

FACILITATING COLLABORATIVE RESEARCH AND INNOVATION THROUGH REGIONAL TRADE AGREEMENTS IN HIGHER EDUCATION INTEGRATION

Author: Sesha Nyanga

**Pan African University Institute of Governance, Humanities and Social Sciences,
University of Yaoundé II
SOA, Cameroon**

Corresponding author's email: seshanyanga@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

The rise of globalization has led to an era of extraordinary interconnectedness, with nations increasingly relying on transnational relations. International collaborations in research and Innovation is central to this interconnected world, which has become central to the advancement of knowledge, tackling complex global challenges, and stimulating economic growth. Regional and continental trade agreements, such as the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) and the Southern African Development Community (SADC), have played a pivotal role in reshaping the landscape of higher education and research integration. These agreements have reduced barriers to exchange, facilitated cross-border research collaborations, shared expertise, and developed innovation networks. The critical examination of the role these trade agreements play in shaping collaborative research and innovation is of paramount importance for various stakeholders, including policymakers, academic institutions, and those invested in the higher education sector. This paper seeks to delve into the multifaceted legal and policy issues that intersect with regional trade agreements and the integration of higher education. By explaining the significance of these agreements, this analysis aims to offer a comprehensive perspective on how they can function as instrumental channels for boosting collaborative research and fostering robust innovation environments. Regional trade agreements, with their specific provisions for safeguarding intellectual property rights, enabling the mobility of researchers, and establishing funding structures, have become increasingly recognized as essential instruments for nurturing these partnerships. This research aims to tackle the question: To what extent and in what manner do regional and continental trade agreements bolster the facilitation of collaborative research and innovation initiatives within the sphere of higher education? The scope of this investigation will extend the analysis of various trade agreements, paying special attention to their mechanisms for supporting academic collaboration, the harmonization of policies and standards in higher

education, as well as the encouragement of joint research ventures and innovation projects. The methodological approach adopted in this paper is inherently interdisciplinary, drawing on the intellectual resources of international law, education policy, and innovation studies. Employing a qualitative case study research methodology, this study will dissect the effectiveness of trade agreements in fostering research collaborations and scrutinize potential challenges that might emerge during their execution, using SADC, AfCFTA, and the Pan-African University (PAU) as case studies.

Keywords: Regional Trade Agreements, collaborative research, innovation, higher education, integration

Introduction

Since Africa's independence, the integration agenda has primarily focused on regionalization in higher education, as a key strategy for socioeconomic and political growth in African nations at both continental and regional levels (Asmelah and Kassahun, 2022). According to USAID (2014), the landscape of higher education in Africa is therefore undergoing a transformative shift with initiatives inclusive of the Africa Research and Innovation Partnership (ARIP), Africa-Japan Collaborative Research (AJ-CORE), Southern African Institute for Collaborative Research and Innovation Organisation (SAICRIO), African Research Universities Alliance (ARUA), EU-Africa Cooperation, and the Long-term Europe-Africa Partnership on Renewable Energy (LEAP-RE). This transformation is driven by the increasing recognition of the importance of collaborative research and innovation as catalysts for sustainable development. Regional Trade Agreements (RTAs) on the one hand have emerged as pivotal frameworks that facilitate economic integration, with their primary focus on the reduction of tariff and non-tariff barriers to trade, thereby enhancing trade flows among member countries (Bureau and Jean, 2013). This reduction also facilitates easier access to markets, which can lead to increased economic growth and productivity. However, with the growing interest in understanding their impact on other aspects of economic activity, RTAs also appear as policy instruments that foster academic collaboration across borders, leading to joint research projects, knowledge sharing, and capacity building among universities across different member countries (Gaglio et al., 2020).

As African nations continue to navigate the complexities of globalization and regional integration, understanding the dynamics of RTAs in the context of higher education will be crucial

for unlocking the potential of academic collaboration to drive sustainable development. In recent years, African nations have made significant strides towards regional integration, with initiatives such as the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) and Regional Economic Communities (RECs) such as the Southern African Development Community (SADC), aiming to bolster both intra-African and intra-regional trade and cooperation. However, the impact of these economic agreements on higher education remains underexplored. On the other hand, the integration of higher education systems across the continent through the Pan African University (PAU) presents unique opportunities for knowledge sharing, resource pooling, and collaborative research initiatives that can drive innovation and address local and global challenges (DeBlaere et al., 2010). By leveraging the strengths of diverse academic institutions, RTAs can create synergies that enhance the quality and relevance of research outputs.

