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Research Article

Rethinking African-European Scientific Cooperation: The Case of the Platform for African-European Studies

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Abstract

African universities rely on teaching traditions and scientific theories based on Western epistemologies and ontologies. Interactions between European and African scholars too tend to focus on the deficits in African experiences, knowledge, research and teaching methodologies and the poor economic environments in which they operate that are characterized by inadequate infrastructure and budgets. This essay discusses an emerging opportunity in science diplomacy within African-European Union (EU) interactions in higher education and argues that a fundamental revision of the imbalances in African-European scholarly relationships is possible. The essay uses the case of the emerging Platform for African-European Studies, which involves 22 universities (including 14 in Africa and eight in Europe) and underscores the importance of science diplomacy, knowledge co-creation and co-production to correct hegemonic knowledge about Africa. It explores the origins of the programme, its attempt to follow a critical global and decolonized approach in addressing the revision of curricula both in Europe and in Africa and the co-design of research. It concludes by highlighting some of the obstacles to disrupting the status-quo.

Keywords

Eurocentrism, Knowledge co-creation, Knowledge co-production, African-European scholarly relations, Programme for African-European Studies

Africa and Europe share a long history of socio-economic and political interaction. The relationship between them has a troubled past though. It has historically tended to be vertical, unidirectional and asymmetric too, in the favour of Europe. This is not to say Europe has not attempted to rebuild the relationship, especially since African countries started attaining political independence in the 1960s. A quick trace of this troubled relationship helps highlight some of Europe's efforts to remodel it. More appropriately, it helps locate the discussion in this essay within efforts to reboot relations between Africa and Europe, in the domain of research and science cooperation.

The legacy of colonialism has had a profound effect on the relationship between Africa and Europe. However, individual European countries and Europe as a group have sought to redefine the relationship into one that is less hierarchical. Through the Treaty of Rome, the European Economic Community (EEC), which preceded the European Union (EU), for example, provided preferential market access for goods from Africa and established a framework for development aid to Africa. Overtime, the relationship was defined by through a series of region-to-region trade and development agreements including the Yaoundé Conventions, the Lomé Conventions and the Cotonou Partnership Agreement¹.

Three arguments can be made from the historical relationship between Africa and Europe. First, some scholars and policy makers argue that Europe has long dominated the relationship with Africa and continues to do so (Farrell, 2005; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013; 2019; Oloruntoba, 2016; Nshimbi, 2020). Second, other scholars go further and argue that the relationship is neo-colonial in nature (Taylor, 2019; Fish et al., 2020). Third, and importantly, scholars focus attention on the realm of knowledge production and highlight the hierarchies inherent in the production of scholarship. These scholars emphasize that the process and practice of knowledge production is Eurocentric and sees Europeans export European educational practices to Africa while they study Africa and Africans from Eurocentric ontological and epistemological perspectives (Nyamnjoh, 2019; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018; 2020). Further, they argue that African scholarship is deliberately marginalised in "the so-called global economy of knowledge" and African scholars are reduced to "hunter-gatherers" and "native informants" for theorists in the global north (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018:86). They assume that knowledge created in Europe is universal (Mignolo, 2003; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2020).

These arguments support increasing calls especially within Africa to decolonize Eurocentric curricula and research practices and processes in universities (Nyamnjoh, 2016; Ndlovu-Gatsheni and Zondi, 2016; Oloruntoba et al., 2021). The curricular and pedagogical methods reinforce and overemphasise Westernized knowledge and knowledge production (Nyamnjoh, 2016; Shahjahan et al., 2021). Despite some efforts to redress this imbalance in scholarly relations, empirical research on how to balance African and European perspectives in education and research in both Africa and Europe are scarce. This is especially the case when it comes to research and innovation cooperation in Africa-Europe relations. Most studies and media reports on African-European relationships and specifically Africa-EU relations disproportionately focus on policy dimensions of cooperation including the economy and most recently, migration.

This essay showcases an attempt to decolonize higher education and research in both Europe and Africa in an effort to disrupt scholarly engagements between Africa and Europe. It does this through an explorative case study of the nascent Platform for African-European Studies (PAES), which started as the Initiative for European Studies in Africa (IESA), and drawing on the concepts of knowledge co-creation and co-production, and science diplomacy. The essay addresses the question: how can African scholars and European scholars co-design and co-create balanced education and research projects on level scholarly relations and build a sustainable professional network?

This essay articulates practical efforts to decolonize education and research in both Europe and Africa, while contributing to literature on knowledge co-creation/co-production and science diplomacy as a disruptive endeavour. The essay reflects on an attempt to reorient attitudes and approaches to transform African-European scholarly relations. It demonstrates how a balanced understanding can be co-developed in education and research that promotes mutual respect and interest. It expands the concept of co-creation and co-production which is prominent in public service, where citizens co-create and co-produce public services (Brandsen et al., 2018; Steen & Tuurnas, 2018; Jukić et al., 2019), to knowledge and research, which are also global public services. It also extends the concept of science diplomacy which tends to focus on inter-state relation, to inter-regional scholarly relations in education and research, which is also becoming important in knowledge production in the increasingly crisis ridden and multipolar world (Copeland, 2016; Arnaldi, 2023).

