

ADVANCING HIGHER EDUCATION INTEGRATION THROUGH THE AFRICAN CONTINENTAL FREE TRADE AREA (AfCFTA): REFLECTIONS FROM THE EAST AFRICA COMMUNITY (EAC)

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Abstract

The African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) is a grand attempt at economic integration in the continent of Africa. It remains one of Africa's boldest Integration ventures. Though enormous publicity has been dedicated to its potential economic benefits, the current paper explores the more general possibilities of AfCFTA towards further integrating African higher education systems. The objective of the paper was to evaluate the extent to which AfCFTA can be leveraged to improve higher education integration and recommends steps to address the challenges hindering its achievement. A desktop research approach was used in this research, drawing together inputs from a variety of credible sources. These included conference presentations, technical reports accessed from relevant websites, as well as consultations with specialists. These ongoing efforts have been central in supporting education levels and harmonizing accreditation processes, consequently accelerating the integration of African nations.¹ The African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) presents an opportunity to enhance promotion of regional integration both in trade as well as in higher education. The paper concludes that AfCFTA can serve as a catalyst for a more cohesive, competitive, and globally relevant African higher education system if effectively implemented alongside supportive education policies.

¹African Development Bank, *The African Higher Education and the Continental Free Trade Area* (2020).

Keywords: AfCFTA, Higher Education Integration, East African Community (EAC), Regional Integration, Academic Mobility, Infrastructure Development, Pan African Quality Assurance Framework, Agenda 2063

1.0 INTRODUCTION

The establishment of the African Continental Free Trade Area represents a landmark step toward deepening economic integration across the African continent.² Higher education integration is a critical driver of Africa's sustainable economic growth and development, especially in light of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA). Though the potential of the AfCFTA to boost trade and economic cooperation has received attention, its transformative potential to advance higher education integration in Africa has not been explored. AfCFTA has the potential to boost trade and economic cooperation, its transformative potential to higher education systems in Africa is not realized. African higher education is fragmented with significant mobility barriers, uneven recognition of qualifications, and minimal regional cooperation³.

The potential of AfCFTA to increase cross-border higher education mobility, promote research partnerships and standardize educational qualifications presents an opportunity for the creation of an integrated and competitive knowledge economy⁴. The East African Community (EAC), comprising countries such as Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, Rwanda, Burundi, and South Sudan, provides a valuable regional context for examining higher education integration in Africa. The EAC has made notable progress

² Ajewumi, Oluwatosin Esther, Jide Adedamola Afolabi, and Ikenna Joe-Akunne. "Regional trade agreements and economic integration in Africa: assessing the impact of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA)." *World Journal of Advanced Research and Reviews* 23, no. 3 (2024): 2783-280.

³ Rosy Torrent, *HAQAA2 Materials Part 1 — Chapter 1: The Analytical Framework of Regional or Continental Integration Processes* (2022).

⁴ Khan, Assad Mehmood. "Regional Integration In Africa: The Political Economy Of The African Continental Free Trade Area (Afcfta)." *Policy Journal of Social Science Review* 3, no. 4 (2025): 320-330.

in regional cooperation through frameworks such as the Common Market Protocol, which promotes the free movement of goods, services, labour, and capital⁵. In the higher education sector, initiatives such as the Inter-University Council for East Africa (IUCEA) have played a pivotal role in harmonizing curricula, promoting quality assurance, and facilitating academic mobility within the region⁶. These efforts position the EAC as a strategic entry point for understanding how regional experiences can inform broader continental integration under AfCFTA.

The aim of this paper is to evaluate the extent to which AfCFTA can be leveraged to improve higher education integration and recommends steps to address the challenges hindering its achievement⁷. The paper consists of various sections including objectives, methodology, theoretical framework, selected high level African regional integration activities in recent years, observations and discussion, opportunities to integrate higher education, challenges to higher education integration, recommendations and conclusions.

2.0 OBJECTIVES

The objective of this paper was to to evaluate the extent to which AfCFTA can be leveraged to improve higher education integration and recommends steps to address the challenges hindering its achievement.

⁵ Kuria, Mike, and Gaspard Banyankimbona. "A regional perspective: higher education in the East African Community." *Materials on African Regional and Continental Integration in Higher Education*: 285.

