



Conclusions of the conference 5-7 September 2023, Brussels

Progressing towards a knowledge-based economy and putting impactful higher education institutions and skilled human capital is at the heart of Africa's agenda and essential for building the continent's strategic autonomy, strength and resilience. Moreover, to foster regional development and innovation and to successfully implement ambitious policy objectives such as the Green and the Digital Transition, a shift in focus to education, training and applied research is needed. This calls for a **needs-based approach and a continuous dialogue** between different education sectors and the world of practice. Universities with a focus on applied sciences are particularly well placed to engage in this dialogue and to foster innovations.

Therefore, the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) in partnership with the European Commission, OBREAL Global, EURASHE, EDUFI, Nuffic and a network of German Universities of Applied Sciences, all with longstanding experience with Africa-EU collaborations, organised the **conference "Applied Sciences as drivers for regional innovation ecosystems in Africa"**, which took place in Brussels 5-7 September 2023 ([Link](#)). The event took place against the background of the Sustainable Development Goals, the Africa-EU Joint Vision for 2030, the Global Gateway Strategy, the AU-EU Innovation Agenda and the African Union's Agenda 2063, and the partners' conviction that a stronger focus on applied sciences fostered by Africa-EU collaboration is paramount.

The **AU-EU Innovation Agenda** to enhance cooperation in science, technology and innovation ([Link](#)) has become the cornerstone of the cooperation on Science, Technology and Innovation between Africa and Europe for the next decade. The Agenda's objectives and actions grouped around the priority areas Public Health, Green Transition, Innovation and Technology and Capacities for Science and Cross-cutting issues, closely match the four **priority areas** discussed during the conference, which comprised (renewable) energy and green transition, agriculture and food security, (public) health as well as IT and technology. Boosting sector-specific advancements and innovations in these areas is essential for the future socio-economic development and the green and digital transition in Africa.

The conference in Brussels was partly organised in hybrid form and was attended by over 150 higher education and SME representatives, policy makers and quality assurance experts. Speakers, panellists and participants from 15 African and 9 European countries engaged in presentations, thematic discussions, policy workshops and dialogues, fostering connections among the Global South, the North-South axis and within Europe.

The discussions reaffirmed that Africa-EU collaborations in the applied sciences – with their holistic approach in bringing together stakeholders from higher education, industry and civil society, and with their strong practical component in research and education – can **play a key role in meeting the AU-EU Innovation Agenda’s KPIs**¹ and are indispensable for reaching the policy objectives of the Africa-EU Joint Vision for 2030, the Global Gateway Strategy and the African Union’s Agenda 2063.

The main recommendations deriving from the conference consolidated with the collaborating partners and with the speakers, include:

- The need for better **understanding the diversity of Africa** (bridging cultural gaps between EU and Africa, and between African countries themselves) and **adopting a country/regional approach** rather than a global/uniform approach, recognizing indigenous knowledge and local expertise.
- The importance of **contextualisation, scaling up and continuous alignment of curricula** to local conditions, requirements and constraints for **needs-driven, impactful and innovative higher education** based on home-grown solutions.
- **Embedding practical components** in higher education institutional structures and procedures² and integrating them as integral parts of the curriculum³ is essential for reaching sustainable solutions on the ground. Students should be encouraged to take initiative and apply competences throughout the study programmes.
- Investing in **human capital development** and in practice-oriented qualification **boosts** the future **employability** of students and is vital for the skilled workforce of tomorrow. In this context, the acquisition of transferable skills such as collaborative learning, entrepreneurship, digital and green competences deserve special attention.
- **Capacity building** and enabling institutions to create supportive, collaborative and innovative structures⁴ are essential in order for them to provide high quality education, training and research.
- Trustful, open and equity-based partnerships are enabling factors for long-lasting collaborations, robust networks and a solid ground for **Africa-EU co-designed projects**. A **multi-stakeholder and participatory approach** is recommended, fostering a dialogue on multiple levels, between disciplines, sectors and continents.⁵
- Making Africa more of a study/research destination for European youth (to **decrease asymmetry in mobility, knowledge sharing, credit transfer**)

¹ The Agenda is accompanied by a Roadmap ([Link](#)), which lists several KPIs to monitor the achievement of its objectives, including the number of joint AU-EU innovation ecosystems and networks created or strengthened, and the number of mobility programmes, of visiting fellowships, scholarships, training courses and workshops between and within AU and EU countries, of successful joint programmes and projects between EU and AU partners “scaled up” as well as of partnerships jointly scaling up programmes and projects.

² Examples at structural level are industry advisory boards, IP centres and regional innovation or excellence centres, and guest lectureships. Examples for processes comprise regular dialogues with industry in co-designing curricula and training methods, IP strategies, and alumni engagement. Continuous collaboration of higher education institutions with the world of industry, with local governments and communities should be ensured in the needs analysis, definition of learning outcomes, curriculum development, implementation and evaluation and student and staff education.

³ Examples are internships, problem-based learning methods, work-study programmes, living labs, and experimental platforms and simulations, ensuring that the training goes beyond the acquisition of theoretical knowledge.

⁴ Higher education-based incubators in collaboration with industry, research and training, mentoring schemes, technology transfer centres/offices and student-led initiatives are examples for building entrepreneurial ecosystem and fostering collaborations between institutions.

⁵ Such an approach brings together stakeholders at local and regional level (e.g. higher education institutions with ministries, municipalities, industry, chambers of industry and commerce, unions, civil society, VET, training institutions), institutions in Africa (Intra-African mobility) and international partners (North-South cooperations).

- The need for **ongoing policy advocacy, policy development and implementation both within HEIs** (research valorisation as a career pathway) **and outside**, fostering innovation.
- Advancing **science communication** is supportive for trust-building and for generating collaboration opportunities with industry, local communities and policy makers. Changing the mindset in the communication strategy “from science to industry/society talk” and showcasing actionable insights from research is fruitful when collaborating with partners.
- Within the spirit of a Team Europe approach, the **interplay between support mechanisms from national and European level** should be considered as an ecosystem that needs coordination, synergies and dedicated care. Communicating the opportunities offered by established programmes such as the Marie Skłodowska-Curie actions and Erasmus+ more broadly, establishing synergies with national programmes and enabling regular exchanges between actors in charge of programme at national and European level could boost Africa-EU collaborations.

The conference “Applied Sciences as drivers for regional innovation ecosystems in Africa” has been organised in partnership with



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