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From human development to human capital development?

Critical reflections on the EU education and skills policies in Africa with a focus on the Global Gateway

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Abstract

The Global Gateway is considered a key instrument of EU development cooperation. Introduced in 2021, it was announced as a 'win-win' strategy for both, the EU's competitiveness agenda and developing countries' strive for sustainable development. The Global Gateway epitomises the current shifts in EU development policy from a focus on poverty reduction to infrastructure investments to boost economic development. These shifts have also affected the EU's education sector support strategies introducing a focus on employability and aiming at an enabling role of education for economic investments. This Policy Note critically discusses some of these trends at the sub-levels of basic, vocational and higher education, as well as the potential risks attached to them, particularly in Africa.

Introduction and Context

Recent geopolitical shifts at the global level are having a significant impact on international and EU external and development policy. While we are seeing increasing geopolitical multipolarity, manifested in growing tensions at the political, economic and military levels, traditional multilateralism based on the UN and its numerous organisations is under severe pressure. This has been affecting the international aid system. Sharp cuts in Official Development Assistance (ODA) spending by the USA and other bilateral donors and the closure of the US development agency USAID are symptoms of major geopolitical shockwaves that are disrupting traditional development policies, practices and narratives.

At the level of EU development policy this has been visible for a few years as the focus on poverty reduction in partner countries as overarching goal has been increasingly complemented by narratives on external policies guided by EU interests, particularly in the fields of migration and security. The term 'development policy and cooperation' has been replaced by 'international partnerships', the 'value-based' approach of cooperation by a stronger focus on economic competitiveness for the purpose of mutual benefits. The 7th African Union (AU) and European Union (EU) Summit, held in November 2025 in Luanda, reconfirmed the strategic partnership between both unions, as well as the goal of 'shaping a prosperous and sustainable future for Africa and Europe' (African Union/European Union 2025). The EU's main instrument to achieve this goal is the Global Gateway Strategy[1], often referred to as the EU's answer to China's Belt and Road initiative.

These substantial shifts in EU development policy have also affected its education sector support strategies. The remainder of this Policy Note will discuss some of these trends, and potential risks attached to them, with a focus on the Global Gateway.

Understanding the Global Gateway

The Global Gateway is considered a key instrument of EU development cooperation. Introduced in 2021 with a budget of € 300 bn and a focus on Africa (€ 150 bn dedicated to Africa), it was announced as a 'win-win' strategy for both, the EU's competitiveness agenda and developing countries' strive for sustainable development mainly by leveraging private finance and big infrastructure investments. The Global Gateway epitomises the current shifts in EU development cooperation and policy. From a focus on poverty reduction and social development it shifts to infrastructure investments to boost economic development. From a mix between public and private sector support it shifts to a focus on private investment encouraged through public co-funding and guarantees. From grants as key financial instruments, especially for Least Developed Countries (LDCs), it shifts to loans.

These changes should be seen against the backdrop of increased awareness of the EU's economic vulnerability and the sharp rise in demand for raw materials as a result of the green and digital transitions, further exacerbated by the recent prioritisation of defence spending. Securing access to critical raw materials and energy has become crucial for the EU.

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Particularly civil society organisations have expressed many concerns about the Global Gateway's underlying strategy focussing on private investments and revenue-generating projects as well as its deployment of loans rather than grants. This would primarily target market opportunities for European companies and could further increase the debt crisis particularly in LDCs, potentially adversely impacting the capacities of these countries to provide public services. Likewise, concerns encompass potentially negative ecological footprints of large projects, potentially negative impacts on local communities and their resources as well as tensions between the EU's proclaimed human rights-based approach and the lack of adequate implementation. Further critical points raised are the Global Gateway's lack of priority setting on development goals in line with the SDGs such as human development, social equity and gender. Finally, concerns point to weak transparency, accountability, democratic participation and – until date – effectiveness (Commission of the Bishops' Conferences of the European Union (COMECE) 2025; Concord 2024; EURODAD et al. 2024; Perez et al. 2025).