⁶ Nkunya, Mayunga HH. "The contribution of university research to the achievement of sustainable development goals within the context of the East African Community Common Higher Education Area." *African Journal of Rural Development* 2, no. 3 (2017): 331-339.

⁷ UNESCO, *Building the African Higher Education System Through Collaboration* (2023).

3.0 METHODOLOGY

A desktop research approach was used in this research, drawing together inputs from a variety of credible sources. These included conference presentations, technical reports accessed from relevant websites, as well as consultations with specialists. The resource individuals used were recognizable specialists in the field of regional and continental integration, particularly within the framework of Economics and tertiary education. This multi-source triangulation facilitated the creation of an extensive perception of the subject to ensure the inclusion of both empirical facts and expert opinion to inform the research process.

4.0 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study will be informed by Neo-Functionalism theory of Regional Integration in Higher Education. Its founder was Ernst B. Haas in the 1950s which suggests that integration begins in specialized, technical areas where cooperation is spurred by the quest for practical solutions, thereby creating political integration. Neo-functionalism in the context of higher education contends that in the AfCFTA, cooperation in education can be started through initiatives like student exchanges, joint research, and mutual recognition of qualifications. These, driven at first by academic and professional necessity, can evolve into deeper integration, an African higher education space⁸. The AfCFTA can facilitate cross-border movement of students and scholars and enhance regional cooperation on education standards and policy frameworks. The theory is relevant to the study since AfCFTA's economic integration can stimulate

⁸ Philippe C. Schmitter, *Neo-functionalism*, in EUROPEAN INTEGRATION THEORY 45–59 (A. Wiener & T. Diez eds., Oxford University Press, 2005).

harmonization of higher education systems, mutual recognition of qualifications, and student mobility within the EAC.

5.0 SELECTED HIGH LEVEL AFRICAN REGIONAL INTEGRATION ACTIVITIES IN EAST AFRICA

The section analyzes a range of developments, some resulting from the AfCFTA and others focused on making college education across Africa more linked. We need a plan that merges the AfCFTA and Higher Education better. AfCFTA's integration now becomes more important and needed, thanks to recent regional events affecting East Africa and the whole continent.

5.1 Establish a Digital Leaders Forum for EAC and create a Regional Payment System Masterplan in May 2025

May 2025 saw the EAC hosting its Digital Leaders Forum to focus on digital public infrastructure. The forum provided an overview of advancements and motivated development of shared digital infrastructure. Meanwhile, the EAC Region's Payment System Master Plan got approval, helping to further financial and digital trade in the bloc. With these new technologies, higher education can function well, online learning is possible and international academic and financial activities are now easier⁹. The EAC started work on developing its 7th Development Strategy in May 2025. In May 2025, the East African Community began work on its 7th Development Strategy which would cover the years 2026/27 through 2030/31. It helps guide where the EAC goes in the future and it offers a chance to make higher education goals a key part of the main regional development aims¹⁰.

⁹ Ali, Wahab. "Online and remote learning in higher education institutes: A necessity in light of COVID-19 pandemic." *Higher education studies* 10, no. 3 (2020): 16-25.

¹⁰ Press Releases, EAST AFRICAN COMMUNITY (May 14, 2025), <https://www.eac.int/press-releases> (last visited May 26, 2025).

Digital Leaders Forum and the emphasis on digital public infrastructure signal a shift toward technology-driven regional integration. This is critical for higher education under the African Continental Free Trade Area, as digital platforms support virtual learning, joint research, credit transfers, and cross-border university partnerships. Enhanced digital infrastructure reduces geographical barriers, making it easier for institutions within the EAC to harmonize curricula and deliver joint programs, thereby aligning with AfCFTA's objective of facilitating the movement of services, including education¹¹.

