

Briefing – ARUA-The Guild – Towards Clusters of Excellence – Academic Leads Meeting

About the ARUA-The Guild partnership

Since 2018, the African Research Universities Alliance (ARUA) and The Guild of European Research-Intensive Universities have established a close partnership, at the heart of which has been a joint appreciation that we can – and must – address global challenges affecting the African and European continents much more effectively if we develop new, long-term partnerships based on equity. Both networks have underlined that we need to strengthen the long-term capacities of African science, and that this required new types of science collaboration that goes beyond short-term collaboration, invests in academic careers at all stages, and includes investment in research infrastructures.

In this context, we also recognised, jointly, that the scientific and student ‘brain drain’ between Africa and Europe has slowed down the expansion of African research universities, restricting their potential to address challenges faced locally and globally, and to act as drivers of change for the continent. At the same time, we acknowledged that science in Europe (and worldwide) would benefit from a stronger cooperation with African universities, in terms of its quality and relevance.

As a result, we have, together, lobbied the European Union for a novel approach to supporting research collaboration between Africa and Europe, involving a focus on the long term. As part of this we have (successfully) persuaded policymakers that science collaboration should be core to the strategic EU-AU relationship, and that this needed a new approach towards development and research and innovation funding, based on equity.

Alongside this, we have committed ourselves, across our universities, to setting an example for the wider sector, as well as for policymakers, in practice. By creating ‘Clusters of Excellence’ we seek to demonstrate how new types of research partnerships could be effected. At the same time, it is clear that such Clusters can only be generated by researchers, based on a shared set of challenges identified by partners in Europe and Africa.

This briefing provides an introduction of the policy recommendations we have made, and the policy environment that sets the context for the development of our research collaborations. The aim of the 20 January meeting is to foster an academic debate about the opportunities and challenges involved in developing new types of equitable partnerships. It is hoped that this may provide a useful foundation for more concrete academic discussions between colleagues on developing Clusters of Excellence in concrete terms.

ARUA – The Guild Policy proposals

Developing our common views, we published our first joint position paper in 2020 ([‘Recommendations for Strengthening African Research Universities’](#)). In it, we called African and European leaders to place

science at the heart of their partnership, and to put in ambitions, new and transformative investments for science and higher education cooperation, with a focus on the long-term.

We elaborated on this paper in our Concept Note '[Confronting our Common Challenges: a new Approach to Strengthening Africa's Research, Innovation and Higher Education Capacity](#)'. In this note, we elaborated further on the development of new types of African-European university partnerships – coined as 'Clusters of Excellence' – to integrate the need to simultaneously boost doctoral education, early-career career opportunities, research infrastructures, research collaborations, and administrative support at African universities. These Clusters of Excellence were expected to involve at least three African universities and three European universities, to be developed in a long-term perspective (+10 years) and to focus on research areas of mutual interest (e.g., public health, energy transition, digital transformation, peace and security, etc.).

We were pleased when our joint positions were recognised and accepted more widely across the sector. In particular, in June 2021, twenty of Europe's Rector's conferences published a joint statement in which they affirmed our position, calling for a strengthening of Africa's universities through:

- Joint inter-university European and African research projects
- High-capacity graduate schools
- Enhanced academic career opportunities, including postdoctoral positions, at African universities
- Investment in research infrastructure in African universities
- Strengthening of the administrative capacities of African universities

Policy and funding context

Our recommendations were heard by policymakers, as African and European leaders [committed](#) in February 2022 to stepping up 'scientific cooperation between researchers to develop knowledge together' and to developing 'partnerships between universities, in order to improve our mutual understanding and foster excellence'. To do this, they agreed to develop a joint AU-EU Innovation Agenda. Remarkably (and importantly), its [first draft](#) was agreed as a core component of the new strategic relationship between the African Union and the European Union.

As requested by ARUA and The Guild, the joint Innovation Agenda adopts a long-term perspective, with milestones identified until 10 years. In line with our proposals, it intends to:

- Strengthen cooperation between African and Europe higher education institutions
- Promote joint master and doctoral degrees and support the mobility of students and staff
- Facilitate inclusive and affordable access to world-class research and innovation infrastructures
- And strengthen the emergence of centres of excellence for African and European researchers

To implement this Innovation Agenda, the European Commission will make funding available through at least three strands:

- [Erasmus+](#): Africa-Europe mobilities and capacity-building projects (€570 million in 2021-2027)

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- [Horizon Europe](#)
 - Joint research projects: €770 million in 2021-2024 earmarked for Europe-Africa scientific cooperation
 - Joint doctoral programmes: €3,000 million in 2021-2027 (not limited to cooperation with Africa)
- [Global Europe](#)/Neighbourhood, Development, and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI)
 - Intra-Africa mobilities: €60 million in 2022-2024
 - Early-career research fellowships: €25 million in 2022

At the same time, it is still a question at this stage how the European Commission plans to finance the development of research infrastructures, as well as what form the African-European centres of excellence will ultimately take. In addition, while the funding made available through Erasmus+ and Horizon Europe is welcome, it will not be sufficient to live up to the ambitions of the Innovation Agenda and to significantly scale up scientific and higher education cooperation between Africa and Europe's universities. Finally, we do not know how and to what extent EU member states, the AU, African states, and the private sector intend to contribute towards the AU-EU Innovation Agenda. This means that there is an opportunity for our two networks to continue influencing the development of new sources of funding, but in turn this also requires a strong commitment to these new research partnerships to showcase to policymakers and beyond.

The ARUA-The Guild Cape Town Summit (November 2022)

For this reason, the ARUA Vice-Chancellors and The Guild Presidents [met](#) at the University of Cape Town in early November 2022. During this meeting, university leaders reflected on the implementation of AU-EU Innovation Agenda at the university level. They affirmed the importance of developing new types of research collaborations between our universities that are focused on the long-term, not least as a way of exploiting, and in turn as a way also of agenda-setting, the new policy context between the AU and the EU.

To this end, they agreed to work towards the creation of Clusters of Excellence between our universities. This would include the development of joint programmes (at the doctoral level in particular) and the pooling of resources for building world-class research infrastructures. It was also decided that researchers should lead the development of the Clusters, with the support of their institutions. Therefore, Vice-Chancellors and Presidents called for the organisation of academic discussions on potential Clusters of Excellence to take place throughout Winter/Spring with a view to scope out interest, commitment, and potential partners. They agreed that they would make a final decision on the Clusters that would go ahead in June 2023, and that proposals should be formalised by 19 May 2023.

Objectives of the meeting

We are very grateful that you have put forward a proposal for a Cluster of Excellence. In total, our universities have manifested an interest in developing about seventy proposals, bearing witness of the excitement that the Cluster of Excellence framework generates, but also of the challenges attached to the scale, funding, and sustainability of these initiatives.

Therefore, this meeting is aimed at presenting the Clusters of Excellence concept – as it has been developed by ARUA and The Guild over the last years –, as well as to discuss and align expectations for what it will entail in practice. It will inform the upcoming joint ARUA-The Guild Deputy Vice-Chancellors/Vice-Presidents meeting in early February, which will decide on the proposal development universities are willing to support.

In addition, the meeting will begin to consider three key issues:

- How can academic discussions best be facilitated to develop a joint academic vision in any given subject area by 19 May 2023?
- How can we ensure that these new partnerships really develop for the long term, and are transformative – in terms of the partnership, but also of the institutions?
- As we negotiate an emerging policy-space over the next few years, are there ‘quick wins’ for the Clusters that we can identify as they are being developed?

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.

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