

# A PARTNERSHIP FOR KNOWLEDGE, INNOVATION AND OPPORTUNITY

## TERTIARY EDUCATION AND RESEARCH AT THE HEART OF THE AU-EU AGENDA

### POSITION PAPER

3 November 2025

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## ABOUT THIS PAPER

This position paper, calling for enhanced visibility of, investment in and valorisation of tertiary education and research partnerships for shared Africa-EU social and economic objectives, is being proposed in the lead-up to the African Union – European Union Summit, taking place in Luanda, Angola in on 24-25 November, 2025. It reflects the collective opinions and extensive experience of a number of organisations affiliated to the Cooperation for Sustainable Development in Higher Education Group (S-DHG)<sup>1</sup>, and their partner organisations and associations in Africa.

The paper is directed to the European Union institutions - notably the European Commission and the European External Action Service (EEAS), EU Member State governments, and the African Union and its Member States and stakeholder institutions. It directly references the AU-EU Innovation Agenda, the Steering Committee of the Youth Mobility Flagship of the EU's Global Gateway, and the newly released African Union Strategies for CESA (Continental Education Strategy for Africa) and STISA (Science, Technology and Innovation Strategy for Africa).

This paper should not be read in a vacuum; it is an extension of the position paper submitted by this same group (S-DHG) on March 31, 2025 - "Reinforcing global partnerships in higher education and research: The world needs the EU and the EU needs the world"<sup>2</sup>, delivered as an input to the EU's Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) 2028-2034. The paper called for stronger funding for EU-Africa higher education and research cooperation as a cornerstone of global development and a means to enhance the "EU's strategic influence as a key global player in an increasingly volatile world".

This position paper is also synergetic with:

- \* The newly published 'ERASUD' (European Research Alliance for Sustainable Development) and The Guild position paper, advocating knowledge driven and inclusive international collaborations (between the EU and 'LMICs')<sup>3</sup> reinforcing the EU's Global Gateway.

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<sup>1</sup> Since 2011, the S-DHG is an annual forum that brings together funding and implementing agencies and organisations dedicated to sustainable international development and capacity building in higher education. It provides a platform to connect and discuss good practices and future initiative on themes such as building alliances in international and development projects and creating sustainable and long-term impacts through higher education and research. With a proven track record of delivering transformative results, the partners involved in S-DHG have longstanding experience in supporting equitable projects for universities and offering scholarships to students, researchers, and academics in partner countries within Africa, South-East Asia and Latin America.

<sup>2</sup> [https://www.daad-brussels.eu/files/2025/04/S-DHG-Position-paper\\_final.pdf](https://www.daad-brussels.eu/files/2025/04/S-DHG-Position-paper_final.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> <https://blogs.idos-research.de/2024/11/28/launch-of-the-new-european-research-alliance-for-sustainable-development-erasud/>

- \* The Open Letter: ‘Education at the Heart of AU-EU partnership’, recently submitted to the European Commission by associations and networks such as Save the Children, Global Campaign for Education and ActAllianceEU. This letter focuses on all educational sectors and stresses the need to align the Global Gateway priorities with those of the AU and safeguard funding for education in emergency and conflict environments.

As a premise, this paper acknowledges the critical investment in tertiary education partnerships under the EU’s Youth Mobility Flagship for Africa, and the diverse funding instruments that favour capacity building and exchange (under the Erasmus+ Programme), intra-Africa mobility as well as Africa-EU reciprocal mobility, youth innovation and continental African integration<sup>4</sup>. These programmes are unique in their nature and are a primary foundation for the Africa-EU partnership that must be recognised, exploited and continued. The organisations behind this paper, including development agencies, reiterate that the Flagship, as well as other programmes like Horizon Europe and the Africa III initiative, are essential to geo-strategic interests which simultaneously address social and economic cohesion.