Despite the potential benefits, several challenges hinder the effective implementation of collaborative research initiatives within the framework of RTAs. These challenges include bureaucratic hurdles, differing educational standards, and limited funding for cross-border research projects. Moreover, the lack of a cohesive strategy for integrating higher education systems across regions often results in fragmented efforts that fail to capitalize on the full potential of collaborative research. It is worth noting that African trade agreements generally include clauses that encourage collaboration and aim to advance science, technology, and innovation, as example, the AfCFTA aims to boost economic integration by promoting industrial development, regional value chains which inherently support technological advancement, innovation, investment cooperation, and intellectual property rights among member states (East African Community, n.d). Nonetheless, there has been little advancement in significant areas such as student and staff mobility and qualification recognition, resulting in limited higher education integration at both regional and continental levels (Afronomicslaw, 2024). This dismal performance is comparable to the low levels of intra-regional trade among African countries, despite several agreements and decades of work. Additionally, the connection between economic integration and higher education in Africa remains a complex dynamic, creating two distinct epistemic communities. This gap highlights the need for further academic and policy dialogue to integrate these crucial areas for sustainable development in Africa.

Addressing these challenges requires a nuanced understanding of the existing barriers and the development of targeted strategies that promote effective collaboration among institutions.

This study aims to fill the existing gap in the literature by examining the potential of RTAs in enhancing collaborative research and innovation within African higher education institutions, addressing the pressing need for integrated approaches to tackle the continent's socio-economic challenges. Hypothetically, RTAs can foster knowledge sharing, technology transfer, and joint research projects between universities and research institutions across the continent, thus suggesting a functional spillover effect created by integration in the economic arena necessitating integration in higher education. By identifying effective strategies and highlighting successful case studies and best practices, this research seeks to provide a comprehensive framework for enhancing collaboration through RTAs, ultimately contributing to the ongoing discourse on the role of trade integration in advancing higher education and promoting sustainable development across the continent.

The interplay of RTA and Higher Education

The interplay between regional trade agreements (RTAs) and higher education is a significant aspect of the globalization of education and research. RTAs, such as the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS), convened by the African Association of Universities (AAU) in April 2004, have been pivotal in shaping the landscape of higher education by promoting cross-border educational services and fostering international collaboration. The GATS aims to liberalize trade in services, including education, thereby encouraging countries to engage in educational exchanges and partnerships that transcend national boundaries (Knight, 2004). This liberalization facilitates the movement of students, faculty, and educational resources, which can enhance the quality and accessibility of higher education globally (Knight, 2004).

One of the primary benefits of RTAs in the context of higher education is the promotion of collaborative research and innovation. As educational institutions increasingly engage in partnerships across borders, they can pool resources, share knowledge, and leverage diverse expertise to tackle complex global challenges (Sidauruk et al., 2019). For instance, international collaborations in research have been shown to yield higher citation impacts, indicating that collaborative efforts often lead to more significant academic contributions (Kliegl & Bates, 2010). This trend is particularly evident in fields such as science and technology, where interdisciplinary and international partnerships are essential for advancing knowledge and innovation (Waltman et al., 2011).

Moreover, the integration of higher education within the framework of RTAs can address disparities in educational access and quality. By facilitating the movement of students and educators, RTAs can help to equalize educational opportunities across different regions, particularly in developing countries (Knight, 2004). This is crucial in the context of global educational inequalities, where access to quality education remains a challenge for many. The GATS has been critiqued for its potential to exacerbate these inequalities; however, it also presents an opportunity for countries to enhance their educational systems through international collaboration and investment (Verger, 2011).

Despite the potential benefits, implementing RTAs in higher education is not without challenges. Issues such as regulatory barriers, differing educational standards, and the commercialization of education can complicate the landscape of international collaboration (Knight, 2004; Verger, 2011). Furthermore, the "spaghetti bowl" effect, characterized by overlapping agreements and regulatory complexities, can hinder the effective integration of higher education within RTAs (Knight, 2004). Therefore, policymakers must create coherent frameworks that facilitate collaboration while addressing these challenges.

