

HARMONISATION OF CURRICULA AND QUALIFICATIONS IN HIGHER EDUCATION IN AFRICA: CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS

Abstract

This paper explores the theme of the 2011 African University Day. The theme “Harmonisation of Curricula and Qualifications in Higher Education in Africa: Challenges and Prospects” is in response to the vision of an integrated Africa espoused by the African Union Commission (AUC) on Higher Education. The African Union (AU) in collaboration with the Association of African Universities (AAU) has embarked on developing a strategy for harmonization of Higher Education Programmes in Africa in order to foster cooperation in information exchange, harmonization of curricula and policies, and attainment of comparability of qualifications in order to facilitate mobility of Africans across African countries for employment and further study.

The paper outlines the rationale for harmonization of Higher Education in Africa and highlights problems that have hindered proper development of universities in Sub-Saharan Africa. The paper further outlines strategies of actualizing the harmonization of Higher Education Programmes in Africa and the challenges and prospects involved in the process.

The African University Day is held on November 12 every year. In 2011 the Association of African Universities (AAU) commemorated African University Day under the theme, *Harmonisation of Curricular and Qualifications in Higher Education in Africa: Challenges and Prospects*. On this day, AAU is called upon all universities which are members of AAU including private universities to take responsibility for the development of Africa. African universities are invited to celebrate the day by organizing a suitable forum for public dialogue, as a means of raising awareness of the critical issues surrounding the theme of the year’s celebration.

The AAU through its *Quality Assurance Programme* has been collaborating with the *African Union Commission (AUC)* in promoting quality development and assurance in African Higher Education in all its dimensions, including the development of regional and continental qualifications frameworks, (such as the Arusha Convention) to facilitate mobility of students and staff. The AAU has been spearheading the discussions as it is the designated lead implementation agency for higher education in the Second Decade of Education for Africa.

It is against this backdrop that the AAU has identified *Harmonisation of Curricula and Qualifications in Higher Education in Africa: Challenges and Prospects* as the theme for the 2011 African University Day. Issues about harmonization are very crucial to Africa’s higher education today, especially with the current force of globalization, which is promoting close cooperation between countries in trade, service and knowledge generation.

In pursuit of the vision of an integrated Africa, the African Union Commission on Education (AUC) in collaboration with the Association of African Universities (AAU) have embarked on developing a strategy for harmonization of Higher Education Programmes (HEP) in Africa in

order to foster cooperation in information exchange, harmonization of procedures and policies, and attainment of comparability of qualifications, in order to facilitate mobility of Africans across African countries for employment and further study.

The African Union (AU) considers African Universities as a partner and a resource for regional cooperation and integration in Africa, and so it is essential that education also contributes towards enhancing mobility of Africans around the continent. However, within Africa, there are many different systems of education based on different national, regional or colonial and other legacies across Africa. One of the consequences of this diversity is the lack of recognition of different forms of certification, and this limits African integration and the mobility of students across Africa. It also limits information exchange and the potential for networking centres of excellent and collaborative research.

The commission of the African Union (AUC) and the Association of African Universities (AAU) have therefore undertaken to develop a framework for harmonization of Higher Education

Programmes in Africa, taking into account other similar initiatives. Harmonisation here refers to the agreement, synchronization, and coordination of higher education provision in Africa.

This harmonization is not synonymous with standardization, creating uniformity or achieving identical higher education systems, but rather developing and agreeing to minimum standards and ensuring equivalence and comparability of qualifications between and within countries are important elements of the process. A primary focus is to enhance quality across the sector and facilitate processes that lead higher education systems to be able to inter-operate more effectively to the benefit of development on the African continent.

Some of the strategies implemented by AU in their quest to harmonize higher education programmes in Africa have been done through the research approach. This strategy was developed through desktop reviews to determine the current trends and initiatives in harmonization internationally and in Africa. Studies have been conducted by AU experts to capture the views of key stakeholders and these views have been debated and subjected to a critique through an e-forum.