Following this introduction, the next section presents the methodological note deployed to explore the genesis of PAES and activities towards co-creating a decentred approach in teaching (European Studies and African Studies) and research in Africa and Europe. The third section discusses African-European relations as presented in the literature review and the case of PAES. The fourth section reflects on some challenges the initiative faced/faces in its evolution. The last section concludes and sets the agenda for future research.

METHODOLOGICAL NOTE

This essay relies on a qualitative analysis that engages with numerous sources including academic articles, books and relevant strategy and policy and legislative documents such as the European Parliament Resolution 2017/2083, *Communication on Africa – Europe Alliance* (2018), *European Commission -European Parliament and the Council, Joint Communication* (2020), and the *Comprehensive Strategy with Africa* (EU 2020). It also relies on a range of discussions and critical reflections undertaken by the informal working group of the PAES, a science diplomacy initiative. Furthermore, it draws on the deliberations of the first virtual workshop of the PAES initiative, which comprised over 60 participants from 18 universities in Africa and in Europe; officials from the European Commission, some EU delegations in Africa; embassies in Brussels, and representatives from the European Studies Association of Sub-Saharan Africa (ESA-SSA) and Una-Europe². PAES itself includes 22 universities, of which 14 are in Africa and 8 in Europe (Table 1).

Table 1 lists some of the universities that participated in the virtual workshop.

Table 1: European and African universities participating in PAES

Europe	Country	Why (involvement)?
Freie Universität Berlin	Berlin	Member of Una-Europe
KU Leuven	Belgium	Member of Una-Europe
Universidade Católica Portuguesa	Portugal	Lusophony
Universidade de Lisboa	Portugal	Lusophony
Università di Bologna	Italy	Member of Una-Europe
Université Paris1 Panthéon-Sorbonne	France	Member of Una-Europe
University of Edinburgh	UK	Member of Una-Europe
Uniwersytet Jagiellonski w Krakowie	Poland	Member of Una-Europe
Africa	Country	Why (involvement)?
Cairo University	Egypt	Hosts European Studies Centre
l'université de Carthage	Tunisia	Hosts European Studies Centre
University of Ghana	Ghana	Hosts European Studies Centre

Europe	Country	Why (involvement)?
University of Pretoria	South Africa	Teaches European Studies / Hosts European Studies Association / Hosts Research Unit on African-European Studies
Addis Ababa University	Ethiopia	Proximity to African Union (AU)
American University of Cairo	Egypt	Networks with some participating universities
The university of Libreville	Gabon	Proximity to Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS)
Universidade Catolica de Angola,	Angola	Lusophone African university
Universidade Católica de Moçambique	Mozambique	Lusophone African university
Université d', Benin	Benin	Francophone African university
Université nationale de Kinshasa	DRC	Francophone African university
University of Abuja	Nigeria	Proximity to Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS)
University of Dar es Salaam	Tanzania	Proximity to East African Community (EAC)
University of the Witwatersrand	South Africa	Network with some participating universities

AFRICAN-EUROPEAN SCHOLARLY RELATIONS IN THE LITERATURE

The Eurocentric nature of the education and scholarship exported from Europe to Africa, including European research on Africa from European epistemological perspectives often leads to misunderstanding, misinformation, and disinformation concerning the two continents (de Sousa Santos, 2018; Shahjahan et al., 2021; Oloruntoba et al., 2021; Clarke & Yellow, 2021; Knudsen et al., 2022). It also goes contrary to the efforts to remodel African-European relations in the aftermath of colonialism. Apart from the deliberate misrepresentation of African realities and marginalization of African scholarship (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018; Herzfield, 2002; Hall, 2000; Foucault, 1972; 1977), Eurocentric scholarship often lacks a comprehensive view of Africa and overlooks cultural, politico-administrative, and economic differences between individual African countries and societies in most accounts. Studies thus tend to be selective in their focus and interpretation of what Africa is and what issues matter. Unsurprisingly, these threads within scholarship often depict African countries as homogenous and reinforce the stereotyped narrative that Africa is a "hopeless Continent" (Deegan, 2008).

Besides representing Africa and Africans in this way, Western educational institutions and curricula also systematically dismiss African scholarship in Africa and the African diaspora (Emenyonu 2020; Cooper, 2019; Oloruntoba et al., 2021; Agozino, 2021; Clarke and Yellow; 2021). Despite the rich customs, traditions, identity, socio-cultural environment and world view, African society and epistemologies are considered inappropriate from the Western perspective (Cooper, 2019). They often ignore African indigenous knowledge production practices such as oral narratives and storytelling (Emenyonu, 2020).

However, recent decolonial discourses represent some efforts to counter these erasures; decolonize curricula and, in the process, argue for pluriversal knowledge (Mignolo, 2003; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2020). The collective struggle for decolonization and human-centred narratives helps to restore dignity, respect and human dignity, and build an inclusive, just and sustainable society (Clarke and Yellow, 2021; Eze, 2021)). From an African policy perspective, Agenda 2063 of the African Union (AU) provides a strong and appropriate avenue for decolonizing education and research in Africa as part of the blueprint for Africa's development (AU, 2014). There is also concern to go beyond Africa. For example, Oloruntoba et al. (2021:197) advocates the necessity to review "European Studies in Europe and Africa".