Regional Trade Agreements and Higher Education in Africa

In a publication titled "Higher Education in the Framework of African Continental and Regional Integration," by Asmelash and Kassahum (2022), the rationale for regional higher education integration in Africa aims to improve the capacity and competitiveness of African higher education institutions. These institutions, which emerged from colonization with limited universities, face challenges like lack of funding and infrastructural deficiencies. Regional and continental integration consolidates resources, sets benchmarks of excellence, and facilitates student and academic mobility across the continent. However, the absence of a strong regime for free movement remains a major obstacle. The authors emphasize the importance of fostering continental solidarity and overcoming the colonial legacy of higher education in Africa. Regional and continental integration can also foster collaborative research initiatives and transform higher education institutions into "orchestrators of continuous innovation ecosystems," contributing to the overall development of the continent (Grove, 2018).

Despite the potential benefits of RTAs, several challenges impede the effective integration of higher education systems across Africa. Gleeson et al. (2019) highlight the complexities involved in analyzing the impact of trade and investment agreements on various sectors, including

education. The authors note that the specific provisions of RTAs can lead to varying outcomes, depending on how they are interpreted and implemented within national contexts. This variability underscores the need for a nuanced understanding of the barriers that hinder collaborative research and innovation in higher education. In addition, Kohl et al. (2015) categorize different types of trade agreements based on their level of economic integration, revealing that deeper integration agreements tend to yield stronger trade-promoting effects. However, the applicability of these findings to higher education remains underexplored. The lack of cohesive strategies for integrating educational systems across regions often results in fragmented efforts that fail to capitalize on the full potential of collaborative research initiatives.

Nonetheless, the promotion of innovation within higher education is critical for addressing the evolving needs of society. For instance, Cai (2017) argues for the development of a new research field focused on innovations in higher education, emphasizing the importance of integrating innovation studies with higher education research. This integration can provide valuable insights into how RTAs can facilitate collaborative research and innovation by fostering an environment conducive to knowledge exchange and resource sharing. Moreover, Eshbayev (2023) explores the role of education technology and expert systems in transforming traditional approaches to teaching and learning. The findings suggest that leveraging technology can enhance student engagement and promote critical thinking, which are essential components of successful collaborative research initiatives. By integrating technological advancements into higher education, RTAs can further support the development of innovative educational practices that align with the goals of regional integration.

The implications of RTAs for higher education integration extend beyond mere economic considerations. A study by Hunter (2015) discusses the impact of educational reform initiatives on marginalized communities, highlighting the importance of inclusive policies that address the needs of diverse populations. This perspective is particularly relevant in the context of African higher education, where disparities in access and quality persist. As the landscape of higher education continues to evolve, policymakers need to recognize the potential of RTAs to facilitate collaborative research and innovation. As such, Islam & Bhandari (2023) emphasize that the expansion of Free Trade Agreements has been driven by globalization, suggesting that African nations must adapt their educational policies to align with the goals of regional integration. By

fostering an environment that encourages collaboration among higher education institutions, RTAs can play a pivotal role in advancing knowledge and innovation across the continent.

Methods and Materials

The methodology for analyzing the impact of RTAs on higher education integration involves a case study approach, focusing on SADC, the AfCFTA, and the Pan African University, examining their frameworks, successes, and challenges in promoting collaborative research and innovation. The study relied on the use of qualitative data collection methodology, which involves the adoption of descriptive analysis of the data generated.

Results and Discussion

The Southern African Development Community (SADC): Challenges and Opportunities

History

The Southern African Development Community (SADC) was established in 1980 to reduce economic dependence on apartheid-era South Africa and promote regional cooperation among its 16 member states (Moyo et. al., 2020). Effective to this, the SADC Treaty in 1992 transformed the Southern African Development Coordination Community (SADCC) into the SADC, focusing on economic growth, poverty alleviation, peace and security, sustainable development, and harmonized policies among member states (Ngoepe and Saurombe, 2016). As highlighted by Mutanga (2023), the organization has pursued initiatives promoting economic integration, trade liberalization, and sustainable development, including the establishment of the SADC Free Trade Area in 2008. However, challenges like political instability, economic disparities, and inadequate infrastructure have hindered progress (Mlambo and Ogunnubi, 2018). In recent years, SADC has recognized the importance of fostering innovation and research collaboration as key drivers of economic development, with initiatives aiming to enhance higher education integration and promote collaborative research among member states.

