within our institutions to nurture the next generation of African entrepreneurs who will leverage AfCFTA's vast opportunities.

5. Driving Policy Advocacy and Thought Leadership

Higher education institutions must take an active role in shaping policies that guide AfCFTA's implementation. Through policy research, think tanks, and academic conferences, we can provide evidence-based insights that inform governments, regional bodies, and the African Union on best practices for trade facilitation, education policy harmonization, and economic integration.

6. **Harnessing Digital Transformation for Education and Trade**
Digitalization is key to the success of AfCFTA. Our institutions must expand online learning, digital literacy, and e-commerce training to ensure that Africa's youth are prepared for a digital-driven economy. Universities must also embrace blockchain for credential verification, artificial intelligence for predictive analytics, and big data to drive policy decisions.
7. **Promoting African Identity, Culture, and Language in Trade**
Economic integration must go hand in hand with cultural integration. As centers of learning, our universities have a responsibility to promote African languages, history, and cultural heritage as strategic assets in trade negotiations and market expansion. Language proficiency in French, English, Arabic, Kiswahili, and indigenous languages can enhance intra-African business and diplomacy.

[C] SKILLS NEEDED BY AFRICAN GRADUATES TO ACHIEVE AfCFTA OBJECTIVES

To fully harness the opportunities of AfCFTA, African graduates must be equipped with:

1. Entrepreneurial and Business Skills

- Understanding of trade regulations, market analysis, and business development
- Capacity to create and sustain enterprises that thrive under AfCFTA
- Financial literacy and investment skills

2. Digital and Technological Skills

- Proficiency in e-commerce, fintech, artificial intelligence, and blockchain
- Data analytics and cybersecurity expertise
- Digital marketing and online business operations

3. Cross-Cultural Communication and Multilingual Proficiency

- Fluency in multiple African languages, in addition to English, French, Arabic, and Portuguese

- Cross-cultural negotiation skills for international trade
- Strong networking and leadership capabilities

4. Problem-Solving and Critical Thinking Abilities

- Capacity to innovate solutions for Africa's economic challenges
- Strategic thinking for business growth and industrialization
- Research and analytical skills for data-driven decision-making

5. Adaptability and Lifelong Learning

- Ability to continuously acquire new skills in a rapidly changing economic environment
- Openness to working in different African regions and industries
- Flexibility in embracing new technologies and market trends

CALL TO ACTION

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen, the realization of AfCFTA's full potential rests on the shoulders of Africa's intellectual capital—our students, educators, and researchers. As leaders of higher education, we must rise to the challenge and reposition our institutions as catalysts for the continent's economic renaissance.

I, therefore, call upon African governments, the African Union, and private sector stakeholders to:

- Invest in higher education and research to enhance Africa's competitiveness.
- Strengthen university-industry partnerships for innovation and skill development.
- Remove barriers to academic mobility and harmonize educational frameworks.
- Support youth entrepreneurship as a pillar of economic transformation.

Together, we can build a prosperous Africa where knowledge fuels trade, innovation drives industrialization, and education becomes the foundation of economic freedom. AfCFTA is our gateway to an integrated and self-sustaining Africa—let us seize this moment with courage, vision, and unity.

Our universities must become more than centers of learning—they must be engines of economic transformation, equipping Africa’s youth to drive intra-African trade, industrialization, and sustainable development.

Together, we can ensure that Africa’s brightest minds become the architects of a prosperous, integrated, and self-reliant continent.

I wish us all fruitful deliberations, and I look forward to the outcomes of this conference that will shape the future of higher education and trade in Africa.

Thank you.