The evolving and new Africa-Europe relationship that allows for cooperation between African and Europe on education and science, as established in the Joint Africa-Europe

Strategy (JAES), provides a practical pathway to challenge hegemonic practices of knowledge production in the context of Africa-EU relations.

Knowledge Co-creation and Co-production in African-European Science Diplomacy

Research on the co-creation and co-production of knowledge is increasingly multi-disciplinary and championed as a mode of reorienting hegemonic knowledge practices (see Brandsen & Honingh, 2018; Steen & Tuurnas, 2018). Like Brandsen and Honingh, (2018), we see co-creation and co-production as distinct but related concepts. While co-creation primarily focuses on initiation and/or strategic planning, co-production concerns design and implementation. We argue that the focus in this context, on knowledge co-creation and co-production between African and European scholars is crucial to decolonising education and research practices while boosting collaboration between African and European scholars.

We further argue that African and European scholars should give increasing attention to science diplomacy. Science diplomacy does not primarily focus on advancing science but sets a broader framework for international scientific cooperation through foreign policy (Arnaldi, 2023). A growing number of countries and international institutions such as the EU and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) recognize the diplomatic potential of science in international cooperation (Copeland, 2016; Ruffini, 2023, Young, 2023). Science diplomacy promotes cooperation between scientific communities (the diplomacy for science dimension), fosters diplomacy, even when tensions exist between nations (the science for diplomacy dimension) and sheds scientific insights for foreign policy and diplomacy (the science in diplomacy) (Copeland, 2016; Ruffini, 2023).

Science diplomacy is increasingly important for the EU. For example through science and innovation programmes like Horizon Europe, the EU has invested significantly in science diplomacy to foster foreign policy and pursue solution to global challenges (Young, 2023). In its engagement with the AU, the EU fosters international scientific cooperation and provides joint funds for EU and African researchers to enhance scholarly relationships. Additionally, through science for diplomacy, the EU seeks to implement AU-EU objectives set out in the Joint Africa-EU Strategy. Finally, from the perspective of science in diplomacy, the EU provides scientific knowledge to address global challenges such as climate change, migration and inequality (Young, 2023). We contend that science diplomacy has the potential to address the problem of Eurocentric scholarship and enhance African-European scholarly relations; to boost diplomatic relations between the AU and EU; and ensure the societal relevance of education and research to tackle global challenges (Copeland, 2016; Arnaldi, 2023).

BACKGROUND OF THE PLATFORM

Recent changes in relations between Africa and Europe have had an impact on research and education collaboration. Following the launch of Horizon 2020 in 2014, the EU has taken substantial action to increase the mobility of African students and researchers through Erasmus+ scholarships. To further strengthen academic mobility between AU and EU, in 2017, the European Parliament adopted a resolution that leverages the EU-Africa Strategy (European Parliament, 2017). The Africa-Europe Alliance for Sustainable Development and Jobs reinforces the strategy (European Commission, 2018).

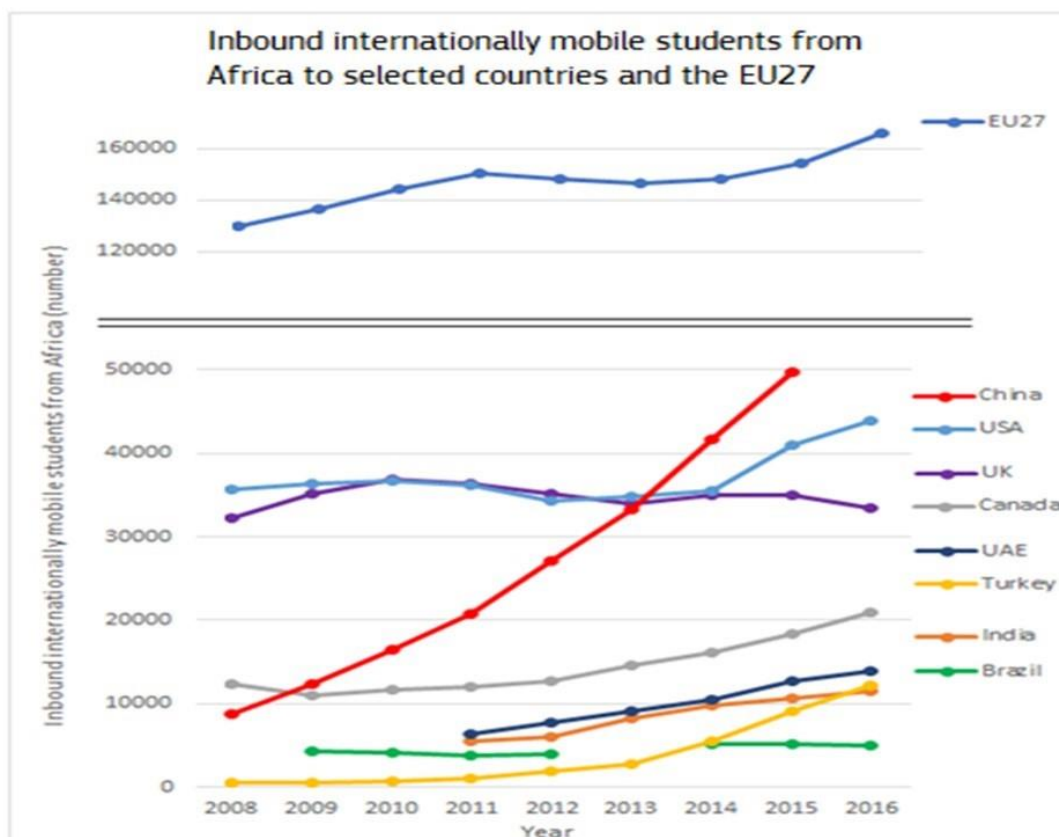
The European Commission (EC) has sought to further strengthen partnerships as articulated in March 2020 with a *Comprehensive Strategy with Africa*. The strategy emphasises that the EU needs “to partner with Africa, our twin continent, to tackle together the challenges of the 21st century and to further our common interests and future” (European Commission, 2020). The strategy further stressed the fact that the “partnership