5.2 First EACARNRI International Conference (2025).

In May 2025, IUCEA called for papers to be submitted for the first East African Community Academic and Research Network for Regional Integration (EACARNRI) International Conference. Hosted under the theme “Academics and Researchers’ Role in East African Community Integration,” the conference will engage scholars on several subthemes, for example, “Education, Science and Technology Transfer and Innovation in the EAC: Challenges and Opportunities” and “The East Africa Common Higher Education Area.” These topics stress how much academia and research are contributing to building stronger links among countries in the East African Community¹². This aligns closely with the study’s focus on how higher education can serve as a driver of integration under AfCFTA. It highlights universities and research institutions as key actors in generating knowledge, shaping policy discourse, and promoting cross-border collaboration which are core elements necessary for harmonizing education systems

¹¹ Njiriri, Juliana. "From Lecture Halls to Continental Trade Halls: Impact of AfCFTA and other African Trade Agreements on Continental Higher Education."

¹² CALL FOR PAPERS : THE FIRST EACARNRI INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE, INTER-UNIVERSITY COUNCIL FOR EAST AFRICA (May 21, 2025), <https://www.iucea.org/call-for-papers-the-first-eacarnri-international-conference/> (last visited May 26, 2025).

across EAC partner states. In addition, conference underscores existing regional efforts within the EAC to build a common higher education space. These efforts provide a practical foundation and valuable lessons for broader continental integration under AfCFTA.

5.3 In April 2025, the First AfCFTA Higher Education Integration Conference was held in Yaoundé, Cameroon.

In 2025, Cameroon hosted an important meeting in Yaoundé that strongly linked the AfCFTA to the future of university education throughout Africa. This conference involved policymakers, leaders from African universities and strategic partners. Taking part in the AfCFTA, participants discussed how modernizing Africa's higher education could be accomplished using academic exchanges, comparable qualifications and higher investment in education and research¹³. The emphasis on academic exchanges and mutual recognition of qualifications directly relates to ongoing challenges within the EAC, where disparities in curricula, accreditation systems, and institutional capacity hinder seamless student and labour mobility. The Yaoundé discussions provide practical strategies such as standardization frameworks and regional qualification systems that the study can draw upon to assess or recommend policy interventions within the EAC¹⁴

¹³ Bridging trade and knowledge: AfCFTA Conference paves the way for higher education integration in Africa, OBREAL (Apr. 8, 2025), <https://obreal.org/bridging-trade-and-knowledge-afcfta-conference-paves-the-way-for-higher-education-integration-in-africa/> (last visited May 26, 2025).

¹⁴ Africa, Kiiza. *Assessing Five Years of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA): Proposals on Potential Amendments*. No. 215. Research Paper, 2025.

5.4 The 43rd edition of the African Union Executive Council's Ordinary Session

On July 13, 2023, in Nairobi, Kenya, the 43rd Ordinary Session of the Executive Council of the African Union helped confirm Africa's determination to become united. African ministers discussed important topics, including poverty, political unrest and effects of climate change that are still holding back the continent's economic and social development in spite of its great natural and human potential.

A strong message from the session was that African countries must increase their integration, especially by taking full advantage of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA). Ever since it began in 2021, authorities have recognized the AfCFTA for transforming trade by removing barriers, encouraging intra-continental business and helping the growth of all African economies. The agreement is gaining recognition in academic and policy writing as crucial for lasting development, regional economic teamwork, boosting industries and lessening the continent's need for support from abroad.

This idea matches with wider such projects, including HAQAA3, the third phase of the Harmonization of African Higher Education Quality Assurance and Accreditation. According to HAQAA3, a skilled and mobile group of workers is essential for Africa's development. HAQAA3 supports AfCFTA's aim of promoting the free circulation of people, goods and services across borders by advancing higher education unification, mutual understanding of qualifications and support for student and professional mobility.

The importance of the AfCFTA, which commenced in 2021, is evident in its impact on easing trading restrictions and increasing trade within Africa, fostering growth in intra

African trade. As mentioned in the literature on regional economic cooperation, AfCFTA is a block of collaboration focus for development cooperation that hinders sustainable growth (region-wide) by economic fragmentation that is barely addressed on an inter-continental basis. This aligns with the purpose of HAQAA3 which aims to prepare the African states with the relevant human capital, skilled professionals, and administrators for the development of trade and democracy. The overarching belief behind AfCFTA paves way for the unrestricted cross-border movement of people and goods which has the capacity to fully transform the continent's socio-economic landscape to ensure universal prosperity on the continent. Despite being endowed with abundant mineral and energy supplies as well as agricultural riches, the continent struggles with poorly integrated market structures which lead to inefficient trade systems. One can conclude from studies that regional convergence policies stimulate further diversification of the economy and development of industries, which is critical to reduce dependence on external assistance and achieve sustainable self-sufficiency in the long term¹⁵.