Rationale for Harmonization of Higher Education in Africa

- The AAU has noted that since the 1980's higher education in Africa experienced reduced investments in a number of African countries, and was given reduced focus by leading international agencies and donors, and this resulted in the relative neglect of Africa's higher education institutions (AAU, 2007).
- All major global initiatives for development and education, including Millenium Development Goals (MDGs) and Education for All (EFA) in the 1990's ignored higher education notwithstanding the fact that higher education is key for the socio-economic and political development of Africa.
- The last two decades have seen a rapid rise in student enrolments, continued loss of intellectual capital (brain drain) and a major reduction in the public financial resources allocated to higher education institutions.

- The over enrolment of students in most higher education institutions in Africa has led to challenges in quality, as African universities are called upon to do more with less in terms of infrastructure, teaching and research facilities and staff (Sawyer, 2002).
- The effects of most African universities being grossly under resourced in terms of teaching facilities and infrastructure is that most higher education institutions experience difficulties in competing in the global market for knowledge creation and production. The African Union has therefore called for an increased focus on revitalizing higher education in Africa, in their plan of Action for the Second Decade of Education for Africa.
- The AU has explicitly acknowledged the indispensable position of a revitalized and reoriented higher education system in the development of Africa, by identifying higher education as one of the seven areas of focus in the plan of Action for the Second Decade of Education for Africa. One of the objectives of the plan is to promote international, continental and regional cooperation by creating awareness, and promoting revision and ratification of the Arusha Convention and harmonizing related work to create synergy among relevant agencies, initiatives and programmes at continental and regional levels.
- The AU strategy for harmonization of higher education will facilitate the comparability of qualifications awarded across the continent and help drive quality assurance measures, thereby contributing to greater quality of education in Africa. Creating a mechanism for benchmarking and comparison of qualifications will allow for professional mobility for employment and further study, as well as expanded job markets. Developing widely accepted standards for quality will also facilitate the creation of centres of excellence.
- Harmonisation will benefit Africa since it will allow for greater intra-regional mobility, thereby fostering increased sharing of information, intellectual resources and research, as well as a growing ability to rely on African expertise rather than skills from elsewhere in the world.
- Harmonisation will also increase access to reliable and transparent information, and promote greater networking among all stakeholders in higher education. This includes creating increased dialogue and cooperation between the higher education systems of different linguistic areas (which have different education systems) allowing for a more coherent and unified vision for African higher education.
- Harmonisation on a broader level has the potential to create a common African Higher Education and research space, and achieve the AU's vision that African higher education institutions become a dynamic force in the international arena.

Higher Education Harmonisation Efforts in Africa

In recent years, there has been a growing tendency for African governments to liberalise education provision. In many African countries, local and foreign private higher education are growing rapidly, apparently without the necessary assessment to ensure that private providers are offering relevant quality education that promotes human resource development and responds to the socio-economic needs of the country (Naidoo, 2004).

Other challenges facing higher education in Africa include the following:

- Gender and regional disparities.

- A mismatch between skills acquired by university / college graduates and those demanded by the industry.
- Imbalances in terms of the number of students studying science and humanities.
- Rigid admission criteria.
- Lack of modalities for credit transfers between universities and other post secondary institutions (UNESCO EFA News, 2006).
- Lack of recognition of prior learning (AAU, 2006).
- The brain drain.
- The threat posed by HIV and AIDS.