(with Africa) should be based on a clear understanding of our respective and mutual interests and responsibilities, reflecting the comprehensiveness and maturity of (the) relationship” (European Commission, 2020:1). Among other things, it was proposed “that the EU scales up EU-Africa academic and scientific cooperation and facilitate the mobility of students, teachers, trainers, and researchers”, reflecting science diplomacy. It is worth noting that the Horizon 2020 programme and science diplomacy are the main vehicles for implementing the 2007 Joint Africa EU Strategy (Young, 2023).

The turn in the way that Europe considered its relationship with Africa is consistent with the shifts in the international development cooperation landscape (Develtere, 2020; Develtere et al., 2021). This shift seeks change in a longstanding unidirectional, vertical and asymmetric relationship built on donor-recipient and North-South perspectives and focused on gaps, deficits and problems.

Recent decolonial discourses have helped to encourage the “review of European Studies in Europe and Africa” (Oloruntoba et al., 2021:197). Practically, the role and influence of non-European countries also appears to be significant. Various non-European countries, such as China, South Korea, India, Turkey, the UAE are investing in African universities and strengthening ties with them, and disrupt the traditional European dominance. Moreover, those countries are increasingly becoming popular destinations for Africans to pursue studies (see Figure 1). Despite the interests from and in other spaces, the ties between European and African institutions on joint research and exchanges remain strong and African students continue to view Europe as a desirable place for study (Develtere, 2021; see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Inbound students from Africa to EU27 and other selected countries



Source: UIS Stat, Chinese Ministry of Education, EPSC

The countries which are increasingly attractive to Africans for pursuing academic studies use soft power and the tool of public diplomacy to woo the Africans. They use multiple

actors along with traditional diplomats to engage the international community on their behalf (Cull, 2009; Nye, 2008). China, for instance, increasingly uses culture and language study centres and investment as tools just like France and the UK.. As of January 2022, it had about 50 Confucius Institutes in 40 Africa countries, which is more than France's Alliance Française, which is present in 37 Africa countries. China has study centres in almost all countries in Africa too. These share institutional links with prestigious Chinese universities in China, which also host students from Africa. The centres also engage in collaborative research on contemporary issues on Africa and China. Like the EU, beyond education and cultural exchange (Liang 2012; King, 2013), China couples this sort of collaboration to boost its soft power by investing in aid programmes in Africa (Shambaugh, 2013) and through unconditional investment into infrastructure and trade with Africa (Fijałkowski, 2011).

South Korea seems to use study centers. Since 2016, it has established study centers at African universities in South Africa, Tanzania, Kenya and Ivory Coast (Develtere, 2021). The Russian government uses culture and science as soft power. Rossotrudnichestvo, the Russian foreign cultural exchange agency, implements Russia's foreign policy, facilitates scholarships for African students, engages in humanitarian work and builds trust with the international community through Russian values, culture, social and political programmes (Mäkinen, 2015). For the EU, on the other hand, only has four countries in Africa host European Study Centres (Ouma-Mugabe and Chaminuka, 2021; Cherry and Toit, 2018). As shown in Table 1, these are located in Egypt (University of Cairo), Ghana (University of Ghana), South Africa (University of Pretoria), and Tunisia (L'université de Carthage). In contrast there are least 56 African Studies centres in Europe. The majority of these centres are associated with the Africa-Europe Group for Interdisciplinary Studies (AEGIS). Some scholars have questioned knowledge making in Europe-based African Studies centres/institutions and the content of the knowledge contained in the programmes offered in those institutions. Oloruntoba et al. (2021:188), for example, show that the content of African Studies offered in European universities depicts a longstanding stereotype of Africa as a conflict-ridden continent and is devoid of an Africa focus. According to Oloruntoba et al. (2021), European perspectives on Africa constitute the core of African Studies courses in Europe. This reflects a deliberate marginalization of African scholarship and Africa as a producer of knowledge. It suggests, European Studies in Africa and African Studies in Europe and research on Africa should be carefully designed and incorporate African perspectives (ibid). The curricula and research should seek to stimulate a critical reflection on positive and negative past and present outcomes of African-European relations so as to promote balanced, inclusive, sustainable and new forms of relations. The PAES initiative seeks to contribute to this.

