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Evaluation of the EU Development Co-operation Support to Higher Education in Partner Countries (2007-2014)

Executive Summary

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The cover pictures were taken by the evaluation team during the field missions in Kenya (Kenyatta University), Cameroon (Université des Montagnes), Egypt (American University in Cairo) and Moldova (Comrat University).

The opinions expressed in this document represent the authors' points of view, which are not necessarily shared by the European Commission or by the authorities of the concerned countries.

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Executive Summary

Evaluation objectives and methodology

This evaluation examines European Union (EU) support to Higher Education (HE) in partner countries during the period 2007-2014. It is thus a thematic evaluation, which provides overall judgements, and not an evaluation of individual programmes. The evaluation follows these twofold objectives:

- Providing the relevant external co-operation services of the EU and the wider public with an independent assessment;
- Identifying key lessons and forward-looking recommendations.

The evaluation covers activities in the HE sector supported by the EU within the framework of the following instruments: the European Development Fund (EDF); the Development Cooperation Instrument – thematic and geographic components (DCI); and the European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument (ENPI)¹.

EU support to HE: Key Figures

- The EU's development co-operation support to HE amounted to EUR 1.5 billion during the period 2007-2014.
- Out of this, 44% were financed by DCI, 43% by ENPI, and 3% by both DCI and ENPI, while only 10% were financed by the EDF.
- 90% of the EU's HE support was channelled through one of its major higher education programmes: Erasmus Mundus (56%), Tempus (24%), ALFA (5%), Edulink (3%) and the Intra-ACP Academic Mobility Scheme (3%). 10% of the funds were not related to any of these programmes.
- 93% of all funds were channelled through universities /research institutes.

Six programmes fall within the scope of the evaluation: *Erasmus Mundus (parts of the programme under development co-operation)*², *Intra-ACP Academic Mobility Scheme*, *Tempus IV*, *ALFA III*, *Edulink*, and the *African Union Support Programme 2 (Pan-African University)*. The design of Erasmus+ programme (since 2014) is taken into account regarding the forward-looking objective of the evaluation.

¹ Contracts funded by the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance and the Industrialised Countries Instrument, were excluded

² EM Action 2, Strand 1 (student and staff mobility), Action 1 (only scholarships funded by Heading 4) and Erasmus Mundus External Co-operation Window.

Respecting the guidelines of the European Commission for strategic evaluations, the evaluation is question-driven adopting a theory of change and a contribution analysis approach.

Data collection and analysis tools included: document review and interviews in Europe, a web-based survey of Higher Education Institutions in partner countries, a tracer study of former beneficiaries and eight field missions.

Policy framework of EU support to HE

Based on a number of policy documents, the EU's support in the field of HE is part of a comprehensive approach to education, which is seen as an important prerequisite for social and economic development. The overall objectives of the EU's HE programmes are:

- The promotion of intercultural understanding and the promotion of inter-societal co-operation between regions.
- The strengthening of sustainable and inclusive socio-economic development.
- The enhancement of political and economic co-operation.

These goals are to be achieved by promoting student and staff mobility, as well as by developing HE systems in partner countries and regions, while addressing cross-cutting issues such as promoting gender equality and preventing brain drain as well increasing the responsiveness to the labour market needs.

EU support to HE: some output figures

- 90% of EM Action 2 alumni consider that the exchange programme helped them to get better exposure to an international research environment.
- 80% of EM A2 alumni and 90% of students who participated in the Intra-ACP Academic Mobility Scheme considered that their first job matched their degree fields. 70% of EM A2 alumni found their first job within three months after graduation.
- 79% of polled departments/faculties stated that employability of their students had increased "to a great extent".
- 89% of polled departments/faculties of partner countries have monitoring and performance assessment systems in place of which many were established with the support of EU-funded projects

Conclusions by Evaluation Criteria

Conclusions by evaluation criteria are based on the findings presented in the answers to the evaluation questions.

Relevance: EU support for HE was relevant as a contribution to achieving socio-economic development objectives. The EU support had a strong focus on enhancing the responsiveness of degree programmes to the needs and requirements of national labour markets. It gained relevance with regard to the design and implementation of national reform processes in HE, and to promoting equitable access to HE for different groups in society. Furthermore, the EU's explicit emphasis on furthering regional approaches for the harmonisation and standardisation of HE made a substantial contribution to advancing regional integration.