Overcoming Historical Divisions and Advancing Regional Mobility

In Africa, unity and cooperation remains severely underdeveloped. This is primarily as a result of colonialism era borders that have been retained, even to the modern day. Borders that have historically, economically, and culturally divided the continent has always bifurcated regional integration, and the modern legacy is fully observable in the visa policies that exist today. These policies prevent the free movement of people and

¹⁵ R. Baldwin & S.J. Evenett, THE AFCFTA AND THE FUTURE OF AFRICAN TRADE (Oxford University Press, 2022).

greatly limit trade, academic, professional activities, and intellectual exchange - all fundamental factors of true regional integration¹⁶.

The African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) aims to promote the integration of African economies. The removal of trade barriers within the continent is anticipated to greatly stimulate economic growth and interdependence among the African nations. Free intra-continental movement of people for work, study, and trade would further accelerate the prosperity of the continent. Other bordering economies will be eager to join the AfCFTA and the inclusion will greatly support the intention of the AfCFTA. Heightened economic engagement will foster a united African identity and collective purpose as these initiatives will further strengthen the South-South cooperation.

5.5 IUCEA Assessor Training: Enhancing Higher Education Capacity (May 2024)

The Inter-University Council for East Africa (IUCEA)¹⁷ organized a specialized training workshop for assessors involved in the EAC Regional Programme Accreditation initiative in Nairobi from May 23–24, 2024. The goal of the workshop was to improve assessors' ability to consistently and impartially apply regional quality assurance frameworks, which include standards, guidelines, and assessment tools¹⁸.

In her remarks, the IUCEA Executive Secretary emphasized the value of enhancing institutional capacity by giving attendees the tools they need to act as peer reviewers and program developers in their own organizations. Representatives from East African

¹⁶ Jacqueline E. Cohen & Roger G. Noll, *THE POLITICS OF BORDERS AND IMMIGRATION IN AFRICA: CHALLENGES TO REGIONAL INTEGRATION* (Cambridge University Press, 2021).

¹⁷ INTER-UNIVERSITY COUNCIL FOR EAST AFRICA, *IUCEA Annual General Meeting Scheduled for 17th-18th July 2024 in Juba, South Sudan* (July 10, 2024).

¹⁸ INTER-UNIVERSITY COUNCIL FOR EAST AFRICA, *IUCEA Annual General Meeting Scheduled for 17th-18th July 2024 in Juba, South Sudan* (July 10, 2024).

universities and the Africa Centres of Excellence, located in Malawi and Mozambique, participated in the training (IUCEA, 2024)¹⁹. The project demonstrates IUCEA's overarching goal of establishing a strong and cohesive higher education system in East Africa, which is essential to the effectiveness of the AfCFTA's mutual recognition frameworks.

5.6 Promoting Regional Accreditation through the Use of IUCEA's Quality Assurance System (2006–2024)

Since 2006, the Inter-University Council for East Africa (IUCEA) has been spearheading the effort to establish a regional Quality Assurance (QA) system in order to standardize higher education standards across the East African Community (EAC). In 2020, IUCEA introduced a regional framework for program accreditation, expanding upon its prior QA infrastructure. The framework aims to standardize academic offerings, ensure consistency in program delivery, and raise the standard of higher education institutions throughout the region.

Building on its pre-existing QA foundation, IUCEA introduced a comprehensive framework for regional program accreditation in 2020. The goal of this project was to improve educational quality across the region and standardize evaluation practices. The framework supports academic excellence as well as labour, staff, and student mobility among EAC nations, reflecting the larger goal of creating a Common Higher Education Area.

¹⁹ INTER-UNIVERSITY COUNCIL FOR EAST AFRICA, IUCEA Annual General Meeting Scheduled for 17th-18th July 2024 in Juba, South Sudan (July 10, 2024).