Success stories

Through various initiatives and frameworks, SADC aims to improve educational quality, promote research collaboration, and drive innovation across its member states. The SADC Protocol on Education and Training, established in 2000, aims to harmonize education systems, promote cooperation across sectors, and establish a training fund (SADC, n.d). It covers basic education, intermediate education and training, higher education, distance education, research and

development, and lifelong learning. The protocol has guided initiatives such as regional policies, student mobility initiatives, and capacity building through regional collaborations (SADC, n.d).

However, challenges remain, such as inadequate infrastructure, varying educational standards, and external factors like the COVID-19 pandemic. According to SADC (n.d), the regional economic community has launched collaborative research initiatives, such as the Southern African Regional Universities Association's Curriculum Innovation Network (SCIN) and the Programme for Climate Change Capacity Development (PCCCD), to address these challenges. Moreover, the Southern African Regional Universities Association (SARUA) Curriculum Innovation Network (SCIN), develops the regional curriculum and coursework for a Master's Programme in Climate Change and Sustainable Development (SADC, n.d). SADC also strengthens institutional capacities through capacity-building programs, facilitating workshops and training sessions to improve university staff and researchers. Key areas needing specialized training are identified, leading to the establishment of Centres of Excellence in specific fields for research collaboration and innovation.

As highlighted by Asmelash and Kassahum (2022), the Regional Qualifications Frameworks (RQF), adopted in 2011 and implemented in 2017, aims to promote mutual recognition of qualifications within SADC and beyond, covering all education levels and categories, focusing on knowledge, skills, and autonomy and responsibility. The SADC is promoting academic mobility in higher education through regional student exchange programs and qualifications recognition (SAURA-Admin, 2023). The Regional Economic Community has implemented legal instruments to promote regional mobility, including the Education and Training Protocol of 1997-2020, the Facilitation of Movement of Persons Protocol of 2005, the 2017 Trade in Services Protocol, and the 2020-2025 Action Plan on Labor Migration (Asmelash and Kassahum, 2022). These protocols require mechanisms for mutual recognition of academic and professional qualifications and aim to enhance cultural exchange and broaden academic perspectives.

Opportunities and Challenges for SADC to Facilitate Collaborative Research and Innovation in Higher Education Integration through RTAs

The SADC, through transport corridors & spatial development initiatives emphasizes the importance of spatial integration to stimulate trade facilitation, which is also critical for enhancing collaborative research efforts. Pretorius et al. (2017) argue that overcoming connectivity gaps

through improved infrastructure is essential for effective economic integration. By investing in transportation and communication infrastructure, the SADC can enhance access to research resources and foster collaboration among universities and research institutions across member states. This infrastructure development can facilitate joint research initiatives, allowing institutions to share data, resources, and expertise more effectively. For instance, these activities could encourage the mobility of students and academic staff across member states. Treating SADC students as local students for tuition purposes fosters an environment where scholars can engage in collaborative research without the barriers of high costs or complex admission processes (SADC, n.d). This mobility enhances the sharing of knowledge and expertise, which is vital for innovation.

However, challenges remain in realizing the full potential of the SADC for collaborative research. Gonese et al., (2023) highlight that trade openness in SADC countries has not necessarily translated into reduced unemployment or improved educational outcomes, suggesting a need to revisit education policies in the region. The quality of education and the alignment of academic programs with regional research priorities are crucial for fostering effective collaboration. The SADC through its protocol on education can play a pivotal role in addressing these issues by promoting curriculum development that aligns with regional needs and encourages interdisciplinary research. Additionally, the SADC's focus on foreign direct investment (FDI) can further enhance collaborative research opportunities. Effective to that, trade liberalization is crucial for attracting FDI, which can provide the necessary resources for research and innovation (Bezuidenhout & Naudé, 2010). By fostering partnerships with foreign investors, the SADC can also leverage additional funding and expertise to support collaborative research initiatives among member institutions.