Global Trends in the Harmonisation of Higher Education Programmes

- Globalisation in education has led to a marked increase in mobility of people, programmes and institutions across borders.
- Cross-border provision of higher education has also increased in type and scope. Some national institutions have begun to use Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) for teaching, learning, information management and dissemination purposes, while many cross-border providers have adopted ICT as their main mode of programme delivery.
- Expansion of cross-border provision of higher education has the potential to introduce innovations and greater efficiency in management, but it also poses challenges to quality assurance, accreditation and recognition of qualifications and programmes of study, while simultaneously subjecting public institutions to fierce competition.
- Cross-border provision of higher education through ICTs and commercialization of education through General Agreements, for instance regional protocols on education has made the portability of qualifications in higher education an issue of concern to all countries.
- The use of ICTs for programme delivery and increasing expansion in private sector provision of higher education has the potential to increase access and efficiency in program delivery. However, without a proper regulatory framework in place, they also carry the risk of compromising quality, equity and programme diversity, especially when the driving motivation is cost saving or profit maximization (Magagula, 2005).
- The response to cross-border provision of higher education and related economic challenges of globalization has been greater regional and international cooperation, partnership and integration (AAU, 2004). This provides another important rationale for harmonization efforts, which are able to focus on fostering more effective partnership and integration, notwithstanding the risk that harmonization efforts may devolve into counter-productive attempts at protectionism if not monitored carefully.

Global Initiatives on Harmonisation

There are various global initiatives that address the issue of harmonization. Some of these initiatives have led to the adoption of a number of regional conventions on recognition of studies and degrees of higher education which have been revised in some instances to take account of the changing nature of the higher education environment, UNESCO launched the *Global Forum on International Quality Assurance, Accreditation and Recognition of Qualifications*. In

addition, the *UNESCO / OECD Guidelines for Quality Provision in Cross-border Higher Education* were launched in 2005, in response to the need for new international initiatives to enhance quality provision in cross-border higher education (UNESCO/OECD, 2005).

- One of the most advanced processes of harmonization of university degrees is the **Bologna Process**, which is an attempt to create a European Higher Education Area (EHEA) by mutual agreement. Over 40 European countries are now signatories. Many of the Bologna signatory countries have had to carry out major reforms to their higher education systems to comply with the process. Despite steady progress made in implementing many of the Bologna reforms, degree structures among member countries remain different. In some specialized subjects, progression is hampered by lack of standardization of courses. Doubts have also been raised about whether mobility will indeed be increased, with language issues remaining a potential obstacle in some countries.
- At **continental level**, there are a number of initiatives working at achieving harmonization. The key mechanism at the continental level is the *Arusha Convention*, which is a UNESCO initiative for promoting continental cooperation through the academic mobility of lecturers and students. However, only 20 countries have ratified this convention. The **Association of African Universities** (AAU) provides a forum for consultation, exchange of information and cooperation among HEI's in Africa. The **African Council for Distance Education** (ACDE) is also interested in harmonization efforts in open and distance education programmes. The ACDE is currently in the process of developing open and distance learning (ODL) standards and establishing a continental Accreditation Commission for Distance Education in Africa. The **African Development Bank** (AfDB) also recently announced a development strategy for higher education, science and technology, which aims to establish public-private sector partnerships and programmes aimed at developing technological skills and strengthening science and technology infrastructure in order to bring about institutional and policy reforms. The **African Capacity Building Foundation** (ACBF) is a development funding organization that supports several national and regional educational projects in Africa in order to strengthen HEIs.
- Regional initiatives include the **Southern African Development Community** (SADC), the protocol on education and training was developed to foster the harmonization of education and training. The protocol emphasizes the importance of harmonizing regional educational systems and maintaining acceptable standards at all educational levels, thus calling for the implementation of quality management at higher education institutions. The SADC regional protocol on education has been ratified by all the SADC member countries (Mavimbela, 2007). The **SADC Technical Committee on Certification and Accreditation** (TCCA) has recently initiated the process of establishing a regional qualifications framework known as the **Southern African Development Community Qualifications Framework** (SADCQF). The focus of SADCQF is not only on higher education, as it encompasses school education as well. At present, the SADCQF has been developed in concept only. There are two models currently being discussed. One model calls on countries to develop a framework and then come to the discussion on a regional qualifications framework with some experience. The other is to set down a framework that is not rigid and ask member states to adopt the system (SADC Technical Committee on Accreditation and Certification, 2006)

