



Delivering on HE Data Collection Fit for AU-CESA 16-25 and Beyond: Is a Regional Approach the Solution?

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The PDU (Policy-Data Unit) Development Team was nominated by important regional university associations, with strong policy ties, as well as experts who can provide full time support to production of the deliverables as well as additional lobbying capacity

- Chair: Nodumo Dhlamini, Director for ICT Services and Knowledge Management, AAU
- Strategic advisors – HAQAA Team: Nicolas Patrici, OBREAL Global and Ursula Painter, DAAD
- Strategic advisor North Africa: Wail BENJELLOUN - Honorary president of the Union of Mediterranean Universities - UNIMED
- Senior Data and Policy Analyst: Nicolas Jooste, SARUA
- Senior Data and Policy Analyst: Ben Ruhinda, IUCEA
- Senior Data and Policy Analyst: Aïsatou Sy Wonyu, Director of the AUF regional Office for Central Africa and the Grands Lacs
- Regional integration and policy consultant: Kibrome H. Mekonnen - Addis Abeba based
- Policy and data consultant: Tafadzwa Mutsvedu Rusive – Gaborone based

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Why HE Data? And why Now?

This policy brief argues that resorting to data collection at the RECs (regional) level, as a stepping stone towards a Continental one, is the most desirable approach to solving Africa's HE data collection problem. The need to strengthen and building upon significant progress already made at the RECs levels needs to be put at the core of such an approach.

The collection, availability and accessibility of quality, relevant and comparable HE data in Africa is evidently crippling policy and development discourse at the different levels. First, informed decision making at the continental, regional and national level in the planning and implementation of strategies aimed at revitalizing the HE sector is hampered. Second, the monitoring and evaluation of continentally set objectives like those under Agenda 2063 and CESA 16-25 are rendered near impossible. Third, informed mobility of African students, faculty and researchers is compromised. Fourth, expansion of her HE institutions and, their competitiveness and representation at the global stage is minimized.

As a result, and along with other factors, these challenges will set back research and innovation in the continent; threaten gains made through other continental initiatives; hamper the ongoing regional integration process, and ultimately, limit Africa and her people from realizing their full potential and creating a prosperous Africa.

Solving the problem of African HE data collection is now made urgent due to a combination of factors. The end of the CESA implementation period – 2025 – is now fast approaching. The same is true for Agenda 2063's first ten-year implementation plan and the Global Sustainable Goals (SDGs). The Continental Integration process has reached a significant milestone with the entry in force of the AfCFTA.

On the other hand, regional and global challenges like climate change, environmental degradation, conflict induced crises and global pandemics like Covid-19 necessitate the Continent's readiness to mitigate the impact of such challenges and pursue its development goals. Critical in this process is the role to be played by Africa's tertiary education, research and innovation capacity. All of which needs to be guided by informed policy choices.

Introduction

Gaps and inconsistencies in relevance, accuracy, and comparability of Higher education data plague Africa as well as her Higher Education Policy agenda. Agenda 2063 and the Continental Education Strategy for Africa 2016-2025 (CESA 16-25) as well as current and future HE initiatives in the continent can only deliver on their objectives if supported by robust policy analysis and, monitoring and evaluation capabilities underpinned by adequate data.¹

Advancements in education vision as well as other continental initiatives require tracking of development indicators to initiate plans and guide implementation of interventions. For instance, CESA 16-25 and Agenda 2063, as well as, the Global Sustainable Development Goal 4 requires the tracking of development indicators to show progress on the pace and direction of meeting these goals. On the other hand, continental initiatives like AfCFTA require data on the movement of people, labor, capital, and knowhow across borders.

However, a look at current state of HE data collection in Africa and availability of data on the continent in international databases indicate that the success of these initiatives is being hamstrung by the lack of timely, accurate, reliable and comparable data that is sustainably collected. This policy brief details why this is so and calls for a coherent approach towards building an African HE information system capability that can match the intent and ambition of the CESA 16-25 strategy as well as support other regional, continental and global processes.