PRACTISING SCIENCE DIPLOMACY IN AFRICAN-EUROPEAN RELATIONS

Initiative for European Studies in Africa

In 2020, some scholars at the University of Leuven (KU Leuven) in Belgium reached out to European Studies centres in Africa with a proposal to co-design a programme or project for promoting European Studies in Africa. In the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic, through a series of email exchanges and virtual meetings the message that Belgian academics wished to do something about the near absence of European Studies in Africa was spread among African scholars. They argued that the limited availability of European Studies in Africa compared to African Studies in Europe has negative implications on current and future relations between Africa and Europe.

An informal working group made of scholars from both continents was convened in 2020. It comprised three members of African and European origin, who were also Africa- and Europe-based academicians. A factor that brought them together in the initiative was their common work and interest in European Studies as well as experience in teaching the subject in Africa. Among the first concrete steps the informal working group took alongside

the discussions was the creation of a website for the initiative where it was clearly indicated that the initiators were committed to, among other things, the exchange of views between African and European participants in the initiative concerning the changing relationship between Africa and Europe and the potential role knowledge co-creation strategies to enrich African Studies programmes in Europe, and co-design European Studies programmes in Africa; and exposing policy makers and non-academic stakeholders to the idea of mutually enriching African and European Studies programmes, in order to determine their views and potential contributions. The informal working group reached out to African and European universities and other stakeholders whose activities involved European Studies and African Studies and based on geographic location and linguistic coverage. Thus, other universities from each of the major regions in Africa, in addition to the four universities that hosted European Study Centres or taught European Studies, came on board as shown in Table 1. The informal working group also reached out to institutions from Lusophone speaking countries to ensure pan-African and lingual representativeness. From Europe, the informal working group approached Una-Europe to ask its members to participate in PAES. Table 1 lists the eight research universities in this alliance which confirmed participation. In addition, to bolster the momentum, the informal working group also set up bilateral meetings with various African government embassies in Brussels, the European Commission, EU Delegations in Africa, industry and the business community, the European Studies Association of Sub-Saharan Africa (ESA-SSA) and Una-Europe.

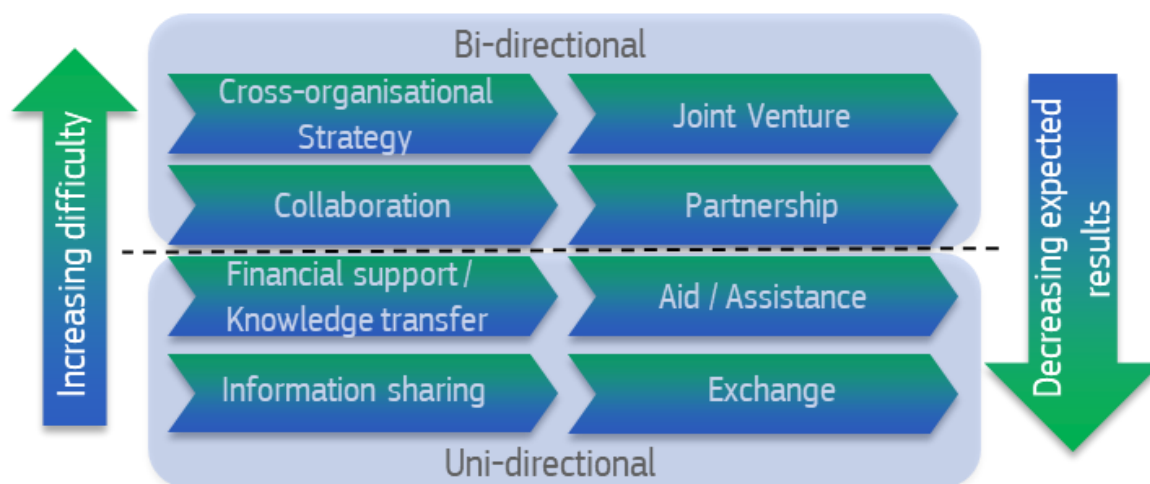
KU Leuven also approved an internal project during this period to bring participating universities to Leuven (Belgium) to launch the programme at a workshop in the autumn of 2021. Due to restrictions caused by Covid-19, however, this had to be delayed *sine die*. In the meantime, the working group used videoconferencing, WhatsApp calls and correspondence through email as functional alternatives to the face-to-face meeting that would have taken place during the Autumn 2021 workshop. It means that, the digital technologies, which are increasingly becoming the norm, partly due to crisis driven innovation, directly and indirectly has helped the co-creation/co-production process.

Participants from the universities that expressed interest in the programme were then asked to write two-page briefs about their universities and to participate in a virtual workshop planned for November 2021. To ensure full participation, the informal working group sent three reminders to the participants. Consequently, over 60 participants from 18 African and European universities, ESA-SSA, the European Commission and two goodwill ambassadors attended the virtual workshop. Most invited universities participated in the workshop, which marked the first collective meeting of all participants, albeit virtually.

