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Enhancing Research Excellence at African Universities through European-African Cooperation

Throughout Africa, 60% to 95% of all research output is produced by universities. Even though their overall performance still lags behind that of their counterparts in the rest of the world, recent progress in terms of research productivity and quality at many of Africa's universities is proof of the great potential universities in Africa have in stimulating sustainable development in their national and continental contexts. Africa's share in the global production of research has more than doubled between 2000 and 2019 (from 1.5% to 3.5%), while in absolute terms many leading African research universities have increased their research output more than fivefold in this period.

European-African university collaboration has a long-standing tradition. Customarily, it was strongly focused on capacity enhancement in education and administrative functions. However, in recent years research and innovation have become important areas of interest for European-African cooperation.

Given that also other countries and regions have begun to introduce strategic initiatives for strengthening their scientific collaboration with the African continent, the European Union needs to make sure that it remains a key scientific partner for Africa. In this context, the current negotiations between the European Union and the African Union about a new, mutually beneficial strategic partnership for the period 2021-2027 provide an important window of opportunity for strengthening the role of research and innovation in the relationship between the two continents and for supporting African governments in the realization of their knowledge society ambitions, as presented in the African Union's Agenda 2063.

To realise the ambitious objectives of Agenda 2063 and the European Union's firm commitment to sustainability, new investments in the research capacity of African universities and new efforts to strengthen research collaborations between African and European universities and research institutions are timely and urgently needed. The signatories therefore call on the European Union to make substantial investments in the research capacities of African universities a key component of the new strategic partnership between the African Union and the European Union. They furthermore call upon the national governments in the European Union and its associated partners to provide complementary funding to strengthen this important initiative further.

Key areas for building research capacity through new investments are

- Joint African-African and African-European inter-university research projects in key areas of mutual interest, such as public health, digitalization, climate change, and good governance.
- High-capacity graduate schools with at least 20 PhD students per year.
- Academic career opportunities in Africa for young, highly talented African scholars, including postdoctoral fellowships, to counter brain drain.
- Up-to-date research infrastructure and equipment at African universities.
- Strengthening of university research administration.
- Professionalization of senior staff and setting up adequate organizational structures for innovation, knowledge transfer and social engagement at African universities.

A critical step towards strengthening European-African science collaboration is the shift from time-limited project-based funding to long-term commitment. A highly visible example of showcasing this long-term commitment would be the establishment of African Clusters of Research Excellence, in selected scientific fields of common concern and in close partnership with universities in Europe. These Clusters of Excellence would strengthen the research and innovation capacity of African universities significantly and sustainably.

In this context, the signatories welcome and support the launch of the "African Research Initiative for Scientific Excellence" (ARISE) pilot programme which will enable early-career African scientists to delivering cutting-edge research across Africa and which was jointly set up by Jutta Urpilainen, European Commissioner for International Partnerships, and Mariya Gabriel, European Commissioner for Innovation, Research, Culture, Education and Youth. Another exemplary initiative has been developed jointly by the African Research Universities Alliance (ARUA) and The Guild of European Research-Intensive Universities.

The signing National Rectors' Conferences – representing more than 1,100 universities in Europe – and the European University Association (EUA) regard these initiatives as critical steps in the right direction of seeking to advance the sustainability of African research excellence and to significantly enhance research cooperation between European and African universities for the benefit of both continents.

Signatories

Česká konference rektorů (CRT) – Czech Rectors' Conference

Conférence des présidents d'université (CPU) – Conference of University Presidents

Conferencia de Rectores de Universidades Españolas (CRUE) – Universities Spain

Conferenza dei Rettori delle Università Italiane (CRUI) – Conference of Italian University Rectors

Conseil des Recteurs (CRef) – Council of Rectors of the Belgian French Universities

Consiliul National Al Rectorilor (CNR) – Romanian National Council of Rectors

Danske Universiteter – Universities Denmark

Hochschulrektorenkonferenz (HRK) – German Rectors' Conference

Konferencja Rektorów Akademickich Szkół Polskich (KRASP) – Conference of Rectors of Academic Schools in Poland

Magyar Rektori Konferencia (MRK) – Hungarian Rectors' Conference

Österreichische Universitätenkonferenz uniko – Universities Austria

Samstarfsnefnd háskólastigsins – Icelandic Rectors' Conference

Slovenská rektorská konferencia (SRK) – Slovak Rectors' Conference

Sveriges universitets- och högskoleförbund (SUHF) – The Association of Swedish Higher Education Institutions

Suomen yliopistot (UNIFI) – Universities Finland

Université du Luxembourg – University of Luxembourg

Universitets- og høyskolerådet (UHR) – Universities Norway

Universities UK (UUK)

Vereniging van Universiteiten (VSNU) – Association of Universities

Vlaamse Interuniversitaire Raad (VLIR) – Flemish Interuniversity Council

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