Furthermore, Adotevi and Kyari (2020) state that to strengthen its attempts at educational integration, SADC should take a cue from ECOWAS's approaches to standardization of educational systems. It is possible to arrange regular ministerial meetings to review developments, exchange best practices, and revise educational regulations. Benchmarks for university education can be designed to standardize quality across schools, promoting better collaboration in research and education. Regardless of socioeconomic background, inclusive education policies can be implemented to guarantee that all individuals have equitable access to high-quality education. Moreover, member-state communication can be improved by

implementing cross-border language promotion, while establishing quality assurance programs can help increase the legitimacy of educational establishments (Adoteci and Kyari, 2020). To ensure that educational reforms are implemented successfully, it is possible to monitor learning successes as a means of regularly evaluating educational outcomes and pinpointing areas for improvement. These tactics can aid SADC in becoming better at facilitating collaborative research and innovation.

The AfCFTA: A Catalyst for Pan-African Collaboration

The Prospects of the AfCFTA in Facilitating Collaborative Research and Innovation in Higher Education Integration

According to the above discussion, SADC can serve as a framework for leveraging the AfCFTA, particularly in enhancing collaborative research and innovation in higher education. However, the regional economic grouping has only laid some groundwork while the AfCFTA presents a more comprehensive opportunity for advancing research and innovation through enhanced collaboration across Africa. The African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), established in 2018, aims to promote economic integration and growth by creating a single market for goods and services among its member states (African Union, 2012). This case study examines the potential of AfCFTA's protocols in facilitating collaborative research and innovation within African universities, highlighting key areas of impact and best practices.

Cooperation in the domains of science, technology, and education has been a recurring theme in the legal and policy frameworks supporting African integration, ranging from the Organization for African Unity's 1963 Charter to the 2018 Agreement establishing the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) (Asmelash and Kassahum, 2022). Therefore, a thorough knowledge of the form and extent of higher education in Africa requires a grasp of this legal institutional architecture. Furthermore, Asmelash and Kassahum (2022) state that since the AfCFTA's Protocol on Trade in Services mandates the reciprocal recognition of qualifications such as experience, education, licenses, and certifications, education continues to play a significant role in this most recent key legislative instrument of economic integration in Africa.

African higher education institutions can improve their research collaboration by using the framework that the AfCFTA offers. The agreement can enable collaborative research activities aimed at tackling regional issues by diminishing trade obstacles and encouraging cooperation. Universities can pool resources and expertise through the creation of regional

research networks, which can result in creative solutions that benefit member states. To address societal issues, Olesika (2021) highlights the value of collaborative research and suggests that the AfCFTA can open up possibilities for academic alliances that improve research output.

Collaborative research in higher education is greatly aided by the availability of financial and infrastructural resources. The AfCFTA has the potential to improve funding prospects for collaborative research projects by drawing in capital from both local and foreign investors. Tahili et al. (2022) emphasize that innovative ideas and successful initiatives depend on networking for collaboration. Through the creation of regional financial organizations or grant programs designed especially for joint ventures, the AfCFTA can encourage innovation and cooperation in research. Furthermore, the AfCFTA's integration of higher education institutions has the potential to forge a single market that will facilitate funding for Research & Development initiatives. This strategy is in line with the study by Fuad et al. (2020), which highlights the significance of an innovation culture in education for driving collaborative research efforts.

Building capacity and transferring technology across African higher education institutions can be facilitated by the AfCFTA. Innovation requires the transfer of knowledge and technology, which the agreement may improve by encouraging university-industry relationships. In his discussion on the benefits of collaborative learning between the workforce, students, and lecturers, Marsofiyati (2024) highlights the necessity of capacity building as a means of raising educational standards and preparing students for the workforce. Investing in training programs and workshops that enhance the skills of researchers and faculty members can significantly improve the region's capacity for innovation. This approach is crucial for ensuring that the benefits of trade integration are realized across various sectors, as highlighted by (Appiah et al., 2023).

