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DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION, SCIENCE, TECHNOLOGY AND INNOVATION
KEYNOTE ADDRESS

**24th International Conference on Higher Education in Africa &
4th HEFAALA Symposium**

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African Union Commission

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Your Excellencies,
Honorable Ministers,
Distinguished Vice-Chancellors and Rectors,

Esteemed Scholars and Researchers,
Development Partners and Friends of Africa,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a profound honour to stand before you at the African Union Commission to officially open the 24th International Conference on Higher Education in Africa and the 4th Higher Education Forum for Africa, Asia and Latin America Symposium.

Allow me to extend a warm and heartfelt welcome to all our delegates, particularly our colleagues from outside Africa. Your presence embodies the very spirit of equitable partnership that defines this gathering, and we are deeply grateful for your solidarity and intellectual contribution to our shared academic journey.

I warmly congratulate our co-conveners—St. Mary's University, the International Network for Higher Education in Africa (INHEA) at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, and the dedicated teams from the AUC Department of Education, Science, Technology and Innovation (ESTI). To every facilitator, presenter, moderator, and partner who contributed to this event: thank you for your commitment to advancing African higher education.

Ladies and gentlemen,

We convene at a pivotal moment in our continental trajectory. We have just closed the implementation cycle of the Continental Education Strategy for Africa and stepped into the AU Decade of Education and Skills Development (2025-2034), supported by a new package of strategies: CESA 2026-2035, STISA-2034, CTVET, the Continental AI Strategy, and the Digital Education Strategy.

This moment is defined by both challenge and opportunity. We face immense geopolitical and economic pressures, including conflicts whose

repercussions are felt globally. Yet, we also stand at the dawn of a new era for African education.

Central to this era is our youth. Africa is home to the world's youngest population. By 2030, more than 375 million young Africans will enter working age. This is the essence of the youth bulge theory: a demographic structure that can either propel unprecedented growth or exacerbate instability. This demographic dividend will only materialize if matched with the right investments in education, skills, and opportunity. Otherwise, we risk a demographic burden. Higher education, therefore, is a the cornerstone for realizing Africa's full potential.

The mandate before us is clear: we must transform higher education from a pipeline for credentials into an engine of structural transformation, innovation, and inclusive development.

Access remains a critical challenge, with an enrolment rate of only 9%, significantly below the global average of 42%. Skills mismatches persist, particularly in science, technology, engineering, and digital fields. We have to confess that the systems we have are not yet delivering the outcomes we need the way we need it.

This is why our partnerships need to be reimagined. They must be anchored in African agency and shared value creation. Equitable collaboration is the critical bridge between our continental frameworks and our harmonization initiatives, the African Continental Qualifications Framework (ACQF), and the Sustainable Development Goals.

Working in silos has never yielded results. South-South, South-North, and triangular cooperation must move beyond transactional arrangements toward strategic, co-designed ecosystems that prioritize capacity co-development, joint research, technology transfer, and fair intellectual property frameworks.

Allow me to commend the remarkable maturing of interregional academic diplomacy, exemplified by Higher Education Forum for Africa, Asia and Latin America HEFAALA and the Interregional Dialogue on Education and Development. The deliberate inclusion of partners from across the globe

reflects a profound evolution toward polycentric cooperation and transcends aid paradigms, championing instead mutual learning, epistemic pluralism, and the co-creation of shared solutions.

Ladies and gentlemen,

We often speak of a knowledge-based economy, yet Africa's contribution to global research remains below 3%, and gross expenditure on R&D hovers at approximately 0.5% of GDP.

We are still in the deliberate process of becoming a knowledge Economy and we expect Academia, the knowledge community, to lead this transformation. Universities therefore must be the nervous system of our development journey, producing problem-solvers, generating policy-relevant research, and driving innovation.

Central to this transformation is the urgent operationalization of a Continental Common Higher Education Area. This vision must move from policy aspiration to practical reality: mutually recognized qualifications, seamless credit transfer, and free mobility for students, researchers, and professionals. By harmonizing frameworks and establishing continental funding mechanisms, we can create an ecosystem where talent circulates rather than drains, and where African skills are aligned with continental industrialization priorities.

This integrated academic space is a strategic imperative that will accelerate the African Continental Free Trade Area and propel us toward the knowledge-driven, borderless Africa envisioned in Agenda 2063.

The challenge before us is one of delivery.

Africa does not lack strategies; we lack pace, scale, and coordination in implementation. Delivering on the Decade of education ahead of us requires fundamental shifts, from incremental improvements to full systems transformation. It requires to break down silos between higher education, TVET, research, and industry to make dynamic nodes within broader ecosystems of skills and innovation.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Though we still have challenges of access to higher end tertiary education, we need to think outside the box. The real measure of success lies in completion, relevant skills acquisition, and meaningful transition to employment or entrepreneurship. This calls for deep curriculum transformation, embedding digital literacy, green skills, critical thinking, and interdisciplinary approaches.

Equally important is strengthening the link between knowledge production and societal impact. Too often, research remains disconnected from policy, industry, and community needs. We must create stronger incentives for applied research, strengthen centers of excellence, and deepen collaboration between universities, research institutions, and the private sector, while protecting African innovations through robust intellectual property systems.

Another critical dimension is talent. While mobility is valuable, it must evolve into brain circulation rather than brain drain. This means creating conditions that attract and retain talent, while actively engaging the African diaspora as a strategic partner in knowledge exchange, investment, and innovation.

As we pursue these ambitions, we must confront the question of financing. Transformation at this scale cannot be achieved without sustained investment. There is an urgent need to increase public investment, diversify funding sources, engage the private sector, and explore innovative financing mechanisms. Universities themselves must evolve toward more entrepreneurial and resilient models.

Distinguished colleagues,

The significance of this conference lies not only in the quality of dialogue it will generate, but in the actions it will catalyze. It must result in a clear and practical roadmap for implementing the priorities of the AU Decade. It must strengthen networks of collaboration across regions and continents. And critically, it must establish a framework for monitoring progress, ensuring that ideas translate into tangible outcomes.

In closing, let us remember that knowledge, when shared fairly and developed collaboratively, is the most renewable resource humanity possesses. As Nobel Laureate Dr. Mohammad Abdus Salam reminded us: "Science and higher education must know no borders. The equitable sharing of knowledge is the surest path to lifting all nations from marginalization."

Echoing this, Dr. Mamphela Aletta Ramphela affirmed that "equitable partnerships in higher education are not about charity; they are about justice, reciprocity, and the shared pursuit of human progress."

The AU Decade of Education and Skills Development is, above all, a decade of delivery. History will not judge us by the strength of our frameworks, but by the impact of our actions. Let this conference mark a turning point, from aspiration to execution, from dialogue to delivery, and from commitment to measurable change.

The African Union will continue to provide continental leadership, policy coherence, and strategic coordination. But success will depend on all of us—governments, institutions, scholars, partners, and students—working together with purpose and urgency.

Together, we can build a higher education system that is integrated, innovative, inclusive, and impactful. A system that equips Africa's people with the knowledge and skills to shape their own future. A system that drives the realization of Agenda 2063 and positions Africa as a leading force in the global knowledge economy.

I now declare the 24th International Conference on Higher Education in Africa and the 4th Higher Education Forum for Africa, Asia and Latin America Symposium officially open.

Thank you, and I wish you all fruitful deliberations.

Prof. Gaspard Banyankimbona Commissioner Education, Science, Technology and Innovation African Union Commission