Education for all is not at the heart of the Global Gateway

Education and research are one of the Global Gateway's five declared priority areas, the others being digital infrastructure, energy and climate, transport and healthcare. However, this priority setting is not reflected in the number of flagship projects. In 2025, education and research accounted for less than 7 % of all flagship projects in Africa[2]. Yet, also in education, narratives are changing. While access to quality education for all has for decades been the overarching goal of international development efforts in the education sector, the Global Gateway primarily envisages an enabling role for education to facilitate investments. This is expressed in the "360-degree approach" that seeks to complement investments with broader support for capacity building, skills development and regulatory reform (Obreal 2025: 5). Consequently, vocational education and training (VET) and skills development, traditionally rather neglected fields, are now at the forefront of EU policies in the education sector.

Veron and van der Meer point to an additional geopolitical dimension skills development has acquired within the Global Gateway. China, traditionally known as an important actor in Africa in terms of infrastructure projects and provision of loans, has more recently become a supplier of (green) technology. Against this background VET and skills development have begun to play an increasingly strategic role for China's activities in Africa, namely as a soft power instrument that helps to achieve market acceptance for Chinese technology (Veron/van der Meer 2025b, 2025a).

There is to date little literature, critical or otherwise, on the impact of the Global Gateway in the education sector. However, a few concerns have been raised by several authors (Obreal 2025; Perez et al. 2025; World Vision International 2025).

A general concern relates to the Global Gateway's strategic approach based on private investments as key instruments. As studies confirm, the financing gaps in the education sector in developing countries and particularly in Africa refer to operational costs like teacher salaries, textbooks and facility maintenance rather than to new infrastructure. It is, however, very unlikely to attract private investment for these operational costs. Rather, such investment in the education sector mostly occurs in terms of digital infrastructure. While most African states are in dire need of technical upgrading for their education systems, private-public partnerships in education bear also a number of risks, in particular if big transnational companies are involved. The former UN Special Rapporteur on the right to education points to the risk of diversion of limited public funds for private interests, data abuse or unethical advertising practices towards minors (Human Rights Council 2020: 12).

Another concern relates to the shift in financing instruments increasingly favouring loan over grant financing. The UN has criticised this generally observable trend of shifting international ODA funds from grants-based to loan based (United Nations Global Crisis Response Group 2024). The UN considers ODA grants as an important source of funding in LDCs, in particular for social sectors. The reason for this is that loans can exacerbate debt burdens, which in turn, diminish the fiscal space for public sector spending in the education and health sectors.

Similar effects are visible for other basic services like electricity or internet access, that indirectly impact the education sector. Interventions which provide access to these services prove to potentially have a huge impact in terms of poverty reduction and inclusion of disadvantaged populations, most notably through improved access to education. However, cost-effectiveness requirements and profitability claims of private service provision tend to exclude the most vulnerable (Concord 2024).

In line with this, concerns are raised by civil society organisations that this new utilitarian approach to education might come at the expense of support to early childhood care and education, basic and foundational education, gender and inclusion, as well as education in emergencies and for displaced persons (World Vision International 2025). All of these fields of interventions are priorities of the African Union (AU) in the education sector and have proven essential in terms of reducing poverty and inequality.

Focus on employability in VET and beyond

The new trend in the EU's Africa policy in the VET sector appears to be "opportunity-driven VET". The Team Europe Initiative (TEI) "Opportunity-driven Skills and VET in Africa" (TEI OP-VET) aims to complement VET programmes financed by the European Commission or Member States at country level. The objective is to orient these programmes towards concrete employment opportunities created

by (EU) investments, trade, (regional) value chain development and other market dynamics in partner countries (Global Gateway 2024)[3].

Examples include the 'Innovating Green Networks through Industry and TVET Empowerment for Green Hydrogen' (IGNITE GH2) project in Namibia[4]. The project will be implemented by the Namibian University of Science and Technology and the Namibian Institute of Mining and Technology, together with private sector GH2 operators Zhero and Hyphen, and aims at upskilling around 700 unemployed graduates to increase their employability in emerging energy sectors. IGNITE, like most TEI OP-VET projects, has only started recently, and therefore limited information is available on how the project is linked to the infrastructure investments on the one hand and to the national education and TVET system on the other, how local actors are involved, how the transition to employment is structured and how gender and inclusivity perspectives are ensured.