In the first part, the participants introduced their respective institutions. Thereafter, the informal working group of three individuals based in Europe and Africa made presentations on European Studies in Africa and African Studies in Europe. The presentations focused on the number of European Studies programmes in Africa and African Studies programmes in Europe, their contents and ongoing Africa- Europe relationships.

The project for African-European scholarly relations, initially called the "Initiative for European Studies in Africa or IESA", would be a real joint venture. As visualised in the PowerPoint presentation developed to explain the *raison d'être* of the project and the proposed strategy to third parties (Figure 2), the initiators preferred taking the path in international cooperation with an explicit choice for a joint venture that would reflect a cross-organizational strategy of the universities involved.

Figure 2: Shifts between a unidirectional and bidirectional relationship



IESA to the Programme for African European Studies (PAES)

Shifts in depth and span

During the bilateral meetings a number of recurrent issues were debated that increased the span and depth of the original initiative. Three major changes out of these debates are noteworthy.

First, a shared conviction that this initiative should not be about establishing European Studies Centres in Africa in an effort to fill a gap or to compete with China Study Centres or Korean Study Centres. The initiative had to go beyond this and set the stage for a multilateral collaboration involving African and European scholars and institutions to stimulate and integrate African perspectives in European studies. Participants also argued that the IESA should not be limited to education, but focus on both education and research. They agreed that research and teaching activities in the frame of the initiative had to include a decolonized and decentred perspective both in Africa and Europe and contribute to the further decolonization and decentring of African – European relations.

Therefore, participants proposed that the network change the name—Initiative for European studies in Africa—since it implied that the ultimate objective of the initiative was to remedy the absence of European Studies in Africa by introducing European Studies in curricula in Africa. A program for African-European studies was proposed, but dropped for linguistic reasons and its implications. Consequently, the new working title of the network was “Programme for African European Studies” aka “PAES”, which tabled the need for an African perspective on European Studies.

Second, there was an institutional shift that implicitly reflected the theory of change. Participants stressed that PAES had to be co-designed and co-created by all participants, and constructed from the bottom-up. The idea of a programme offered by European colleagues, as donors and tutors, to African counterparts, as recipients and students, was resolutely rejected. Rather, the proposal was for the programme to be constructed by all participants on an equal footing and to that effect, mechanisms for co-decision-making had to be established. The point of departure of this decision-making had to be the individual scholars and their respective research units or departments. This bottom-up process was confirmed by participants at the August 2022 in-person meeting in Leuven in which they also underscored the importance of mutual trust and ownership, which they agreed to constitute the core principles of cooperation.

The third important dimension that stems from the discussion was networking and pluriversality of knowledge. The focus on dimension was partly reinforced by the workshop welcome speech, Professor Meulaerts who emphasized: 'the need to build a strong international network and to co-design and co-create an African-European program, and decolonize African-European scholarly relations'. She added 'history matters and thus the network should seek to decentre knowledge production and see knowledge as pluriversal'.

The participants in the workshop similarly underlined the necessity of pluriversality of knowledge within PAES as a collaborative endeavour (co-creation and co-design). The participants highlighted the need to integrate African perspectives into existing European Studies in Africa and African Studies in Europe. In addition, they also wanted to explore research collaboration on topics of common interest on African-European relations and Europe and Africa in the world. This is in line with Knudsen et al. (2022) who argue that pluriversality of knowledge is crucial to opening up new horizons for all participants and imagining humanistic and co-created future societies.

Equally, the participants emphasized the importance of building networks, which ultimately resulted in renaming PAES. To truly reflect, its mission and nature, the participants decided that PAES should stand for *Platform* for African-European Studies. That is, a platform as a programme of programmes in research and teaching; a meeting point for African and European scholars; a workplace to construct new initiatives; an incubator of new experiments and innovative projects; a particle accelerator; an intersection where academia, policy makers, private sector and civil society interact; and all of this combined. To this end, they also highlighted the need to foster student and staff mobility, establish bottom-up and university driven interdisciplinary PAES chapters in all the participating institutions, networking with multiple actors, interdisciplinary research cooperation and joint publications and conferences, and the search for funding and sharing of resources to operationalize PAES. PAES was consolidated in an in-person meeting held on 24-26 August 2022 in Leuven.

Joint Mission and Goals

The initial PAES mission and goals built on the many online informal working group discussions and reflections since 2020. The workshop confirmed the need for dialogue and critical reflection between stakeholders including, African and European scholars, the EU and the AU to address the historic, asymmetric and Eurocentric approach and to reimagine a balanced socio-economic and political relationship between the continents (see also Develtere, 2020). The participants underscored the need to decolonize European Studies in African and African Studies in Europe and to decolonize the mind, institutions and educational practice in both continents (see also Knudsen et al., 2022). The participants were convinced that both Africa and Europe would benefit from a systematic and respectful relationships and more democratic access to knowledge. They articulated and agreed on the mission of the PAES as follows.