Effectiveness: At the level of HE Institutions – and, more broadly, in national higher education systems – EU support has strongly contributed to:

- Increasing the quality of teaching and learning through curriculum development;
- Improvement of management practices of HE institutions as a result of strengthened administrative, institutional and financial practices;
- Creating a fertile ground for greater inclusiveness of vulnerable or disadvantaged groups by drawing attention of HE institutions to development priorities. However, the contribution to the participation of these groups was limited.

Through project-based support, which required the participation of universities from different countries and regions, the EU contributed decisively to internationalisation and to “South-South” co-operation in higher education. Generally, approaches to harmonisation and standardisation by partner countries' universities have played an important part in achieving the overall effectiveness of the support.

Efficiency: The general finding is that the delivery of support, mainly via projects under regional and global programmes, provided a suitable framework for achieving the expected outcomes. This included, but was not limited to: policy and institutional reforms at both national and universities levels – including improved quality assurance; harmonisation and

standardisation of HE; internationalisation of HE institutions; strengthened capacities of individual students and scholars.

The evaluation did not find any differences between the level of efficiency of EU support provided through major regional and global HE programmes and EU support provided bilaterally. Across the entire portfolio, support to HE in partner countries was delivered in a timely fashion in most cases, with the exception of some delays at operational level that were not, however, perceived as being highly critical. Overall, EU support was well aligned with national policy priorities. With the exception of South Africa partner country, procurement systems were not applied in HE support.

Impact: EU support to HE has contributed to narrowing the gap between the qualifications of university graduates and the needs of national, regional and global economies and labour markets.

This was mainly achieved through the development of new degree programmes oriented to the labour market, and increasing interaction between HE Institutions and the private sector. One of the most visible impacts is improved employability and acquisition of relevant skills for the socio-economic development of partner countries, as a direct result of broad-scale brain circulation within the framework of the EU-funded mobility programmes. At the same time, brain drain could be avoided to a large extent. Even when it happened, partner countries did not perceive its extent as being a problem.

Furthermore, the EU achieved the envisioned strengthening of inter-cultural understanding and inter-societal co-operation between regions. However, a robust and direct link between support to HE and sustainable and inclusive socio-economic development cannot be established in measurable terms.

Sustainability: EU support has yielded sustainable benefits at the level of partner countries and regions, as well as at the level of individuals. Major reforms were introduced as part of, and a result of, projects, and/or supported through bilateral co-operation. Partnerships and networks of HE institutions strengthened their internationalisation. Both achievements are highly unlikely to be reversed.

It can reasonably be assumed that the changes are sustainable wherever Bologna principles have been fully or partially adopted, or where other EU-supported policy and institutional reforms have been implemented with a view to improving the quality of teaching and learning, the employability of students, and the capacities of academic staff. In these instances, solid and durable structures have been created.

Coherence, EU Added Value and the 3Cs (co-ordination, complementarity and coherence): EU support to HE has been largely coherent in its approach and implementation. The clearest evidence of coherence is available for the individual programmes funded by the European Commission's Directorate-General for International Co-operation and Development (DG DEVCO) – Erasmus Mundus, Tempus IV, ALFA III, Edulink, and the Intra-ACP Academic Mobility Scheme. Evidence for coherence and synergies was also found between interventions funded by DG DEVCO and the support provided by DG RTD (Research and Innovation) and DG EAC (Education and Culture).

The evaluation did not find any instances of notable inconsistencies between the support provided by the EU on the one hand and Member States (MS) on the other. However, given the broadly similar objectives and targeted beneficiary groups of the EU programmes and those of the MS, it is surprising that only very limited effort was made to create synergies through pooling of resources and funding. Outside the Higher Education Donor Harmonisation Group, the lack of formalised co-operation and co-ordination at the level of partner countries constituted a missed opportunity in terms of achieving coherence or synergies.

The added value of the EU support has been high. Probably no single EU Member State or even group of Member States on their own would be sufficiently well placed to take the lead in organising and managing a highly complex programme in support of global HE.

Overall conclusions

The Conclusions are divided into three clusters relating to: (1) Policy and Strategic Focus; (2) Achieving Results; (3) Co-ordination and Synergies.

Cluster 1 – Policy and strategic focus

Conclusion 1: *EU support to HE lacked a clear overall strategic approach outlining the pathways to expected development impacts.*

The EU's approach to HE lacked an overarching strategy – and related intervention logic – with a strong and comprehensive rationale and assumptions on how to achieve the expected impacts and overarching development goals towards sustainable and inclusive socio-economic development and, ultimately, poverty reduction. The evaluation found that the design of programmes and of bilateral assistance was based only on implicit assumptions. A more explicit link between the benefits of investing in HE and broader development goals could have had the potential to increase the relevance and eventually the impact of the EU support to HE even further.