The new TEI OP-VET approach claims to introduce a paradigm shift from supply- to demand-driven VET (Global Gateway 2024). Indeed, traditionally, there was little alignment between VET and labour market policies while official discourses used to suggest that VET alone would be sufficient to create jobs. By contrast, the new initiative emphasises the need to concurrently invest in job creation and VET.

However, the current discourse also transmits a commoditised understanding of skills and VET. It entails an ahistoric account, which is silent about the colonial legacy and past fallacies both in national and donor education/VET policies. As in many countries in the Global South, VET systems in Africa tend to be weak, underfunded and of low reputation. In addition, policy documents often state the lack or poor quality of available data and the weakness of VET and labour market research. There is an elucidating academic debate about how VET systems in most African countries emerged from colonial education systems and how this still impacts their current state. This is most visible in terms of limited VET relevance for both social mobility and the socioeconomic realities shaped by the predominance of the informal sector and of subsistence agriculture in many countries (see e.g. Allais 2020a; McGrath 2022). This inconsistency between policies and local contexts has been underpinning VET systems in African countries since their independence. Most VET policies are still transferred from Western countries, and they only insufficiently correspond to the local requirements (Allais 2023; McGrath 2022). To sum up, current VET systems appear to be in a weak position for fulfilling their expected role in the Global Gateway investment strategy. On top of this, in many African countries, general education systems tend to be weak and underfunded failing to equip African Youth, except for small elites, with solid basic skills required for any form of VET or further education (Veron/van der Meer 2025a).

Yet, while the new discourse acknowledges that VET alone cannot create jobs, a demand-driven approach does not necessarily mean a systemic approach that balances employers' and learners' needs and opens pathways to people beyond their immediate job needs. To the contrary, the term "opportunity" suggests a high degree of volatility and precariousness rather than a stable employment and income prospective. It also gives an idea of a further hollowing-out of already fragmented VET systems. Rather than transmitting solid occupational training, these systems are incentivized to train for immediate skills requirement that might soon be obsolete.

Whether this new VET policy will help in creating employment depends on a variety of factors. In many African countries, most economic activities occur in the informal sector while the formal private sector is often very small. Investments, as envisaged by the Global Gateway, if they occur at all, will take time to materialise in terms of employment. Informality and scarcity of resources make it also implausible that employment opportunities comply with the requirements of 'decent work', such as e.g. a living salary and a minimum number of working hours.

The TEI OP-VET's predecessor project, the VET Toolbox, sheds some light on the complexity of achieving the desired impacts. The VET toolbox has focused on private sector involvement and creation of decent employment through piloting opportunity-driven VET projects. Its latest available annual report points to promising results in terms of mobilising private sector partners, but also to difficulties in gender inclusion and in integrating trainings and qualifications into the national education systems. Securing employment for graduates that complies with the criteria of decent work is considered the most challenging target (VET Toolbox Coordination Hub 2024).

In addition, it is unclear to what extent the opportunity driven VET approach aligns with the priorities of African partner countries. The new African Union continental TVET strategy appears to transmit a different spirit in calling for a focus on strong public institutions as well as holistic and inclusive national and regional VET systems. It advocates for access to quality VET for all, including women and minority groups as well as informal and rural workers (African Union 2025).

The EU's opportunity-driven VET approach might provide impetus to increase political attention and financing for VET, improve its reputation, its quality and labour market relevance. However, there is a risk that some of these effects might remain confined to isolated spots. It is questionable whether this approach will be helpful to set up solid and sustainable VET systems as integrated parts of holistic education systems, geared towards the requirements of African economies and their people.

Higher education sidelined?

Generally, the EU has substantially increased its funding for higher education partnerships and research cooperation with Africa. For instance, under the current cycle of the Erasmus+ programme (2021–2027), about 23 % of international funds are dedicated to Sub Saharan Africa. This is a massive increase from about 7 % of the budget under the previous programme cycle (2014–2020)[5]. The EU's main research funding programme, Horizon Europe, has a specific Africa Initiative window.