This policy brief is based on a mapping of African HE data sources. Data for the mapping report was collected through desk review of relevant literatures, reports and publications; examination of international and regional databases as well as assessment of existing policies, laws and institutional frameworks. Further data is also gathered through five focus group discussions organized in each of the five African regions. Other data collection experiences linked to regional policy making were also assessed in way of comparison.

The Limited Relevance of International Data Collections

Globally, UNESCO's UIS and the World Bank's Edstat databases are among the widely used, high quality and internationally comparable education data sources. Unfortunately, **African HE data on these international databases is scarcely available; rarely relevant for HE objectives set at the continental level and, mostly outdated.** For example, a close examination of the data availability for HE relevant indicators on the UIS database attests to this fact. Data for the 6 years from 2015 to 2020 is only available for 1 to 5 African Countries for most of the HE relevant indicators. Conversely, the number of countries for which there is no single data for the same 6 years range from 22 to 42, depending on the indicators.

Additionally, lack of adequate data on these indicators greatly reflects in socio-economic policy choices and the overall development of the countries. For instance, as much as emphasis is made on the importance of research and HE in realizing the continent's economic potential and technological competitiveness, this

1. AU, Continental Education Strategy for Africa: Indicators Manual, March 2018

cannot be realized without having a good sense of, as an example, where education attainment rate lies. This is critical, among other things, as evidence as to the availability or lack thereof of trained labour force to meet these economic objectives.

However, data on educational attainment rate, at the first degree, masters or doctoral levels, for the six years covering 2015 to 2020 is unavailable on the UIS database for more than 40 African Countries. The same holds true for the Edstat database. This is true even for the most basic education indicators like, for example, HE graduation rate. About 27 countries out of 54 have represented their data less than twice. A reporting ration of less than 50%. No meaningful comparison can be made with such low data reporting rates.

There is also problem in terms of developing relevant indicators for the monitoring and evaluation of continental strategies like CESA. Very few of the indicators applied by these databases directly correspond with those developed for the M&E of CESA. This shows that even the most comprehensive databases out there are inadequate for the policy making and enforcement in African HE sectors.

The Limited Relevance of International Rankings

There are a wide variety of international university rankings that can be assessed as data collection/transparency tools. International rankings have been criticized both conceptually and from methodology perspectives. Such criticisms aside, Rankings cannot be used as data sources for monitoring and evaluation of the CESA strategic objectives in particular for several reasons.

First, the criteria for ranking are substantively different from the ones developed to measure CESA's implementation. Secondly, data submitted to the rankings is not publicly available and policy makers at the continental, regional and national level cannot, adequately and accurately, deduce whether a certain CESA target has been met or not from a rating of a HEI's. Thirdly, unlike criteria developed by most rankings, the CESA objectives are set with the particular benefit expansion and strengthening of tertiary education would bring to the socio-economic development of the continent and what measures member states need to take in order to realize this potential. Furthermore, these international rankings do nothing to alleviate the lack of a reliable database about HEIs and programmes in Africa since only a handful institutions partake in those rankings.

The Limited Relevance of Once-Off Data Collections

For the purposes of this brief, 'Once off Data Collections and/or Initiatives' refers to initiatives and studies aimed at the collection of data/statistics on HE in general or any one or more dimensions of HE administration and policy in Africa. Such initiatives, aside from serving as a benchmark for building a better data collection mechanism, have little to offer in terms of institutionalizing each level of HE data collection in a manner that will be relevant to the continental policy making and implementation. They also suffer from a lack of continuity due to being project-based initiatives or lacking funding.

Once off initiatives while very rich in information **suffer from limited coverage in terms of geography, time span and dimensions of HE**. As a future option, their sustainability is also questionable as funding sources that go into numerous once off initiatives could be pooled for myriads of reasons.

