



UNITAFRICA

*Empowering the Academic Cooperation between Italy and Africa for
fostering the quality and effectiveness of the higher education
systems in a mutual learning environment*
TNE23-00050 - CUP D81I24000280007

Messina UNITAFRICA Conference

11-12-13 December 2025

CALL FOR PAPERS

The Protection of the Right to Quality Higher Education under International Law: Instruments and Perspectives

I. Conference Content

When we discuss the right to education, we generally refer to a primary education level. However, the term “education” is utilized in international human rights instruments in its narrower sense to include all formal institutional instruction imparted within a national, provincial or local education system (whether public or private) at the primary, secondary, and tertiary levels. Although children are the main beneficiaries, the right to education belongs to all individuals. In proclaiming that “everyone has the right to education”, Art. 26 (1) of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) implicitly recognizes, indeed, that education is a life-long and continuous process.

Over the past 60 years the international community has recognized higher education as a basic human right. The right to higher education has been specifically affirmed in detail by certain major human rights instruments, such as the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1966). Under this instrument, all States Parties are required to provide at least for the existence and maintenance of adequate instruction facilities and to ensure that all conditions prescribed by international law are fully satisfied.

The right to quality higher education is also recognized and reaffirmed by the African regional human rights system. Art. 17 (1) of the African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights (1981), which was adopted by the Organization of African Unity on 27 June 1981, provides that: “every individual shall have the right to education”. A more comprehensive formulation of the right to education is to be found in the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child which was adopted by the OAU on 11 July 1990. This instrument imposes the development of universal secondary education in its different forms and the universal accessibility to higher education based on capacity. More recently, the Assembly of the AU adopted the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa, which requires all States Members to take all appropriate measures to guarantee women equal opportunity and access in the sphere of education and training [Art. 12 (1)]. Therefore, all States Parties are required to take specific positive measures to promote education and training for women at all levels and in all disciplines (particularly science and



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technology), and the enrolment and retention of girls in schools and training institutions [at Art. 12 (2)].

In view of the above, we are calling for paper proposals on the following subjects:

- a) It is generally accepted that formal education is an important function of the State. Is higher education a pre-requisite for individual dignity and development?
- b) How can higher education be made equally accessible to all based on merit or capacity rather than wealth or social class?
- c) Subject to certain conditions, must states respect the liberty of individuals, bodies, and minority groups to establish and run educational institutions?
- d) Could it be asserted with confidence that certain aspects of the right to education have arguably now crystallized as part of customary international law?
- e) International human rights law strives to ensure that access to (and treatment in) educational programmes at all levels shall be based on non-discrimination and equality of educational opportunities. How can this essential goal be achieved?
- f) As a “second generation” type of human right, the right to education requires a considerable amount of public expenditure – progressively – over time for its effective implementation. However, the educational sector remains under-funded in many countries due to the combined effects of economic under-development, poverty and the result of a severe debt burden. How might the rules of international law governing international cooperation for sustainable development in the African continent contribute to guaranteeing the full realization of the right to higher quality education?
- g) Nowadays, the problem of educational discrimination against various groups persists. These groups include, especially, children with disabilities, indigenous, pregnant girls and teenage mothers, children living in rural communities, refugees and migrant workers. How might the principle of gender equality implement the right to higher quality education in the African Continent?
- h) How should the international community as a whole monitor the realization of the right to education?
- i) Provide a complete report on the higher education situation in African Sub-Saharan countries.

II. Selection criteria

The abstracts will be assessed by the selection committee based on:

- Innovative nature of the work.
- Originality of the presentation (e.g. videos, animation, installations, etc.).
- Relevance of the paper to the conference theme.
- Interdisciplinary nature of the work.



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- Diversity criteria, in accordance with the best practices of diversity, equality and inclusion.
- We particularly welcome proposals in French or English, and papers could be delivered at the conference in either of these two languages. The languages of the conference will be English and French.
- Only one abstract per author will be considered.
- Joint submissions are possible.

III. Submission Procedure and Instructions

The following information will be required for submission:

- a) An abstract – not exceeding 300 words – plus a short biography (150 words max.) to be included with the abstract.
- b) The author's name and affiliation.
- c) The author's contact details, including email address and phone number.
- d) The author's CV, including a short list of relevant publications (max. 1-2 pages).
(Please note: the author's CV is consulted only at the second stage, after review of the abstract, to ensure balanced panel assessment in line with the best practices of diversity, equality and inclusion).

Proposals must be submitted via e-mail to both of the following email contact addresses: marcella.distefano@unime.it and giuseppe.gallo@unime.it. Please write “Messina UNITAFRICA Conference 2025” in the subject of the email.

ABSTRACT SUBMISSION DEADLINE: 31 October 2025

Notification of acceptance will be communicated to selected speakers by: 4 November 2025.

IV. Publication

After the conference, the University of Messina will provide the opportunity to publish selected papers in a volume.

V. Conference Fees, Costs and Financial Support

The authors of the three most interesting abstracts will be invited as speakers at the conference. The costs relating to travel and accommodation will be borne by the UnitAfrica Project.



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VI. About the conference organizers

This Conference is an event organized by the UNITAFRICA Project. The UNITAFRICA research project, spearheaded by Italian Universities (IUs) within the Italian University Network for Development Cooperation (CUCS), is a strategic initiative finalized at fostering joint training, research, and international cooperation with peer institutions across the African continent. In this proposal, 21 Italian Universities and 78 African Universities, under the UNITAFRICA Alliance, aim to empower mutual cooperation and to improve the quality and effectiveness of higher education while strengthening the Italian academic system in Africa. For more information, visit www.unitafrica.it.

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