## PART 1

### The pivotal role of Higher Education in the areas of Skills, Employability, Research and Innovation and Social Mobility

It is undisputed that universities/higher education institutions offer a unique bridge for education, research and service to society and are demonstrable agents for local development across the African continent. This said, increasing focus has been placed on TVET in the African development agenda (see the African Continental TVET Strategy 2025-2034), as a means to sharpen labour market-responsive education provision and develop skilled and immediately employable workers. At the same time, research and innovation, science, and technology are rightly touted as “key drivers of sustainable development, economic growth, and social transformation across Africa” (STISA 2025-2034<sup>5</sup>). While each area – Higher Education, TVET, Research – requires its respective policy attention, they can at times be siloed; Higher education, for example, risks being “lost in the middle” between the growing emphasis on innovation ecosystems and technical skills/employability. It is vital that the **AU-EU partnership recognises higher education as an enabler of human capital development**, not as an isolated level of study, nor as an education sector for the elite only. Further, its institutions form a critical link between vocational education, research, innovation, and employability, becoming a core component of tertiary education. What is more,

<sup>4</sup> Two primary examples are the Harmonisation, Quality Assurance and Accreditation in African Higher Education initiative (HAQAA3) and the African Continental Qualifications Framework II initiatives, both under the Youth Mobility Flagship.

<sup>5</sup> <https://au.int/en/documents/20250718/science-technology-and-innovation-strategy-africa-stisa-2034>

“Higher education is also a powerful tool for social mobility, offering individuals a means to transcend socio-economic barriers and improve quality of life.”<sup>6</sup>

**Strengthening articulation between higher education, TVET, and labour market needs is key to ensuring youth employability and productivity.** African and European universities are moving forward through entrepreneurship hubs, cooperative education, the adoption of problem-based learning approaches and applied research and innovation responding to local industries and social needs. Europe’s experience with dual education systems, universities of applied sciences, HE-TVET ‘alliances for innovation’, micro-credentials and smart specialisation offers models for shared learning and joint investment. These experiences must be leveraged to make the implementation of the AU-EU Agenda more effective.

Teacher education is also a prime example of this need for a strengthened articulation. **Africa’s urgent need for qualified teachers—particularly for STEM and digital learning—cannot be met without robust higher education systems** capable of training and supporting them. Tertiary institutions (HEIs and others) therefore underpin the entire educational value chain and are indispensable for the implementation of the AU’s Decade for Accelerated Action for Education and Skills (2025–2034) and the EU’s Global Gateway.

## PART 2

### Science Matters

Science and knowledge cooperation are fundamental to prosperity, peace, and resilience. In a geopolitical context where the multilateral principle is contested and science is sometimes distrusted or put to the service of unilateral initiatives, the AU and EU must reaffirm their shared commitment to openness and international cooperation in research, academic freedom, and evidence-based policymaking.

Science cooperation - anchored in joint research programmes, shared infrastructure, and open data - should be placed at the heart of the partnership; and science diplomacy must be considered an essential aspect of bi-regional relations. Knowledge-driven international collaborations linked to the Global Gateway are crucial to address health threats, climate change, energy transitions, and digital transformation. Investments in research capacity and academic mobility yield shared benefits: strengthening African research ecosystems while enhancing Europe’s scientific competitiveness.

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<sup>6</sup>[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/392836046\\_The\\_Role\\_of\\_Higher\\_Education\\_in\\_Promoting\\_Social\\_Mobility\\_and\\_Reducing\\_Inequality](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/392836046_The_Role_of_Higher_Education_in_Promoting_Social_Mobility_and_Reducing_Inequality)

Scientific cooperation should be grass-rooted. **People-to-people** cooperation—through mobility between Europe and Africa, as well as intra-African exchanges—remains not only the foundation of regional integration but also a facilitator of current and future scientific excellence. Expanding programmes such as the Intra-Africa Mobility Scheme, the international dimension of Erasmus+, and Horizon Europe's Africa Initiative will help ensure that ideas and talent circulate equitably, contributing to innovation ecosystems and economic growth on both continents.