The creation of entrepreneurial ecosystems that foster innovation in higher education can be facilitated by the AfCFTA. This agreement can promote the establishment of innovation hubs and incubators that support startups and encourage entrepreneurship by encouraging collaboration between universities and industry. According to Yu, et.al. (2024), local industries can become more competitive and stimulate industrial growth by being integrated into regional value chains. Creating an environment conducive to innovation and entrepreneurship is essential for maximizing the benefits of trade integration. The AfCFTA thus can provide a framework for these

collaborations, enabling universities to play a more active role in driving economic development through innovation.

The Protocol on Intellectual Property Rights of the AfCFTA, adopted in 2023 promotes cooperation and investment and intellectual property rights (African Union, 2012). This protocol aims to establish harmonized rules for the protection of enforcement of intellectual property across member states, thereby facilitating technological transfer and innovation. As collaborative research initiatives expand under the AfCFTA, it is essential to address ethical considerations and ensure research integrity. The agreement can promote best practices in research ethics by establishing guidelines for collaboration that respect the rights and contributions of all parties involved. This is particularly important in the context of regional partnerships, where diverse stakeholders may have varying expectations and norms. By fostering a culture of ethical research practices, the AfCFTA can enhance the credibility and impact of collaborative research outcomes, ensuring that they contribute positively to the development of member states. Jiang (2023) emphasizes the importance of think tanks in improving education policies and practices through innovative ideas and solutions, which can be integrated into the ethical frameworks established by the AfCFTA.

Challenges

The AfCFTA as indicated in the above discussions holds significant promise for enhancing collaborative research and innovation within African higher education. However, several challenges may impede its effectiveness in achieving these objectives. This section discusses key challenges that the AfCFTA may face in facilitating collaborative research and innovation.

The AfCFTA is likely to face challenges due to varying levels of institutional capacity and governance among member states. Economic disparities and weaker institutions can hinder effective collaboration, leading to fragmented efforts and limited benefits for higher education integration (Ezugwu, 2023). Therefore, the effectiveness of the AfCFTA depends on robust governance structures that facilitate cooperation among member states, with clear guidelines and mechanisms for collaboration enhancing the potential for meaningful partnerships.

As aforementioned, access to funding is crucial for fostering collaborative research and innovation, as highlighted by the AfCFTA. However, many African countries face budget constraints and limited funding opportunities, hindering their ability to engage in research.

Regional funding mechanisms are needed to address this challenge (Ibrahim et, al., 2023). Additionally, competition for funding among sectors can create tensions, hindering collaboration in higher education, hence, policies generating internal and external social capital are essential for fostering collaboration among researchers and institutions. Furthermore, according to Alamri et. al. (2020), cultural and contextual differences among member states can hinder collaborative research under the AfCFTA, affecting communication, dynamics, and effectiveness of research partnerships. Addressing these cultural nuances is crucial for successful collaborations. Additionally, varying levels of commitment to research and innovation across member states can create disparities in collaboration outcomes, with some countries prioritizing research initiatives more than others, leading to an uneven distribution of benefits from collaborative efforts.

As highlighted by Asmelash and Kassahum (2022), AfCFTA members must ensure equal opportunities for mutual recognition agreements in the promotion of intra-regional trade and avoid discriminatory unilateral recognitions, but the Protocol lacks a comprehensive legal framework for academic qualification mutual recognition or harmonization. Addressing these challenges is crucial for the AfCFTA to effectively facilitate collaborative research and innovation in higher education.

Lastly, the AfCFTA does not have a specific Protocol on education or higher education. This absence poses challenges for collaborative research and innovation, as it limits formal frameworks for student mobility, qualification recognition, and program harmonization across member states. Without these structures, achieving the integration of higher education systems remains difficult, hindering the potential for regional cooperation and economic development. Efforts like the African Higher Education Harmonization Strategy exist but require stronger political will and infrastructure improvements to be effective.

