

## Realising the AU-EU strategy through sustainable African research universities

**Building on their high-level conference on 22 November involving African and European policymakers, civil society leaders, vice-chancellors and scientists, the African Research Universities Alliance (ARUA) and The Guild of Research-Intensive Universities (The Guild) affirm the critical importance of strengthening African research universities through long-term investments, as essential to delivering the African knowledge society.**

In 2017, the AU-EU summit paved the way for the recognition of science collaborations and research-led higher education as key priorities in the Africa-EU partnership. Since then, huge progress has been achieved with regard to these two objectives, with particular momentum developing since late 2019.

A key moment was the very first AU-EU research and innovation ministers' meeting taking place under the AU-EU High-Level Policy Dialogue (HLPD) on Science, Technology, and Innovation in July 2020. This articulated four priority areas for AU-EU R&I cooperation: public health, green transition, innovation and technology, and capacities for science. In addition, the AU and EU launched the Africa-Europe Alliance for Sustainable Investment and Jobs in September 2018 to boost employment and sustainable growth in Africa, with investments in education and skills as a priority.

These initiatives have been supported by significant additional investments. The four priority areas inform the African Research Initiative for Scientific Excellence (ARISE) Pilot Programme, which is intended to strengthen African frontier science based on excellence. Under Horizon Europe, a new Africa Initiative earmarks €350 million for research and innovation collaboration with African partners in 2021-2022 alone. In the new Erasmus+ programme, African universities will be the first partners of European institutions outside the EU, with the aim to triple the number of African students and researchers supported through the programme between 2020 and 2027. At the same time, the EU will direct more than 60% of the Global Europe Instrument (NDICI)'s Geographic Pillar budget to Africa for projects fostering human development, planet protection, prosperity, peace, and partnerships.

It is time now to ensure that these different initiatives are integrated in such a way that they jointly strengthen the capacity of African science in a sustainable way, enabling African universities to enhance their capacity for producing new scientific and socio-economic knowledge, deliver high-quality education, and contribute to innovation. In particular, ARUA and The Guild urge the African Union and the European Union to:

1. **Invest in [Clusters of Excellence](#) at African research universities**, which will foster intra-African scientific collaborations across the whole continent to address shared challenges as well as the specificities of each region. Unblocking competitive funding for Clusters of Excellence would enable the long-term and systemic expansion of the African knowledge society. It

would support the emergence of strong intra-African and African-European research and higher education networks, and provide for the training of African students and researchers along the entire research pipeline – from masters to research leadership positions. It would also build up the capacities of scholars, students, and institutions to drive social, cultural, and economic innovation and entrepreneurship.

2. **Strengthen the African research, innovation, and higher education systems**, to serve a rapidly growing student population and increase the capacity to contribute to addressing major African challenges with African solutions, as well as to narrow the global investment gap. To achieve this, we must strengthen the links between the university sector, public authorities, and the private sector. This will ensure the circulation of resources and knowledge needed to strengthen universities' capacity to contribute to the African knowledge society.

In addition, the introduction of a sustainable financial architecture for research and innovation in the form of a pan-African research funding scheme (e.g., in the form of an African Research Council managed by the African Academy of Sciences) would boost the number of excellent African scholars and research projects developed in Africa, and increase their visibility internationally.

Further, we should be able to monitor progress through an inter-governmental agreement on key R&I indicators for African science and the production and collection of reliable data. Finally, strengthening the science policy arena in Africa forms an essential component of delivering the African knowledge society. This includes identifying key science policy institutions and supporting their effective interactions with national and continental science policymakers.

3. **Support the development of world-class research infrastructures in Africa, including through the EU's Global Gateways programme.** This would enable the further development of world-class research in Africa, while also encouraging African scholars to return and attract European researchers to spend time at African universities and research institutes. To do this, the AU and EU could make co-investments in research capacities in Africa and thereby strengthen the interconnectedness between African and European research systems. This would enable mutually beneficial and equitable research partnerships through the principle of co-ownership. Moreover, with a growing need for robust infrastructures to better connect the world together, appropriate investments will enable universities to act as Global Gateways, facilitating the exchange of knowledge, data, and expertise between Africa and Europe.
4. **Develop a 'matching fund' approach**, to ensure the sustainability and the large-scale impact of capacity-building programmes, and strengthen the buy-in at the local, national, and regional levels. In practice, this would entail a significant commitment of African countries to increase their investment in R&D and innovation, responding to the AU's and EU's investment in Clusters of Excellence. Such commitments may vary in nature depending on the specific circumstances of any country. We call on national African commitments to echo the EU's

commitment to ringfencing funding for research and higher education in Africa in appropriate and sustainable ways.

5. **Foster a critical debate and reflection** on the colonial legacies and indebtedness of universities and science to colonialism and post-colonial structures. We must include these reflections appropriately in our curricula and evidence them more fully in the work of our subject associations, universities, and academies. These are essential steps for Europe's universities to contribute to a change in research culture, acknowledging fully the contribution of African researchers and communities to the global knowledge production.

With the forthcoming EU-AU summit in February 2022, research and higher education must feature high on the agenda for a new, mutually beneficial strategic African-European partnership. In this regard, African universities are best placed to address the challenges faced by Africa. Grounded in their local realities, they are mandated to train and empower the next generation of African politicians, entrepreneurs, innovators, and thought leaders. They will enable the creation of quality, knowledge-based employment opportunities; sustain the democratisation and inclusivity of education in Africa; and act as catalysts for stronger partnerships and knowledge exchanges between Africa and Europe.

### About The African Research Universities Alliance (ARUA)

Composed of sixteen leading universities in Africa, ARUA aims to enhance research and graduate training in member universities through a number of channels, including the setting up of Centres of Excellence (CoEs) at its member universities. Addressing key challenges of Africa's sustainable development, ARUA CoEs are intended to be focal points for aggregating world-class researchers from member universities and elsewhere to undertake collaborative research in priority thematic areas while providing opportunities for graduate students from the region and elsewhere to work with the researchers.

### About The Guild of European Research-Intensive Universities

Founded in 2016, The Guild comprises twenty-one of Europe's most distinguished research-intensive universities in sixteen countries and is dedicated to enhancing the voice of academic institutions, their researchers, and their students. The Guild is committed to the pursuit of excellence, the importance of truth-seeking and trust-building as the foundation of public life, and the creation of new knowledge for the benefit of society, culture, and economic growth.