We are committed to co-create (sic) and decolonize education and research both in Africa and Europe to address the limitation of Eurocentric approach and improve political, economic and social life in both continent through strengthening balanced and evidence based and context fit teaching and research that rooted in multidirectional and reciprocal partnership of equals and networks of mutual interests and responsibilities. (Platform for African European Studies, 2023)

Related to the mission, the participants distinguished two major goals/objectives:

The first was to promote European Studies in Africa and to exchange views between African and European partners on the desirability, relevance and feasibility of co-creating

European Studies programmes in Africa. The participants were convinced that potential existed for further research on European politics, institutions and culture from an African perspective. Moreover, they underscored that a better understanding of the workings of the European Union could enable African students, scholars and future leaders to engage Europe and the world better as well as to be better equipped to deal with European stakeholders.

The second was to enrich and strengthen existing European Studies programmes within Europe that are already developing critical global and decentred approaches, with specific African perspectives. The participants emphasized the need to break the mould and curb the rather one-sided flow of information and knowledge by learning with and from African partners, in mutual respect and appreciation and through genuine decolonial and collaborative cooperation. They unanimously revealed their interest to achieve truly decentred learning and genuinely decolonized university on both continents.

GOVERNING PAES AND CHALLENGES TO DISRUPTIVE SCIENCE COLLABORATION

Participants critically discussed the framework and how PAES would be governed as well as the way forward to realize its mission and goals. Concerning the working framework, the critical topic that occupied the agenda was the need to make the programme interdisciplinary both in Africa and Europe. To disrupt Eurocentric scholarship, there was consensus that, the programme should be open in terms of disciplinary scope based the diversity and intersectoral nature of the relationship between Africa and Europe.

Interestingly, the interdisciplinary teams of most universities in the initiative were created in the framework of PAES. This also came about in a bottom-up manner. There was no imposition of a common template. The teams comprised scholars from social and political sciences, international law, economics, geography, arts, and languages, as well as other disciplines. There was also no recommendation on where the program should be hosted in the participating universities. However, participants agreed that an interdisciplinary approach not only improves the quality and inclusiveness of the program but that it would also contribute to decolonizing education and research in African and Europe. It would also contribute to the co-design and co-creation of relevant education and joint research programmes.

The governance of PAES turned out to be a critical topic of discussion in the virtual workshop. After critically reflecting on this, the participants agreed on two issues: to work towards signing a memorandum of understanding (MoU) and to establish an interim working group of five individuals to steer the programme. Participants agreed that the MoU would facilitate smooth horizontal and vertical interaction between partners and within the universities that were participating in the initiative. This was informed by the fact that formal governance and leadership depend on formal contractual agreements that would detail the duties and responsibilities of the actors. The participants agreed that the interim informal working group would comprise the authors and participants from Benin, Egypt, and France. They agreed for the informal working to operationalize the programme and move the initiative forward. The working group's mandate was, therefore, organise, coordinate and facilitate the next (in person) meeting, develop an MoU, a proposal for a definite governance model as well as project proposals within the platform for funding. Participants were aware of institutional (historical, structural, and cultural), and financial challenges (see Shahjahan et al., 2021; Belluigi & Joseph, 2021; Clarke & Yellow, 2021; Knudsen et al., 2022) in implementing the aspirations of PAES. However, they foresaw the development of a multi-stakeholder project, with the possibility of receiving funding from multiple actors including international organizations, the private sector and co-financed by governments.

Three prominent challenges that PAES has faced in its evolution and implementation are worth briefly reflecting on. We broadly characterise them as: time, expectations and institutional challenges.

Turning the page in the relationship and stepping into a common future on the same leaf promises to truly establish the partnership (to which both parties aspire) as a genuine partnership of equals. It will help them squarely address sticky challenges that mock the touted political shift towards a partnership in Africa-EU relations and the suggested abandoning of a donor-dependent relationship in spheres like development cooperation (Carbon, 2015; Sherriff and Kotsopoulos, 2013; Haastrup, 2013; Develtere et al., 2021). It also promises inclusive mechanisms of interaction marked by transparency, communication and dialogue, to govern the partnership. Transparency, communication and dialogue are essential conditions for an even or levelled and interactive platform on which to co-create and co-produce knowledge.

Despite that, establishing new relationships among actors from diverse cultures, socioeconomic, political and historical backgrounds and building a team out of them that works towards common objectives and goals is daunting and time consuming. It takes time and effort to share ideas, exchange information, iron out differences, align interests and reach consensus and common aspirations. For PAES, which started in early 2020, this was compounded by the outbreak of Covid-19 and accompanying national lockdowns and restrictions on human mobility. Scheduled in-person activities to establish and concretize the relationships and build PAES from potential partners got cancelled or postponed. A couple of the postponed meetings ended up being virtual meetings. And though not attended by all targeted potential partners, and despite challenges in coordinating intercontinental virtual events across different time zones as well as technical glitches, the meetings were successful for events of their type.