## PART 3

### Higher Education to promote Ethical and Inclusive Global Gateway Partnerships

A renewed AU–EU partnership in higher education and research must be grounded in ethical, equitable, **capacity-exchange partnerships**. Partnerships should move beyond donor–recipient dynamics, which have often proved ineffective, toward genuine co-creation, co-funding, and co-ownership of results. African and European institutions must engage as equal partners, each contributing their strengths, priorities, and resources. If African and European excellence in higher education and research is a goal, the pathway to get there must include capacity exchange, also **targeting LDCs**, whose institutions can be supported through **regional Centers of Excellence and inter/intra-regional training and collaboration approaches**. The pursuit of excellence without an advancement in equitable social development has proven impossible.

Values-based collaboration rests on principles of **academic integrity, transparency, reciprocity, and mutual accountability**. Programmes such as DAAD's African Centres of Excellence, World Bank/AFD African Centers of Excellence (ACE), Belgium's (VLIRUOS and ARES) Institutional Partnerships, EDUFI's global education cooperation, AFD's Africa–France Academia Partnerships (PeA), GIZ's East African Digital Skills, AI Research and Innovation Alliance, and OBREAL's interregional cooperation and dialogue platforms already embody these principles, placing African leadership and institutional strengthening at the core. Given the shared values and successful cooperation models of such organisations, further **Team Europe** Initiatives in tertiary education and research must be launched and promoted, in cooperation with African counterparts. Such initiatives can and should be national, regional or continental, as there is value-added at each level of intervention.

Continued EU-African higher education collaboration is essential also because a strong tertiary education system is a prerequisite for economic investments. The EU's Global Gateway strategy aims to strengthen private sector involvement in EU-African partnerships in a 360-degree approach, which also includes cooperation around regulatory environments, skills development, learning ecosystems and knowledge partnerships.

Building sustainable systems requires working through regional associations, networks, and consortia, reinforcing their capacity to coordinate and scale initiatives. This approach ensures local ownership and continuity beyond project cycles, aligning with the AU's goal of continental integration in higher education and research. In this respect, African partners from the public and private sector and governmental institutions should consider **co-funding approaches** to this shared agenda: co-creation of policies and programmes for tertiary education and research must begin at their initiation and transcend into their sustainability.

## PART 4

### Forward Looking – Recommendations to Take the Partnership to the Next Level

The AU and EU clearly value tertiary education and research, as demonstrated by the Declaration of the 2022 AU-EU Summit and the subsequent collaboration which has ensued under the Youth Mobility Flagship, the EU-AU Innovation Agenda and beyond. What is now needed is sustained and deeper investment, enhanced effectiveness in implementation, and clear targets and accountability. **Each region must continue to invest in its own higher education system(s) while co-financing shared initiatives that deliver mutual benefit.**

The following are actionable recommendations, to be acknowledged at the 2025 AU-EU Summit and in its subsequent action plans. Concrete targets are suggested, as benchmarks towards the next Summit:

- 1 **Embrace a new narrative:** The AU–EU partnership must embrace a new narrative that views education, science, and innovation as strategic investments: drivers of shared growth and resilience rather than components of development cooperation.

For Europe, Africa–EU cooperation in tertiary education and research offers economic and social dividends, fostering innovation, enabling brain circulation rather than brain drain, and addressing demographic challenges through managed mobility and skills recognition. For Africa, it accelerates continental priorities such as CESA 2026–2035 and STISA, strengthening intra-African collaboration and African institutional leadership. For both Africa and Europe, tertiary education and research cooperation are an essential complement to investments in infrastructure and underpin science diplomacy.

- ◆ **Development cooperation in tertiary education and economic cooperation are no longer separate spheres** and should not be treated as such in joint AU-EU Declarations, strategies and programing. Each of the two underpins the other, as they share a main common goal: Development.