Limited Progress at the Continental Level

At the continental level, there are no meaningful data collection exercises going on. There have been some notable initiatives that focused on solving the education data collection problem.

However, none of these initiatives have led to fruition for various reasons. Chief among such reasons is the existing disparity between the level of preparedness in each region and extent to which continental initiatives are translated to the particular region and at the national levels.

Data Initiatives at RECs Level

The comparison between the regions attest to the existing disparity in terms of existence of political will as evidenced by the adoption of legal and policy measures

enabling the broader HE regionalization and data exchange initiatives; existence of regional institutions with the mandate to work on HE regionalization as well as the existence of active regional initiatives towards setting up a regional data collection mechanism. Table 1 below briefly presents these differences.

Table 1: Disparity Between the Regions in terms of Legal and Policy Readiness

Criteria for Comparison	Southern A.	Eastern A.	Central A.	Western A.	Northern A.
Existence of regional policy instrument relevant for data collection	Available and being implemented	Available and being implemented	Available but not effective	Available but not effective	Not Available
Existence of Regional legal instrument on HE and HE Data collection	Available and being implemented	Available and being implemented	Available but lacks effective domestic application	Available	Not Available
Existence of regional institution with the mandate to work on HE regionalization	Available and legally acknowledged by the REC	Available and legally acknowledged by the REC	Not available	Not Available	Not available
Regional Data collection mechanism	In the process of being established	In the process of being established	Not Available	Not Available	Not Available

Similar disparity is also observed in terms of the challenges and opportunities present in each region. For instance, the availability of trained personnel for data collection and analysis at the different levels; availability of technology and facilities for data storage and retrieval; comparability of data definitions; existence of mandate for data collection at the regional and national level as well as availability and adequacy of funding for research and data collection. These differences hinder the establishment of a continental data collection mechanism in a ‘one size fits all approach’. Table 2 below presents the current state of data collection in terms of the challenges and opportunities present in each region.

Table 2: Existing Challenges and Opportunities for Data Collection in the Regions

Regions	Challenges	Opportunities
Southern Africa	<p>Incomparable nature of data being collected by universities</p> <p>definition of data not similar in different countries</p> <p>data not informing policy making in some countries</p> <p>difficulty to collect private HEIs data</p> <p>limited capacity at individual, institutional, national and regional level</p> <p>some institutions not having ITS</p>	<p>the possibility of integrating SADC data system through the network provider</p> <p>existence of enabling legal and policy frameworks</p> <p>political buy-in at the REC level for a SADC HEMIS already present</p> <p>existence of national level bodies mandated with HE data collection</p> <p>existence of national level I bodies mandated with HE data collection</p> <p>Most National CHE have adequate capacity to collect data</p> <p>most HEIs use ITS for data collection</p> <p>Existence of active HEIs association recognized as an institution of the relevant REC - SARUA</p>
Eastern Africa	<p>Data collection not linked to CESA objectives</p> <p>concerns on comparability of data</p> <p>Absence of policy specific to data collections</p> <p>lack of adequate human resource and infrastructure to run national and, eventually regional HEMIS</p> <p>some domestic data privacy laws negatively affecting exchange of data</p> <p>HEMIS at HEIs level and at the national level not yet interoperable</p>	<p>willingness to work closely by HEIs</p> <p>data is being used for policy making at the national and regional level</p> <p>Existence of national mandate to collect HE data</p> <p>most of the data collected in many of the states is relevant for CESA M&E – like enrolment, finance, graduates (including doctoral students)...</p> <p>the HE harmonization process is deeply rooted in the RI process</p> <p>most national HE Councils/commissions have HEMIS and ability to collect HE data</p> <p>data collection and dissemination in most member countries already automated at the national level</p> <p>national HE authorities/councils have legal mandate to collect data</p> <p>Existence of active HEIs association recognized as an institution of the relevant REC - IUCEA</p>
Central Africa	<p>HE data collection is limited to the national level</p> <p>data collection system and practice varies from country to country.</p> <p>there is no linkage to policies and strategies set at the regional or continental level.</p> <p>shortage of funding and expertise to collect and analyse the data</p>	<p>Active presence of the AUF as a forum for HEIs in the region</p> <p>some countries in the region have a relatively effective national data collection practice (Cameroon)</p>