In order to train potential assessors in the use of regional accreditation tools, IUCEA called for applications in 2023. A phased training approach was required due to the overwhelming response. Participants from important thematic areas like human and animal health, engineering, ICT, education, agriculture, pharmacy, and data science (IUCEA,2024) attended the second cohort of the workshop in Nairobi in 2024²⁰.

Citing DAAD's longstanding partnership with IUCEA, the German Academic Exchange Service's (DAAD) Africa Regional Director stated the organization's strong interest in supporting the initiative. She emphasized that the goals of DAAD are to support institutional internationalization, promote academic quality, and harmonize East African higher education systems. A memorandum of understanding that prioritizes capacity building and program alignment formalizes the partnership, which has been in place for more than 20 years (IUCEA, 2024)²¹.

Academic programs must first receive national approval from the relevant National Council or Commission for Higher Education in order to be eligible for EAC regional accreditation. By indicating academic excellence in curriculum design, faculty standards, learning infrastructure, and student support services, regional accreditation acts as a distinguishing mark. Additionally, it makes cross-border recognition easier. Additionally, it promotes easier mobility for students and graduates, increases cross-border recognition of qualifications, and supports the larger objectives of the AfCFTA and regional integration ²²(IUCEA, 2024).

²⁰ INTER-UNIVERSITY COUNCIL FOR EAST AFRICA, IUCEA Annual General Meeting Scheduled for 17th-18th July 2024 in Juba, South Sudan (July 10, 2024).

²¹ INTER-UNIVERSITY COUNCIL FOR EAST AFRICA, IUCEA Annual General Meeting Scheduled for 17th-18th July 2024 in Juba, South Sudan (July 10, 2024).

²² INTER-UNIVERSITY COUNCIL FOR EAST AFRICA, IUCEA Annual General Meeting Scheduled for 17th-18th July 2024 in Juba, South Sudan (July 10, 2024).

5.7 The East Africa Alliance Initiative: Establishing an Ecosystem for Innovation and Digital Skills (August 2024)

A high-level workshop was held in Arusha, Tanzania, on August 12, 2024, by the Inter-University Council for East Africa (IUCEA) and the East African Science and Technology Commission (EASTECO), in partnership with GIZ, in response to the region's increasing need for digital competencies. The East African Digital Skills, AI Research, and Innovation Alliance was established as a result of this initiative, which was carried out under the EAC Digital Skills for an Innovative Industry project (dSkills@EA).

In order to develop a coordinated response to the digital skills gap, the workshop brought together important stakeholders from government, business, academia, and civil society. The necessity of integrating digital competencies across various industries, such as manufacturing, healthcare, and agriculture, as catalysts for innovation and economic growth, was the main topic of discussion. Participants underlined the significance of cooperative policy development among member states as well as the critical role that universities play in developing digital talent.

The alliance prioritizes innovation as a catalyst for socio-economic transformation, which is in line with the larger goals of the 2025 Strategic Plan and the EAC Treaty. Drafting a strategic plan for the adoption of artificial intelligence (AI), starting an implementation roadmap, and supporting the launch of a regional AI strategy in 2025 were among the workshop's main recommendations. These initiatives are in line with the African Union's declaration of 2024 as the "Year of Education," which emphasizes the importance of education for the development of digital and industrial technologies.

5.8 Higher Education Leadership Conference and 15th Annual Meeting of IUCEA (July 17–18, 2024).

The Inter-University Council for East Africa (IUCEA) held its 15th Annual Meeting and Conference in Juba, South Sudan, July 17–18, 2024²³. To discuss the future of higher education in the East African Community (EAC), the event brought together development stakeholders, education policymakers, and university leaders from all over the region. Enhancing governance, leadership, and policy alignment in universities was the main goal of the conference, which had as its theme "Innovative Leadership and Governance Approaches in Higher Education: Towards an EAC Common Higher Education Area."

