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Accra Declaration on GATS and the Internationalization of Higher Education in Africa

The Association of African Universities (AAU), in collaboration with UNESCO and the Council on Higher Education (CHE) (South Africa), organized a regional workshop on the theme: “**The Implications of WTO/GATS for Higher Education in Africa**”. The workshop was held from 27-29 April 2004 in Accra, Ghana. It succeeded in bringing together high profile participants, including trade and education ministers and other senior policy-makers, Vice-Chancellors and other leaders of public and private universities, heads of regional research and higher education organizations, representatives of national and regional regulatory agencies, sub-regional and international organizations, donors, advocacy networks, as well as consultants, journalists and other major stakeholders. A total of 67 participants mostly drawn from 16 African countries, and others coming from Europe, the Middle East, and Canada, took part in the workshop.

The workshop participants explored the issues related to GATS and its implications for higher education Africa, noted the transformations in African higher education, identified the gaps in research and advocacy in the context of the internationalisation of higher education in Africa, and unanimously adopted the attached Declaration to affirm their commitments and guide the concerted actions of all major stakeholders.



Accra Declaration on GATS and the Internationalization of Higher Education in Africa

(29 April 2004, Accra, Ghana)

Preamble

It is imperative to reaffirm the role and importance of higher education for sustainable social, political and economic development and renewal in Africa in a context where ongoing globalisation in higher education has put on the agenda issues of increased cross border provision, new modes and technologies of provision, new types of providers and qualifications, and new trade imperatives driving education. Higher education in Africa has to respond to these challenges in a global environment characterised by increasing differences in wealth, social well-being, educational opportunity and resources between rich and poor countries and where it is often asserted that ‘sharing knowledge, international co-operation and new technologies can offer new opportunities to reduce this gap (Preamble to World Declaration on Higher Education for the 21st Century, 1998, p. 19).

We participants in this workshop on the Implications of WTO/GATS for Higher Education in Africa assembled in Accra, Ghana from 27 – 29 April 2004:

Recalling

- ?? the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), Article 26, paragraph 1, which affirms that ‘Everyone has the right to education’ and that ‘higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit.’
- ?? the World Declaration on Higher Education for the 21st Century (1998), which affirms the role of higher education in the ‘consolidation of human rights, sustainable development, democracy and peace, in a context of justice’, and which asserts that ‘international co-operation and exchange are major avenues for advancing higher education throughout the world’, and further that the ‘principles of international co-operation based on solidarity, recognition and mutual support, true partnership that equitably serves the interests of the partners and the value of sharing knowledge and know-how across borders should govern relationships among higher education institutions in both developed and developing countries and should benefit the least developed countries in particular’
- ?? the AAU Declaration on the African University in the Third Millennium (2001), which calls for ‘the revitalisation of the African University and for a renewed sense of urgency in acknowledging the crucial role it should play in solving the many problems facing [the] continent’, and which urges African universities to

‘give priority to effective and positive participation in the global creation, exchange and application of knowledge’ and urges African governments to ‘continue to assume the prime responsibility for sustaining their universities, in partnership with other stakeholders’ because of the ‘critical role of universities in national development’

Noting

- ?? the negative impact of decades of structural adjustment policies and inadequate financing on the viability of higher education institutions as teaching and research institutions in Africa
- ?? the fact that the regeneration of higher education institutions in many African countries is at an early and vulnerable stage
- ?? the fact that regulatory regimes for the licensing/registration, quality assurance and accreditation of higher education institutions and programmes are undeveloped in many African countries or in early stages of development accompanied by problems of poor resourcing and capacity
- ?? the fact that various forms of internationalisation in higher education, including cross-border provision, are already underway and that national, regional and international mechanisms to foster and regulate international co-operation in higher education have been established by national governments, by regional associations and by UNESCO and other bodies
- ?? the ambiguities, silences and lack of clarity in GATS provisions, the lack of transparency in GATS deliberations, and insufficient knowledge and understanding of the full implications of GATS for higher education, especially in developing country contexts

Declare

- ?? A renewed commitment to the development of higher education in Africa as a ‘public mandate’ whose mission and objectives must serve the social, economic and intellectual needs and priorities of the peoples of the African continent while contributing to the ‘global creation, exchange and application of knowledge’ (AAU Declaration on the African University in the Third Millennium). We therefore caution against the reduction of higher education, under the GATS regime, to a tradable commodity subject primarily to international trade rules and negotiations, and the loss of authority of national governments to regulate higher education according to national needs and priorities.

- ?? Continued support for multiple forms of internationalisation in higher education which bring identifiable mutual benefits to African countries as much as to their co-operating partners in other countries and regions. We therefore re-affirm our commitment to reducing obstacles to international co-operation in respect of knowledge creation, exchange and application, to the enhancement of access to higher education and to increasing academic mobility within Africa itself.
- ?? A commitment to the strengthening of national institutional capacity and to developing national and regional arrangements for quality assurance, accreditation and the recognition of qualifications, and to greater co-operation and exchange of information on quality assurance issues relating to cross-border provision, including active support for and participation in activities to give effect to the Arusha Convention and to NEPAD objectives.
- ?? A commitment to engagement with the political, educational and economic implications of GATS for higher education in Africa. We therefore call on African governments and other African role players to exercise caution on further GATS commitments in higher education until a deeper understanding of GATS and the surrounding issues is developed and a more informed position is arrived at on how trade related cross-border provision in higher education can best serve national and regional development needs and priorities on the African continent.

Resolve to

- ?? promote greater availability of information on GATS and Higher Education in Africa, and more debate and discussion among relevant stakeholders in order to increase understanding of the potential dangers and/or opportunities from having cross-border higher education regulated by GATS.
- ?? promote further research on the nature and extent of cross-border provision in Africa and on quality assurance and accreditation systems appropriate for the development of higher education in Africa.