The informal working group constituted in 2020 had a challenge in managing expectations of potential partners. Some of the partners had difficulties coming to terms with the fact that besides the common work, interest and experience in teaching European Studies in Africa within the informal working group, no funds actually drove the IESA/PAES initiative. Instead, it was an idea purely driven by the vision to reboot African-European scholarly relations and to co-create and co-produce knowledge on a level playing field; in the hope that fundraising to finance the initiative would come later, after the idea was firmly rooted. Others saw the initiative as a potential commercial venture they could exploit as a source of *n*th stream income for their institutions. They were, therefore, reluctant and questioned the benefit of participating in an initiative that had no commercial aspirations. Despite this, a fruitful in-person meeting of stakeholders from Africa and Europe based institutions materialised and successfully launched PAES.

Some of the institutional challenges PAES experienced relate to the apparent perpetuation of what the scholarship argues are historical asymmetry and patriarchy in Africa-Europe relations—skewed in Europe's favour as the dominant partner (Brown, 2000; Hansen and Jonsson, 2014; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2019; Oloruntoba, 2016; Pasture, 2015). Partners from Africa faced various visa-related challenges that affected travel to Europe and attendance of the in-person platform meeting. The challenges ranged from high visa fees, to delays in issuing visas, to inability to obtain visas. The visa challenges have precedence. Citizens of African countries need a visa to enter the EU but citizens of the EU and its member states enjoy visa-free entry in most African countries. Obtaining a visa to Europe is increasingly difficult for many people from Africa because of tighter visa and stringent immigration regimes informed by the securitization of migration and narratives of Africans attempting to escape poverty, pestilence, crime, war and conflict for a better life in Europe (Nshimbi and Moyo, 2016; Flahaux and De Haas, 2016; Laine et al., 2021). Unfortunately, African scholars are caught up in this narrative too and their ability to collaborate with colleagues in Europe is affected.

Constraints on the international mobility of African scholars due to increasing restrictive visa policies for Africans (Mau et al., 2015) affects science diplomacy (Ruffini, 2023) and African-scholarly relations. It also constrains the implementation of the ongoing African-European partnership on research and innovation.

CONCLUSIONS

Historical shifts in African-European relations have the potential to change the existing unbalanced positions between Africa and Europe. This change can be facilitated by science diplomacy with attention to knowledge co-creation, and knowledge co-production. The case of PAES presented in this essay shows that dialogue and critical reflection between African and European scholars could help balance African-European perspectives and reimagine scholarly relations. The dialogues and critical reflections experienced in the PAES initiative demonstrate that opportunities exist to develop, co-design and co-create multi-stakeholder projects and networks in scholarship. PAES adopted an approach that promises to promote justice and humane African-European scholarly relationships. The promise of the initiative is evident in its activities, which started in 2020. Despite the limitations imposed by the Covid-19 pandemic and associated restrictions, the nascent and evolving initiative has realized some notable accomplishments in the two short years of its existence.

Firstly, PAES has managed to establish a community of interest that spans Africa and Europe. This community is unique in the sense that it constitutes scholars who are committed to transforming the curriculum from the traditional universal to pluriversal and decentred outcomes and processes. This will include the creation and production of knowledge on European Studies in Africa and vice versa. Secondly, the initiative comprises a transcontinental team that is interdisciplinary. This is commendable in view of the tendency for scholars to work in disciplinary silos, when societal, global and indeed problems that face Africa and Europe traverse the continents and require comprehensive and integrated approaches to addressing them. The viability of the community established by PAES is evident in the fact that, thirdly, the participants can communicate and exchange ideas with each other and across disciplines. This is happening within each participating institution, where local interdisciplinary PAES chapters have been formed. It is also happening between participating institutions within Africa and Europe, respectively, and across the two continents. Some of the ideas and information exchanged in these networks concern the mobility of professionals, postgraduate study and research at the Master's and PhD levels. With this, the initiative, fourthly, now boasts of a completed Master's thesis on "European Studies in Africa" at KU Leuven.

Agenda 2063 of the African Union emphasises the quality and relevance of education and research, and that this generates knowledge that fosters development (AU, 2014). Agenda 2063 further promotes the direct involvement of non-conventional stakeholders in such spheres as education, to address societal problems and promote development. PAES as an initiative, and joint scholarly programmes drawn in the context of African-European relations like those envisioned by PAES to co-create and co-produce knowledge for improving intercontinental relations and addressing various problems speak directly to the recommendations of Agenda 2063.

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ENDNOTES

¹ The Yaoundé Conventions (1963-1968) elaborated the preferential market access for African goods to European markets in the Africa-EU relationship. The Lomé Conventions (1975-2000) dropped the policy of association in the Treaty of Rome and replaced it with a policy of 'partnership'. The 2000 Cotonou Partnership Agreement implicitly retained pan-Europeanism and the exploitation of African resources (Hettne and Söderbaum, 2005; Farrell, 2005; Hansen and Johnsson, 2011; Langan and Price, 2020).

² Una-Europe is an alliance of 9 European research universities: Alma Mater Studiorum Università di Bologna, Freie Universität Berlin, University of Edinburgh, Helsingin yliopisto/Helsingfors universitet, Uniwersytet Jagielloński w Krakowie, KU Leuven, Universidad Complutense de Madrid, Université Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne, and Leiden University.

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