- 2 **People-to-People mobility as the foundation of strong scientific cooperation, fostering regional integration.** Financing instruments that promote reciprocal academic mobility and knowledge circulation, integrating return pathways and opportunities for African graduates, should be highly prioritised. Initiatives such as 'Study and Research in Africa' are welcome, as is the extension of the Intra-Africa Mobility Scheme to the undergraduate level. Both the EU and AU should leverage the important initiatives under the Youth Mobility Flagship that have supported African continental integration objectives (e.g. HAQAA, ACQF, Erasmus+ Capacity Building for Higher Education) and seek to institutionalise their results.

◆ *An ambitious target should be set to double the number of Intra-Africa and Africa-EU academic exchanges and mobilities by the next Summit.*

- 3 **Promoting co-financing under the EU's Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) 2028–2034:** Clear, long-term co-funded instruments within the Global Gateway to support higher education and research partnerships should be established, ensuring continuity and predictability. This not only entails the promotion of more Team Europe Initiatives but also generates stronger co-financing commitments by the African public and private sector.

◆ *The AU should consider setting up a dedicated continental/regional fund that mirrors or directly complements the EU's Global Gateway instruments for higher education and research.*

- 4 **Sustainability through local leadership:** African leadership of projects makes them more responsive to local needs and enhances their impact. It also generates capacity for contextually impactful science. Therefore, it is indispensable to reinforce tri-angular cooperation of African networks, associations, and higher education institutions to allow them to co-design and manage cooperation projects, guaranteeing relevance, lasting capacity and ownership. This also involves investing in continuous administrative staff development and managerial training at the level of HEI, in order to professionalise services provision, project management, grant writing and tech transfer, among others.

◆ *By the next summit, a substantial increase in the number of African coordinated tertiary education and research projects should be observed. Current projects and programmes that support HEI staff development for internationalisation, project management, and impact assessment should be mapped, expanded and leveraged.*

- 5 **Inclusion and diversity of countries, institutions and individuals targeted:** This means ensuring that Least Developed Countries and fragile states are fully represented and not left behind in the cooperation proposal. In practice, it entails reinforcing consortium-led inter and intra-regional partnership models that include LDCs and less-capacitated institutions, while at the same time identifying and reinforcing pockets of excellence in higher education, research and innovation

between Europe and Africa. It also means a continued investment in inclusive and diverse leadership in higher education and research, and the pipeline to this leadership.

- 6 **Human development as integral to economic investment:** The newly created Global Gateway Investment Hub is a welcome development. It is recommended that Team Nationals in each EU country and EU Delegations in partner countries would recognize the role of higher education and research in ensuring a 360-degree approach to investments. This would profile the EU as a fair partner towards Africa, while also underlining knowledge and skills for human development as part of economic investment.

◆ *By the next summit, a substantial percentage of AU-EU collaboration projects (e.g. one third of all running Team Europe Initiatives), should integrate tertiary education and/or research as transversal components.*

Through these measures, the AU–EU partnership can move to a more visionary, but also much more effective collaboration—predicated on mutual ownership and investment and building a sustainable, knowledge-driven futures for both continents.

## **SIGNATORIES**

OBREAL

DAAD – The German Academic Exchange Service

EDUFI – Finnish National Agency for Education

VLIR-UOS – Flemish Interuniversity Council – University Development Cooperation

ARES – Académie de Recherche et d'Enseignement supérieur

Enabel - Belgian Agency for International Cooperation

AFD – Agence Française de Développement

GIZ – Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit

Education Malta

IAU – International Association of Universities

OeAD – Austria's Agency for Education and Internationalisation

ERASud – European Research Alliance for Sustainable Development

SARUA – Southern African Regional Universities Association

AAU – Association of African Universities

IUCEA – Inter-University Council of East Africa

AASU – All Africa Students' Union