

ASSOCIATION OF AFRICAN UNIVERSITIES

Presentation By

Prof. Etienne Ehouan EHILE

Secretary General

Association of African Universities, Accra, GHANA

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**Theme: The Role of Universities in the Integration of
the West African Sub-Region**

SUMMARY

Throughout the centuries, formal education has generally been regarded as a means of developing the human intellectual capacity and thus improve its efficiency in all kinds of its endeavours, while higher education is particularly recognized for its role in wealth-creation, the inculcation of values and the advancement of knowledge and skills necessary for good citizenry and for the socio-economic advancement of human society. There is general agreement that the essential goals and guiding principles of higher education include the need to provide students with important knowledge and skills as well as the experience in putting the acquired knowledge and skills to practical use in “real-world” settings.

In Africa education has long been perceived as an indispensable tool in the fight against abject poverty and underdevelopment. As we recall, the 1960s was a historical and important landmark decade in Africa’s struggle for independence and search for a modern identity. It was the period when most colonial territories achieved, or were about to achieve political ‘freedom’. It was also the beginning of the so-called ‘development decade’ when African countries soon, found themselves drawn into international conferences of various agendas, motives and rationale, ostensibly designed not only to analyze but also to prescribe solutions to their problems. Education naturally received high priority in these conferences, spearheaded by organisations like UNESCO; leading to the formation of the Association of African Universities (AAU) in Rabat, Morocco on 12th November, 1967. It was a decade of great expectations for Africa.

In this framework, the preamble of the 1967 AAU Constitution adopted by *“the Heads of Universities and University Institutions of Higher Education throughout the African Continent, highlighted the role of African Universities to maintain an adherence and loyalty to world academic standards, and to evolve over the years a pattern of higher education in the service of Africa and its peoples, yet promoting a bond of kinship to the larger human society”.....*

“Therefore, they have resolved to establish a corporate body to achieve their aims and objectives in harmony with the spirit of the Organization of African Unity.

The AAU was seen as part of the evolving Pan-African organizations under the general umbrella of the Organization of African Unity (OAU). This is aptly captured in the Report of the Executive Vice-President at the second Conference of the Association held in Kinshasa in 1969 in which he saw the AAU and its scholarship program as an attempt *“to create the type of students, of future leaders, who*

through their assimilation in more than one African social scene, will develop an awareness of the realities and aspirations, of the traditions and ideals of their peoples in Africa and hence a sense of belonging not to one tribe or nation but to Africa as a whole, and this is the unity of Africa which we like to see and are out to achieve”.

Although the regional integration has, by and large, achieved, we should bear in mind that regional integration is not only a political choice but an opportunity for the region. However, before there can be meaningful regional integration, we have to know our realities, which is the first step before we are able to change them for the better. Needless to say, West Africa as a region has many challenges to overcome as highlighted below:

- In the ECOWAS zone, one notable feature is the diversity of the systems of education in West Africa, which are based on the colonial linguistic divide and traditions of English and French and, in a way hampering the effective integration of the educational programs across the Anglophone and Francophone member countries.

- Two of the key activities of higher education, namely research and teaching, in all their forms and functions, are perhaps the most powerful vehicles that countries can and should use to ensure change. Research, in particular, engenders the values of inquiry, critical thinking, creativity and open-mindedness. However, only a few African countries have well developed and logical systems of training and scientific research and innovation. This is sadly the case of West Africa. University research is still driven by individual researchers and funding agencies; and in most cases, either there are no policies to ensure that research addresses social problems, or the existing policies are not enforced. With regard to research at the national level, the results of AAU study conducted in six West African countries in 2010 showed that research and innovation responsibilities are shared among several independent institutions with no central coordination and collaboration among them. and In some cases, research efforts are duplicated. The onus is therefore on universities in this sub-region to ensure they conduct coordinated research that offers an excellent opportunity for networking and joint publication. This also calls for the need to develop quality homegrown journals and share experiences and scarce resources; a move that will, in the long-run, lead to improved quality assurance in the different universities across the sub-region. Only then will society be sure of good quality graduates.