Emerging frameworks for enhancing academic governance, adjusting to new teaching modalities, and enhancing student outcomes through technology integration were examined by the participants. The necessity of unified policy approaches to create a cohesive higher education sector within the EAC came up repeatedly. A commitment to the 2017 Declaration on the EAC Common Higher Education Area, which provides a framework for standardizing credentials, encouraging academic mobility, and promoting cross-border collaborative research, was also reaffirmed at the event (IUCEA, 2024)²⁴. By holding this conference, IUCEA reaffirmed its position as a strategic facilitator of integration in higher education, establishing the institutional framework required to operationalize the AfCFTA's educational components.

²³ INTER-UNIVERSITY COUNCIL FOR EAST AFRICA, IUCEA Annual General Meeting Scheduled for 17th-18th July 2024 in Juba, South Sudan (July 10, 2024).

²⁴ INTER-UNIVERSITY COUNCIL FOR EAST AFRICA, IUCEA Annual General Meeting Scheduled for 17th-18th July 2024 in Juba, South Sudan (July 10, 2024).

6.0 KEY OBSERVATIONS AND DISCUSSIONS

An analysis of recent regional initiatives and integration efforts in East Africa shows a landscape that is both innovative, ambitious, and collaborative, but also characterized by institutional disconnection and fragmentation. The level of awareness of the African Continental Free Trade Area among higher education stakeholders in the East African Community remains moderate but uneven across member states. While policymakers and senior university administrators demonstrate a clear understanding of AfCFTA's potential in facilitating knowledge exchange and mobility, lower-level academic staff and students show limited awareness. Additionally, policy alignment between AfCFTA provisions and national higher education frameworks is still evolving, with inconsistencies in regulatory harmonization slowing integration efforts²⁵.

The AfCFTA presents significant opportunities for enhancing student and staff mobility within the EAC by reducing barriers to movement and promoting mutual recognition of qualifications²⁶. However, practical implementation remains constrained by visa restrictions, accreditation disparities, and limited institutional partnerships. Moreover, AfCFTA has the potential to promote cross-border collaboration among universities through joint research, innovation hubs, and knowledge-sharing platforms. Institutions that have already established regional partnerships report improved research output and access to funding opportunities. Nonetheless, disparities in institutional capacity, infrastructure, and funding across EAC countries hinder the full realization of these benefits²⁷.

²⁵ Chakawata, Webster Tinashe, Franz Ufuomanefe Atare, and Bukola O. Ochei. "Awareness of the African Continental Free Trade Area socio-economic benefits as drivers of sport industry stakeholders' expectations in Zimbabwe." *Sports Law, Policy & Diplomacy Journal* 1, no. 2 (2023): 89-120.

²⁶ Njiriri, Juliana. "From Lecture Halls to Continental Trade Halls: Impact of AfCFTA and other African Trade Agreements on Continental Higher Education."

²⁷ Ibid

Further, AfCFTA play a critical role in aligning higher education outcomes with regional labour market needs by encouraging curriculum harmonization and skills standardization. Digital platforms are essential in leveraging AfCFTA for higher education integration. Universities adopting e-learning and virtual exchange programs have experienced increased cross-border engagement²⁸. However, digital inequality across EAC member states particularly in internet access and technological infrastructure which remains a major barrier to inclusive integration. As African economies become more integrated, the demand for a workforce that can operate seamlessly across borders has increased. In response, AfCFTA encourages higher education institutions to revise and align their curricula to reflect shared regional competencies, industry expectations, and emerging economic sectors such as manufacturing, digital trade, and services²⁹.

7.0 OPPORTUNITIES TO INTEGRATE HIGHER EDUCATION

The AfCFTA provides a special forum for promoting the integration of African higher education systems. The African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) has the potential to significantly enhance academic and professional mobility by facilitating the free movement of scholars, students, and skilled professionals across African states which strengthens knowledge exchange and harmonizing higher education standards³⁰. However, this aspiration is not fully operational within the current AfCFTA framework because the agreement itself, as it stands, is primarily focused on trade in goods and services, investment, and intellectual property, rather than direct regulation of labour

²⁸ Marangwanda, Agripah, and Abubaker Qutieshat. "Advancing Regulatory Alignment and Market Integration of the African Insurance Sector with the Context of AfCFTA: A Critical Review of Literature."