Western Africa	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Data collection not linked to CESA objectives lack of awareness about continental strategies and objectives (including CESA) lack of a clear set criteria for data collection lack of clear policy on data collections lack of data collection mandate at the regional level limited responses for surveys limited funding for surveys infrastructure problem 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> existence of enabling political commitment at the REC level for a regional HEMIS existence of national level institutions mandated with HE data collection
Northern Africa	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Data collection not linked to CESA objectives concerns on comparability of data Absence of regional policy on data collections relative lack of inter-country cooperation on HE in the region significant delay in timely collecting data at the national level, especially for Mauritania data collection and dissemination in some countries not automated disparity with international standards in the data collected 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> willingness to work closely by HEIs most national HE authorities/councils have mandate to collect data most national systems have ability to collect data data is being used for policy making at the national level most of the data collected in many of the states is relevant for CESA M&E – like mobility, finance, doctoral graduates Participants insisted that regional cooperation needs to be reinforced.

The Way Forward

The current move towards Continental Integration in Africa, in which the regional economic communities serve as important pillars, puts HE harmonization as one of its focus areas. This presents a unique opportunity to devise a new approach towards solving the HE data problem in Africa. The approach identified as most suitable and preferable is one based in the regions, building upon their own regional political structures, processes and plans. It needs also to reflect the state of data collection at the national level in the respective regions.

Hence, the interventions in the regions will have to be designed in a manner responsive to the data and capacity building needs of the particular regions while at the same time having the required commonality in order to serve as the building blocks for a continental database as envisaged under CESA.

The outcomes of the regional focus groups conducted for the mapping study also support such an approach. Table 3 below presents some of the interventions identified as necessary in each region to facilitate regional data collection.

Table 3: Identified Intervention Areas for Each Region

Regions	Interventions Needed
Southern Africa	<p>Supporting the ongoing establishment of the regional HEMIS</p> <p>Creating linkage between national and regional system</p> <p>developing and adoption of common definitions for indicators</p> <p>identifying need and targeting capacity assistance at individual, national and regional level</p> <p>Creating or supporting policy dialogue forums to drive the data agenda at the regional level</p>
Eastern Africa	<p>adoption of a regional policy on HE information and data management</p> <p>supporting the ongoing establishment of a regional HEMIS</p> <p>Promotion of CESA objectives to policy makers</p> <p>Capacity building scheme to enhance human resource and infrastructure capability for a regional HEMIS</p> <p>assisting the development and definition of indicators pertinent for regional and continental HE objectives</p> <p>developing an EAC level access to information and data law to enhance better exchange of data</p>
Central Africa	<p>creating awareness about the CESA and its strategic objectives</p> <p>creating or supporting policy dialogue forums to drive the data agenda at the regional level</p> <p>initiating the process for creating linkage between national and regional systems</p> <p>Capacity assistance in terms of infrastructure development at the different levels</p>
Western Africa	<p>creating awareness about the CESA and other continentally set HE its strategic objectives</p> <p>creating or supporting policy dialogue forums to drive the data agenda at the regional level</p> <p>supporting the process of creating linkage between national and regional system</p> <p>Capacity assistance in terms of infrastructure development at the different levels</p>
Northern Africa	<p>supporting trans country HEIs dialogue and engagement</p> <p>bringing HE authorities in the region to work towards creating a common understanding on data collection and exchange</p> <p>Promotion of CESA and other continentally set HE objectives to policy makers</p> <p>devising a capacity building scheme for countries in the region with particular focus on national systems with glaring gap in data collection like that of Mauritania</p>

This requires, first of all, targeting the establishment of data collection mechanisms imbedded in the HE regionalization process of the respective RECs. Practically, such an approach presents multiple opportunities in solving the HE data collection problem at the continental level. First, once such processes are initiated at the regional level, interventions to address the key challenges identified above can be developed. However, since each region is moving at its own pace in terms of developing a regional data capability, the interventions in the regions will have to be designed in a manner responsive to the data and capacity building needs of the particular regions.