- In the current education dispensation, there is a strong imperative to create university partnerships, university-university relationships being a crucial starting point. In this respect, the AAU has a lot of initiatives to showcase. The DFID funded project is just one success story among many on the need to forge partnerships between and among regional universities in Africa as an impetus for accelerated growth in order to tackle the myriad of continental challenges mainly related to food security and health and technology.

- With the limited human and other essential resources and differing levels of development and infrastructure, the way forward for African universities in their pursuit of inter-collaboration is to create regional centres of excellence - to develop robust postgraduate studies and a strong research base; and as a means of seeking opportunities for external collaboration and partnership on equal and mutually beneficial platforms. These centers of excellence and any emerging useful partnerships as a result of them, must be seen as important to, for example, the manufacturing industry.

- Within this framework, it is important to highlight a few ongoing initiatives, the objectives of which is excellence. These are: **i)** The Pan-African university; **ii)** The World Bank African Centers of Excellence; **iii)** The ECOWAS University (an ongoing project)

- Another area where universities in West Africa can help integrate the sub-region is staff and student exchange programmes. The INTERAFrican scholarship programme used to channel qualified African students to different African universities outside their own countries because of lack of either space or desired discipline in their own countries. This is another strong point in support of the centres of excellence earlier mentioned.

- **Other key factors** that West African universities need to look at, in order to network more effectively for achieving a higher degree of excellence, include: **i)** Infrastructure - encompassing quality physical premises; equipment and stable supply of energy. **ii)** ICT - Internet connectivity; affordable bandwidth and access; national ICT policies that favour the educational sector, especially the provision of

adequate financial resources channelled into e-learning and e-journals.. **iii)** Human resources – training of new faculty (upgrading skills) and ability to put courses online. **iv)** Course content development and review; additionally, the on-going LMD reforms in Francophone institutions in order for them to be in harmony with the Anglophone system need to be supported with these new technologies. **v)** Knowledge-sharing - there cannot be meaningful networking without sharing. The AAU Database of African Theses and Dissertations (DATAD) is an example that aims to promote African scholarly works by making them available online and by establishing national repositories of university research outputs for purposes of knowledge sharing among the faculty of African universities and international scholars. **vi)** Quality Assurance - the fundamental basis of cross border student mobility and credit transfer and wider systems harmonization and integration. **vii)** Strong institutional leadership and governance to overcome the constant instability institutions experience due to staff and student strife, frequent educational policy changes due to changes of national governments, and poor institutional governance; **viii)** Academic freedom and institutional autonomy.

- Although universities design their own programs based on their strengths and the interests of the faculty and students, almost all programs include teaching, research, and service to the community. For regional integration, and to be globally competitive, the direction of universities should be re-oriented towards:

- i)** Ability to apply knowledge and skills to real-world settings through such schemes as internships or other hands-on experiences;
- ii)** Knowledge of the human cultures as well as the understanding of the physical and natural world;
- iii)** New concepts and new developments in science and technology;
- iv)** Global issues and developments such as climate change, the environment, and sustainable development and their implications for the future of the sub-region and Africa in general; **v)** Intellectual, practical skills and innovation;
- vi)** Teamwork skills and ability to collaborate with others in diverse group settings; and **vii)** Ability to communicate effectively with and across the traditional language barriers.

Within the ECOWAS zone, there are important organizations which serve as tools of integration and which have high impact.. These are, among others: **I) Health:** The West African Health Organisation (WAHO); **ii) Business:** The Organisation pour l'Harmonisation en Afrique du Droit des Affaires (OHADA); **iii) Higher Education :** African and Malagasy Council for Higher Education (CAMES).

All the aforesaid provides West Africa and its the universities with an excellent opportunity for integration as a sub-region; searching together common solutions to common problems, without excessive duplication of effort.

In conclusion

Regional integration can help Africa to increase its competitiveness, diversify its economic base and ***“create enough jobs for its young population.Regional integration in Africa will be possible, if the competitiveness gap between Africa and other emerging regions is bridged by investing in high-quality institutions , infrastructure , macroeconomic policies, the education and the adoption of new technologies ”***

As such, Higher Education, engine of economic and social development must be a priority in development priorities. To do this, prior challenges for a harmonized and efficient Higher Education system should be overcome. That is a collective historical responsibility for our sub-region involving Sub-regional Institutions, States, Public and private Higher Education Institutions, technical and financial partners, parents of students and learners