Some Global Gateway flagship projects address the higher education sector, like the Youth Mobility for Africa and the Regional Teachers Initiative for Africa (RTIA)[6]. Nevertheless, a move to employability is visible also in higher education and research. Programmes such as Erasmus+ demand alignment with the Global Gateway priorities. The expected role of interventions is that of an enabling factor for investments.

At the same time, many European agencies implementing higher education partnership programmes with countries in the Global South experience budget cuts and increased pressure to prove that such programmes serve donor interests to the same or a higher extent than development objectives.

These shifting priorities have given rise to concerns. Representatives of university associations state that "higher education and research is not yet fully acknowledged in the larger [AU-EU] collaboration framework and might just be seen as a tool to advance certain priorities in a rather technical and utilitarian fashion"[7]. Other stakeholders are concerned that the sector risks being 'lost in the middle' between the Global Gateway's emphasis on innovation ecosystems and employable skills (Obreal 2025). Against this background, stakeholders call for increased attention of the Global Gateway to the pivotal role of higher education systems as a prerequisite for economic investment. They also demand higher funding, more interventions, stronger consideration of African leadership to ensure responsiveness to local needs and inclusion of LDCs and fragile states in partnerships (ibid.). Other recommendations stress that EU-Africa partnerships must be values-based including democracy, academic freedom, as well as equity and inclusion (Association of African Universities/European University Association 2025).

Conclusions

Based on current knowledge, there is good reason to believe that, beyond rhetoric, the Global Gateway is struggling to reconcile the two conflicting goals of the EU's competitiveness agenda on the one hand and sustainable development in the Global South on the other.

This is visible in the education sector, which, like other social sectors, does not easily fit in the development-through-investment approach of the Global Gateway. In line with the SDG 4 "Quality education for all" and the education agenda of the AU, current EU policies in the sector require some adaptations.

First, to comply with the goal of providing quality education for all, sustained public funding is required to strengthen public education systems, including in fragile contexts. It is therefore advisable to safeguard EU ODA grant funding for education and, in addition to the new focus on VET, to reinforce traditional foci on balanced and systemic education sector support as well as on equity, gender and inclusion.

Second, in line with the partnership principle underpinning the AU-EU partnership and the Global Gateway, priorities in EU education sector support should be stronger aligned with AU priorities, which go beyond an enabling role of education for investments.

Third, the employability approach in VET should be leveraged to strengthen and improve African VET systems in a holistic and sustainable way and to integrate them into national education systems so that they can offer real pathways to young people and new professional opportunities to workers.

Last, while higher education is indeed indispensable to enable economic development, its role should not be confined to supplying high level skills and innovation on demand for specific investments. In addition to integrating higher education and research as transversal components in Global Gateway projects, funding schemes should allow for projects that aim at supporting long-term and sustainable higher education systems in Africa. In accordance with the concept of partnerships, these should also offer space for local priorities and efforts to decolonise knowledge production.

1 https://commission.europa.eu/topics/international-partnerships/global-gateway_en

2 Own calculation. https://international-partnerships.ec.europa.eu/document/download/ed505ccf-18ef-4fe9-816b-587d28f10633_en?filename=infographics-global-gateway-flagship-projects-2025-eu-africa_en.pdf (Dec 4, 2025)

3 See: https://capacity4dev.europa.eu/system/files/documents/2024-08/Infographic%20-%20TEI%20OP-VET.pdf (Dec 10, 2025).

4 https://international-partnerships.ec.europa.eu/news-and-events/news/global-gateway-investments-focus-education-and-job-creation-namibians-benefit-pioneering-green-2025-09-19_en

5 https://erasmusplus.oead.at/de/wirkung-initiativen/thematische-initiativen/aktueller-schwerpunkt-afrika

6 https://international-partnerships.ec.europa.eu/policies/global-gateway/education-and-research_en

7 https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20251202205030867&utm_source=newsletter&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=AFNL0521 (Dec 4, 2025)

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