The Pan African University: A Model for Regional Integration

History

The Pan-African University (PAU) was established to provide high-level human resources and researchers for development in Africa. Its operating model leverages the expertise of top African universities and research centers to establish regional knowledge hubs, addressing the continent's critical mass of high-level human resources (Shabani, 2023). As highlighted by The Pan African University (n.d), the PAU is a project driven by major policy frameworks of the African Union Commission, including the Vision of the African Union, the Second Decade of

Education, and the Consolidated Plan of Action for Science and Technology. It aims to revitalize higher education and research in Africa, enhancing its excellence, local relevance, and global competitiveness, and establishing it at the core of Africa's development. The Pan-African University comprises five regional institutes in five African regions, covering knowledge areas such as Space Science in South Africa, Water and Energy in Algeria, Basic Sciences, Technology and Innovation in Kenya, Life and Earth Sciences in Nigeria, and Governance, Humanities and Social Sciences in Cameroon, as such, these institutes network with other institutions in their respective fields of scholarship (Shabani, 2023).

Success Stories

The Pan African University (PAU) serves as a pivotal case study in understanding how collaborative research and innovation can be facilitated through regional trade agreements and higher education integration in Africa. Established to enhance the continent's capacity for scientific and technological advancement, PAU operates under the auspices of the African Union and aims to foster collaboration among member states. In terms of research outputs and patents, PAU has demonstrated significant productivity in research, with its institutes registering nine patents attributed to students from the Pan African University of Science and Technology (PAUSTI) in Kenya (African Union, 2021). Additionally, over the period from 2012 to 2021, PAU students and staff published around 600 scientific articles in peer-reviewed journals, showcasing the university's commitment to advancing knowledge and innovation (African Union, 2021). Fostering entrepreneurship is a core pillar of PAU's strategic vision. To this end, the African Union (2021) highlights that the institution launched the PAU Innovation Challenge to promote an entrepreneurial mindset among students, aiming to translate research into market-oriented products. This initiative is supported by partnerships with organizations like GIZ and the African Development Bank, enhancing PAU's financial sustainability through innovative educational programs.

Integration Through Regional Trade Agreements

PAU's approach to higher education integration is closely linked with regional trade agreements that facilitate collaboration across borders. These agreements enable institutions to share resources, knowledge, and best practices, thus enhancing educational outcomes and research capabilities. For instance, the adoption of the PAU Strategic Plan (2020-2024) reflects an organized effort to streamline operations and enhance collaboration among member states

(African Union, 2020). This plan includes developing policies that improve efficiency in research activities, ensuring that PAU aligns with international educational standards while addressing local challenges.

It is worth noting that African RTAs differ from the European model due to their economic context. The European model, developed in an industrial context, facilitates a smoother transition, while African economies lack trade complementarity, requiring a tailored approach to collaboration focusing on synergies among diverse institutions (Gathii, 2011). The PAU as such exemplifies how RTAs can maintain friendly trade relations among countries, which is vital for educational institutions seeking to collaborate across borders. The African higher education institution does this by fostering partnerships among member states, thereby creating a conducive environment for collaborative research and innovation. The flexibility of African regional trade agreements, as noted by Gathii (2011), allows for adaptive legal regimes that can support the unique needs of higher education institutions. This flexibility is crucial for the PAU as it navigates the diverse educational landscapes of its member countries. Moreover, the PAU's strategic positioning allows it to address the challenges posed by trade diversion, which is often a concern in the context of preferential trade agreements. As argued by Cheong et al. (2014), while trade agreements can curtail trade creation and lead to trade diversion, they also present opportunities for targeted collaboration that can enhance research outcomes. The PAU can therefore utilize this insight to develop partnerships that prioritize shared research interests and collaborative projects, thereby mitigating the risks associated with trade diversion.

The collaborative nature of research in higher education is pivotal for enhancing research outcomes, particularly in the context of the Pan African University. As highlighted by Sidauruk et al. (2019), partnerships among academic institutions can significantly improve the quality and impact of research initiatives. This assertion is particularly relevant when considering the integration facilitated by regional trade agreements (RTAs) in Africa, which can provide a framework for fostering such collaborations. The emphasis on collaborative research is particularly critical in the African context, where many countries have limited resources and research capacities. As noted by Hedt-Gauthier et al. (2019), disparities in research infrastructure and access to funding can restrict the ability of African researchers to lead collaborative projects effectively, a situation that underscores the importance of RTAs in creating networks that facilitate knowledge sharing and resource allocation among institutions. The PAU can in this case

act as a central hub for these collaborations, promoting joint projects that draw on the expertise of various member institutions and fostering a culture of cooperation rather than competition. The evolution of RTAs and their implications for higher education are also discussed by Bao and Wang (2019), who argue that the shift toward regional economic integration is reshaping globalization patterns. This shift thus is reflected in the PAU's strategic positioning within the African Union's agenda for educational integration, which seeks to enhance the continent's global competitiveness.