Conclusion 2: *The strategy of supporting HE mainly through projects under regional and global programmes was effective.*

The EU's approach to supporting HE was flexible and responsive to key national and regional development priorities as it embedded its support within the specific development contexts of HE in the respective countries and regions. Although the EU's approach to HE is best described as the sum of its parts, its common feature was the practice of channeling funds mainly through regional and global programmes for the benefit of universities, academics and students. This placed HE Institutions at the centre of the support. This approach constituted a bottom-up process that was initiated and effectively implemented at the institutional level and then often spilled over to the national level, resulting in reform initiatives benefitting the entire sector.

Cluster 2 – Achieving Results

Conclusion 3: *EU support to HE improved the framework conditions for enhanced teaching and learning.*

Across all regions, universities benefited from EU support in terms of often substantially improved enabling conditions for more effective and better quality teaching and learning. The strongest impact was evident in countries where EU-funded projects promoted the Bologna Process, but results were also evident in

partner countries or other countries that have chosen to follow other guidelines. For instance, the creation or expansion of e-learning programmes at a wide range of HE Institutions that participated in *ALFA III*, *Tempus IV* and *EduLink* projects, was possible thanks to EU support.

Conclusion 4: *EU support to HE generated employability effects.*

EU-funded projects that were directed at creating and improving degree programmes and curricula, and related mechanisms to better align university education with the labour market trends and needs, contributed to improved employment opportunities and prospects for graduates. For instance, it has been evidenced that most of the students and particularly those who participated in mobility programmes, through their acquisition of “soft skills”, were helped in finding their first job that matched their degree fields in their home countries.

Conclusion 5: *EU support to HE did only make a limited contribution to increasing inclusiveness.*

All EU-funded programmes promoted inclusiveness in HE from a gender perspective, and some promoted other under-represented, disadvantaged groups. The major mobility programmes succeeded only partly in achieving equitable participation. External factors in the participation of vulnerable and under-represented groups in EU programmes include their limited access to information about the opportunities, and their ability to take them up. The EU support as a whole has not been very successful in ensuring better access to HE for these groups. However, some EU projects had an indirect influence by drawing attention to greater inclusiveness at the level of HE institutions.

Conclusion 6: *EU support has strengthened intra-regional co-operation.*

EU support has fostered co-operation in HE between, and among, partner countries, and also strengthened intra-regional co-operation mainly as the result of:

- Network-building among HE Institutions within the same region;

- Intra-regional mobilities within the Intra-ACP Academic Mobility Scheme, and indirectly EduLink and ALFA III;
- EU-supported harmonisation based on governmental agreements,

The merger of *Tempus*, *Alfa III* and *EduLink* into the Erasmus+ Capacity Building action allows for a strengthening of co-operation between different regions; however, the focus on intra-regional co-operation for partner countries remains limited.

Cluster 3 – Co-ordination and Synergies

Conclusion 7: *EU support to HE produced some linkages with the EU's assistance to research and innovation, but synergies could have been higher..*

The EU's approach to supporting HE on the one hand and research and innovation on the other was complementary and has created some synergies, for example:

- Links between Erasmus Mundus and Tempus IV with the Seventh Framework Programme (FP 7), the EU's main instrument for funding research;
- EduLink's connection with the ACP Science & Technology Programme.

However, formal and institutionalised attempts to connect the major programmes targeted at universities were very limited (they existed only in the case of ACP HE Institutions); there would have been room (and demand) for creating more synergies.

Conclusion 8: *Formal co-ordination of the EU and Member States support to HE exists at a high political level, but is largely absent at partner country and regional levels.*

Since 2010, the Higher Education Donor Harmonisation Group has annually exchanged information on the members' respective policies, strategies and programmes for their support to HE.

However, in more practical terms the EU and MS embarked only on a small number of jointly-funded programmes (most importantly, the *Pan-African University*) and joint projects (mainly EU Support to Higher Education in ASEAN Region/EU Share).

Recommendations

Corresponding to the organisation of the Conclusions into three clusters, the same format is used for the Recommendations.

Cluster 1 – Policy and strategic focus

Recommendation 1: *Formulate the overall strategic approach to the support of HE in the EU's development co-operation relations.*

Very high importance in the short-term horizon.