Second, the already advanced state of HE regionalization in the regions will help address the lack of political will on the part of member states or, at least, make securing political buy-in less restricting. It should be noted, however, this too will require careful sensitization, consultation, and negotiation.

Third, the setting up of regional mechanisms at the RECs level can be used as a building block towards the setting up of a continental data collection mechanism. The regional efforts will be complimented at the continental level by the AU and other professional associations like the AAU. This fits perfectly well with the overall approach being followed for continental integration in Africa.

Fourth, to facilitate the timely transfer of data, the regional mechanisms need to be linked to national HE data collection mechanisms. This will in turn require setting up such mechanisms in countries where one doesn't exist or enhancing the capacity of existing mechanisms. Since it will be targeted at a relatively small number of states in a particular region, building facilities and infrastructure as well as data collection, management and maintenance will be relatively easier to undertake if approached regionally.

Fifth, putting to work adequate and skilled human resources, familiar with the education systems of the regions, and with the needed specific knowledge of languages, would be helped by the setting up of regional data collection systems.

Sixth, a number of RECs in the various regions have already adopted legal and political instruments that mandate some level of cooperation and exchange of education data. This provides a much better conducive background for setting up regional data collection mechanisms.

Seventh, the existence of important REC based regional HE associations endowed with significant and wide HE mandate presents a particularly unique opportunity. Institutional arrangements like SARUA and the IUCEA play critical role in articulating HE policy at the regional levels and, are already working on various dimensions of HE administration in their respective regions.

Last, but not least, such regional data collection helps provide comparable and disaggregated data accurately representing the reality of each region and countries in the region contributing for the M&E of both regional and continental strategies.

Hence, owing to the advantages it presents, it is high time a regional approach be adopted as a pragmatic path to addressing the challenge. This approach is not new either. It has already been utilized in areas of relevance for HE regionalization like quality assurance, accreditation, qualification, and recognition of studies and awards.

As it is, the respective RECs in Eastern and Southern Africa are already in the process of establishing such mechanisms. This presents the ideal scenario to implement the regional approach endorsed above. Particular

attention, at least in the short term, in these two regions and provision of the necessary capacity assistance supporting these initiatives will have diverse and far-reaching benefits for the following reasons.

First, it is advantageous from resource and time stand point. Building up on and supporting these initiatives, rather than starting anew in all the regions, will help avoid redundancy and duplication of efforts thereby saving significant time and resource.

Secondly, once this approach is tried and tested, the lessons and out puts from interventions in these regions can be built upon and contextualized to expand similar experiences to the other regions. There is already a trend for this, for instance, where EMIS Norms and Standards developed in one African region have served as the basis for similar efforts in other RECs and at the Continental level.

Thirdly, and in the meantime, effort can be made to create an enabling environment in the other regions to ensure the experiences from the two regions can be effectively transplanted. This allows a targeted deployment of resources in a manner that is reflective of the current needs of the different regions.

This policy brief is based on a Mapping Report of African HE Data Sources prepared by HAQAA 2 Initiative's Policy Data Unit (PDU) Development Team, in collaboration with relevant HE stakeholders in the continent including the AAU, SARUA, AUF and IUCEA. The objective of the study is to assess the state of HE data collection in the continent; identify challenges and opportunities, and propose possible ways to eventually establish a continental data collection mechanism.