Challenges for PAU integration through RTAs

The integration of the Pan African University (PAU) through regional trade agreements (RTAs) faces several challenges that stem from the unique socio-economic and political landscape of Africa. These challenges can hinder the effectiveness of collaborative research and innovation initiatives that the PAU aims to promote across the continent.

One significant challenge is the nascent state of research infrastructure in many African countries. As highlighted by Hedt-Gauthier et al. (2019), many African nations lack the necessary research facilities and trained personnel to lead collaborative projects effectively. This deficiency limits the capacity of institutions to engage in meaningful partnerships and hinders the development of robust research networks. The PAU, while positioned to facilitate collaboration, must navigate these infrastructural limitations as a collaborative research and innovation hub to ensure that member institutions can contribute effectively to joint research initiatives.

Moreover, the fragmentation of research efforts across the continent presents another challenge. As emphasized by Pouris (2017), African science collaboration often flows through international channels, with limited intra-African partnerships, thus causing fragmentation which can lead to a lack of coherence in research priorities and objectives. As a result, it becomes complex for the PAU to align its initiatives with the broader goals of regional integration. The PAU must work to foster a more unified approach to research collaboration that transcends national boundaries and encourages shared objectives among member institutions.

Inadequate funding persists as a significant barrier to the development of higher education integration in Africa. Many universities lack the necessary financial resources to improve infrastructure, hire qualified academics, and invest in research capabilities, as governments have historically prioritized basic education over higher education, leading to a neglect of tertiary institutions (Khaled, 2023). Thus, chronic underfunding, coupled with low wages and poor career

prospects for researchers, significantly curtails the potential of African researchers (Izugbara et al., 2017). This lack of investment not only affects the quality of research output but also discourages collaboration, as institutions may be reluctant to engage in partnerships that do not offer immediate benefits or adequate support.

To sum it up, while the PAU has the potential to enhance collaboration and innovation in higher education integration through regional trade agreements, it faces significant challenges related to research infrastructure, fragmentation, and inadequate funding. Addressing these challenges will be crucial for the PAU to fulfill its mission of fostering collaborative research and innovation across Africa.

CONCLUSION AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

In conclusion, RTAs promote collaborative research among higher education institutions by providing a framework for partnerships across borders, addressing regional challenges, and leveraging diverse expertise. This integration leads to increased research output and innovation, particularly in sectors like science and technology studies. Successful collaboration depends on policy alignment among member states, as disparities can hinder effective collaboration. Adequate infrastructure, including communication and transportation networks, is crucial for facilitating collaborative research, enhancing connectivity, and enabling researchers to engage more effectively across borders. Capacity building within institutions is necessary for effective engagement in collaborative research, including training in research methodologies, project management, and technology use for communication and data sharing.

Based on the discussed case studies, and the present opportunities in facilitating collaborative research and innovation in higher education integration, some key recommendations are inclusive of, but are limited to the following;

This study recommends that to strengthen educational and research policies, there is a need for the harmonization of policies, investment in infrastructure, promoting of interdisciplinary research, developing capacity-building programs, monitoring and evaluating outcomes, and fostering international partnerships. Member states of both the SADC and AfCFTA should harmonize regional and continental policies to create a more conducive environment for collaboration, establishing common standards and protocols for research practices. In addition, governments and regional bodies should prioritize investment in infrastructure that supports research collaboration, such as digital platforms for communication

and data sharing. Encouraging interdisciplinary research initiatives can enhance the relevance and impact of collaborative efforts. Similarly, capacity-building programs for researchers and educators can enhance their skills and competencies in collaborative research, monitoring and evaluating outcomes of collaborative research initiatives is also crucial to identify successful strategies and areas for improvement. Finally, fostering international partnerships can provide additional resources and expertise, enhancing the capacity for collaborative research and facilitating knowledge exchange and innovation.

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