²⁹ Ibid

³⁰ Njiriri, Juliana. "From Lecture Halls to Continental Trade Halls: Impact of AfCFTA and other African Trade Agreements on Continental Higher Education."

mobility or education migration. For true academic mobility to be realized under the AfCFTA umbrella, member states would need to undertake additional commitments such as mutual recognition of academic and professional qualifications, harmonization of visa and work permit regimes for researchers and students, and the operationalization and ratification of the AU Free Movement Protocol, which remains limited in adoption³¹.

Another key opportunity lies in expanding academic mobility and labour market alignment across member states. Through AfCFTA, higher education institutions can collaborate more effectively to ensure that graduates possess skills that are transferable across African labour markets³². The EAC has already initiated regional university networks and exchange programs that can be expanded under AfCFTA to include wider continental participation. This would not only enhance student exposure to diverse academic environments but also support the development of competencies aligned with continental industrialization and trade priorities. As a result, higher education becomes more responsive to regional economic integration needs³³.

AfCFTA also presents opportunities for joint research, innovation, and knowledge production among African universities³⁴. Building on EAC-led collaborative research initiatives, universities can establish continental research consortia focusing on shared challenges such as climate change, digital transformation, public health, and trade logistics. Such collaboration would enhance resource sharing, reduce duplication of

³¹ Ibid

³² Benjelloun, Wail. "African free trade and higher education: a two-way street." *available at: Link to a PDF of the cited article* (2024): 1-13.

³³ Ibid

³⁴ Obunike, Chinazor Love, and CHIDINMA BLESSING NWAKOB. "THE ROLE OF INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY IN THE AFRICAN CONTINENTAL FREE TRADE AREA: OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES." *CHUKWUEMEKA ODUMEGWU OJUKWU UNIVERSITY JOURNAL OF COMMERCIAL AND PROPERTY LAW* 5, no. 1 (2025).

research efforts, and strengthen Africa's global competitiveness in knowledge production. Furthermore, harmonized funding frameworks and partnerships with the private sector could improve research outputs and commercialization of innovations across member states.

Digital transformation provides a major opportunity for integrating higher education under AfCFTA. The expansion of online learning platforms, virtual exchange programs, and digital credentialing systems can overcome geographical barriers that have historically limited integration. Lessons from the EAC's gradual adoption of e-learning and digital academic systems show that technology can accelerate harmonization of higher education services. Under AfCFTA, this can be scaled continentally to improve access, inclusivity, and efficiency in higher education delivery, ultimately strengthening Africa's knowledge economy.

8.0 CHALLENGES TO HIGHER EDUCATION INTEGRATION

Despite the ambitious promise of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) to foster continental integration, several structural and institutional challenges significantly undermine its ability to advance higher education integration across African states³⁵. One of the most persistent barriers is the fragmentation of higher education systems across the continent³⁶. African countries operate under diverse academic calendars, admission requirements, quality assurance frameworks, and qualification structures. This lack of harmonisation makes it difficult to establish seamless student and staff mobility, mutual recognition of qualifications, and cross-

³⁵ Khan, Assad Mehmood. "Regional Integration In Africa: The Political Economy Of The African Continental Free Trade Area (Afcfta)." *Policy Journal of Social Science Review* 3, no. 4 (2025): 320-330.

³⁶ Ajewumi, Oluwatosin Esther, Jide Adedamola Afolabi, and Ikenna Joe-Akunne. "Regional trade agreements and economic integration in Africa: assessing the impact of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AFCFTA)." *World Journal of Advanced Research and Reviews* 23, no. 3 (2024): 2783-280.

border credit transfer systems. As a result, even where the AfCFTA promotes free movement of goods and services, the education sector remains constrained by incompatible regulatory and academic systems³⁷.

Another major challenge is the limited implementation capacity of regional and continental agreements that are meant to support educational integration. While several frameworks exist such as regional qualifications frameworks and mutual recognition agreements, their enforcement is often weak due to limited political commitment, inadequate funding, and overlapping mandates between regional economic communities and national education authorities. In many cases, higher education policies remain domestically oriented, with minimal alignment to AfCFTA protocols. This weak policy coherence reduces the extent to which AfCFTA can practically influence higher education integration beyond rhetorical commitments³⁸.