The EU should elaborate a strategy that is clear with regard to “what” and “how”, in terms of achieving overarching development objectives. This strategic approach should address the main shortcomings of the previous programming period.

Recommendation 2: *Deepen the alignment with partner countries' policies and priorities in HE through jointly-funded academic mobility programmes.*

Medium importance in the long-term horizon.

While the EU's commitment to alignment is undisputed and clearly visible, it should be strengthened further through joint EU and partner country initiatives. The Commission and other EU stakeholders should explore the possibility of academic mobility programmes jointly funded by a partner country and the EU or, more specifically, joint programmes that would fund double degree study courses between the partner country's and EU's HE institutions. Joint programme funding would also make a contribution towards meeting the requirements of systems alignment under the Paris Declaration.

Cluster 2 – Achieving Results

Recommendation 3: *Realign the support to HE with the objective of strengthening intra-regional co-operation.*

High importance in the medium-term horizon.

Erasmus+ provides a framework for intra-regional and inter-regional co-operation, but the latter is more pronounced than the former. *The Intra-ACP Academic Mobility Scheme*, which did not merge into Erasmus+, became the Intra-Africa Academic Mobility Scheme. Under this programme, only African applicants can apply, which naturally strengthens intra-regional co-operation. Therefore, the EU should explore the possibility of replicating the Intra-Africa Academic Mobility Scheme in other

regions or introducing similar regional mobility programmes outside the scope of Erasmus+.

Recommendation 4: *Develop and implement an approach towards strengthening inclusiveness.*

Very high importance in the medium-term horizon.

The recommendation directly addresses the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 4.a³, 4.3⁴ and 4.5⁵. Equally important, strengthening inclusiveness is directly related to the EU commitment of “leaving no one behind” in development co-operation, which creates a clear mandate for DG DEVCO. While the EU mobility programmes, in the main, achieved equitable gender balance, the EU should now develop a clear concept of inclusiveness that will form a basis for an implementation and performance measurement. DG EAC and EACEA (Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency) should monitor the performance of Erasmus+ and other EU support to partner countries against clear performance targets for inclusiveness in HE, and they should take steps if the targets are not met. Putting special emphasis on inclusiveness seems mandatory in view of both the requirements of the Erasmus+ programme and overall development objectives.

Recommendation 5: *Create “dual” study courses oriented to the labour market.*

Medium importance in the long-term horizon.

EU support to HE aims at linking degree programmes and study courses with the labour market and thus it contributes to achieve SDG 4.4. DG EAC and DG DEVCO should encourage the creation of “dual” degree courses, either as a special action under Erasmus+ or through a new programme to further strengthen the positive effects that have already been achieved with regard to employability. Dual programmes have a stronger vocational approach than traditional academic study courses.

³ 4.a “Build and upgrade education facilities that are child, disability and gender sensitive and provide safe, non-violent, inclusive and effective learning environments for all”

⁴ 4.3 “By 2030, ensure equal access for all women and men to affordable and quality technical, vocational and tertiary education, including university”

⁵ 4.5 “By 2030, eliminate gender disparities in education and ensure equal access to all levels of education and vocational training for the vulnerable, including persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples and children in vulnerable situations”

es, and combine a university course with practical training. Unlike in the case of part-time courses, the employment and/or training element in a dual programme is an integral part of the course.

Cluster 3 – Co-ordination and synergies

Recommendation 6: *Expand formal mechanisms to facilitate the co-ordination of EU and Member States support to HE.*

Very high importance in the medium-term horizon.

Regular dialogue mechanism with MS to increase synergies and facilitate joint programming should be established at the strategic level. In partner countries and regions, HE sub-sector, should be included in the formal co-operation and co-ordination agenda of the EU Delegations and Member States.

Recommendation 7: *Strengthen the links between support to HE and support to research and innovation.*

High importance in the long-term horizon.

The EU support to HE, in particular to better quality teaching and learning, should be continued and further enhanced through the creation of stronger links with support to research and innovation provided by DG RTD. No solidly-developed formal and institutionalised links exist between the two areas of support that would allow for a stronger co-ordinated approach and the creation of synergies. The EU should therefore develop a more integrated approach that treats learning and teaching on the one hand and research on the other hand in a holistic way, and allows for more cross-fertilisation between the two mutually-dependent areas of HE. This would contribute towards achieving SDG 9.5.⁶

⁶ 9.5 “Enhance scientific research, upgrade the technological capabilities of industrial sectors in all countries, in particular developing countries,”