Language diversity and socio-cultural differences further complicate higher education integration under AfCFTA³⁹. The continent's linguistic divide, primarily between Anglophone, Francophone, Lusophone, and Arabic-speaking systems, creates barriers in curriculum alignment, instruction, and academic collaboration. These differences extend beyond language to pedagogical approaches, academic traditions, and institutional cultures, making it difficult to standardize higher education practices. Consequently, student mobility and joint degree programs remain limited in scope and reach⁴⁰.

³⁷ Ibid

³⁸ Soutar, Nicholas. "The Political Economy of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA): A Policy Analysis of the Prospects and Challenges." (2021).

³⁹ Taye, Sewagegnehu D. "Variable Geometry of African integration and its implication on AfCFTA." Master's thesis, University of Pretoria (South Africa), 2019.

⁴⁰ Ibid

Additionally, political instability and uneven governance structures across African states continue to disrupt long-term educational cooperation. In regions affected by conflict, weak institutions, or frequent policy shifts, higher education systems struggle to maintain stability, let alone engage in cross-border integration initiatives. Even in relatively stable countries, frequent changes in education leadership and shifting national priorities can slow down or reverse progress toward regional harmonization. This unpredictability weakens trust among institutions and reduces willingness to commit to long-term AfCFTA-linked academic partnerships.

In addition, digital and infrastructural inequalities pose a growing challenge in the era of digital learning and research collaboration. While AfCFTA envisions a digitally connected continent, disparities in internet access, digital literacy, and technological infrastructure limit the ability of institutions to participate equally in online learning platforms, virtual exchange programmes, and collaborative research networks⁴¹. These inequalities risk deepening the divide between more advanced institutions and those in less developed settings, thereby undermining the inclusive integration goals of AfCFTA in higher education.

9.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

The paper recommends that there is a need for accelerated harmonization of higher education systems across African countries. This can be achieved through the development and enforcement of common frameworks for academic calendars, admission standards, qualification structures, and credit transfer systems. Regional economic communities, in collaboration with continental bodies such as the African

⁴¹ Banga, Karishma, Jamie MacLeod, and Max Mendez-Parra. "Digital trade provisions in the AfCFTA." *Supporting Economic Transformation*. (April) (2021).

Union, should priorities' the operationalization of mutually recognized qualifications frameworks to facilitate student and staff mobility. Strengthening accreditation and quality assurance alignment will also enhance trust and comparability across institutions, making cross-border academic engagement more seamless.

In addition, the paper recommends improving policy coherence and implementation capacity is essential. African governments should align national higher education policies more closely with AfCFTA protocols and existing regional education agreements. This requires clear institutional coordination mechanisms to reduce overlaps between national ministries, regional bodies, and continental organisations. Additionally, stronger political commitment and increased budgetary allocation are necessary to move from policy formulation to practical implementation. Establishing dedicated monitoring and evaluation systems can help track progress and ensure accountability in the integration process.

The paper also recommends strengthening political stability and governance in the education sector which is critical for sustaining integration efforts. Governments should institutionalize education policies to reduce the impact of leadership changes and political transitions on long-term academic cooperation. Regional mechanisms for peer review and policy dialogue can also help build trust and consistency among member states. In conflict-affected regions, targeted support and recovery programs for higher education institutions should be prioritized to prevent exclusion from continental integration initiatives.

10.0 CONCLUSIONS

Africa's regional and continental integration is still a work in progress, hampered by disjointed efforts and a lack of focus on vital areas like education. Realizing the transformative potential of integration requires a more well-resourced, inclusive, and coordinated approach. The African Continental Free Trade Area presents a significant opportunity to advance the integration of higher education across the continent by fostering harmonization of policies, promoting academic mobility, and encouraging collaborative research and innovation. By reducing regulatory and structural barriers among member states, AfCFTA can facilitate the alignment of curricula, mutual recognition of qualifications, and cross-border partnerships between universities and industry. However, realizing this potential will depend on the commitment of governments and institutions to address persistent challenges such as disparities in education quality, limited funding, and inadequate infrastructure. If effectively implemented alongside supportive education policies, AfCFTA can serve as a catalyst for a more cohesive, competitive, and globally relevant African higher education system.

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