The **Inter-University Council for East Africa (IUCEA)** is a regional inter-governmental organization established by Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda. Its aim is to facilitate contact between the universities of East Africa by providing a forum for discussion on a range of academic and other matters pertaining to higher education, and helping to maintain high comparable academic standards. The Inter-University Council for East Africa (IUCEA) has put in place a system of cooperation between university –level institutions facilitating, for example students’ and staff transfers between institutions in the region (Sabaya, 2004)

The **Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS)** is another example of a regional group of fifteen West African countries whose mission is to promote economic integration and development. Under the revised treaty of ECOWAS, member states agreed to cooperate in the use of their human resources (ECOWAS, 1993). In addition, ECOWAS members signed a protocol on Education and Training during the first Decade of Education for Africa (1997-2006), which outlined various areas of cooperation in education (AUC 2006). Furthermore, ECOWAS adopted a General Convention on the recognition and equivalence of Degrees, Diplomas, Certificates and other qualifications in ECOWAS member states (Ogbe, 2007).

Challenges and Opportunities for the Harmonisation Process

There is great diversity amongst countries around accreditation and quality assurance issues. In addition, the nature of national bodies in charge of recognition differs according to linguistic zones. There are several harmonization initiatives in Africa, which presents a significant risk for duplication of efforts and even for conflict processes. While several processes have been identified that are playing some role in facilitating harmonization, it has been difficult to determine how much progress has been made. In some instances, processes are running behind schedules while others seem to be suffering from absence of strong political commitment amongst participating countries.

A critical step towards achieving harmonization will be to coordinate harmonization efforts on a continental level in order to eliminate unnecessary duplication of efforts and to enable existing initiatives to fulfil their true potential. There is need to create a strong, achievable vision that will create buy-in from all Regional Economic Communities (RECs), Inter-Governmental Organisations (IGOs), countries and HEIs. In addition, it is necessary to create strong links between existing continental and regional organizations so that they work together. This will require effective and credible leadership and management systems, best provided by the Commission of the African Union. This leadership will need to provide direction, based on broad consultation with key players, on how to take the process further.

The problem of comparability is one of the biggest challenges facing any regional harmonization process. Different higher education systems are structured in different ways in terms of curriculum. Alignment of curricular will be important to ensure that regional processes are covering common themes in similar ways; otherwise it will not be possible to integrate these processes into a continental system of harmonization. Ultimately, the creation of a system in which programmes from different countries can be meaningfully compared for students, employers and academics to be able to assess their relative merit and weighting will have to be accompanied by a degree of systematic reform at the national level, in order to ensure that

countries can provide information about higher education programmes that can be usefully compared with that from other countries.

Cross-border provision of higher education provides both challenges and opportunities to developing countries. It offers students new opportunities, as it can lead to increased access, improvement and innovations in higher education systems, and the building of international cooperation. However, it also opens up the risk of low quality provision of HE through rogue merchants. This makes it increasingly important for information to be made available to students and other relevant stakeholders on the quality of higher education programmes.

It has been observed that there are very few national regulatory mechanisms for trans-national higher education. The AU Strategy intends to incorporate a focus on establishing effective accreditation and quality assurance mechanisms to help HE institutions to attain agreed minimum standards of quality and enable them to continue improving this quality through ongoing quality assurance. These systems can then function as regulatory mechanisms to facilitate cross-border higher education, while protecting countries from its risks (Hoosen, Butcher and Njenga, 2009).

Quality Assurance and Accreditation

Some countries in Africa do not have the capacity to provide the full range of quality programmes necessary for economic and social development of their countries. In addition, some countries cannot absorb all students qualifying for entry into higher education. Thus, many rely on other countries to train their citizens in certain disciplines. Access and quality in HE in Africa can only be achieved if there are systems to benchmark and ensure quality across the continent. This can only be achieved if there are mechanisms in place at a national level to ensure the quality of qualifications, and if there are assurances that these national mechanisms are operating within agreed minimum standards of regional and continental frameworks. Therefore, it is important to develop national quality assurance bodies and frameworks, and to develop capacity in developing quality assurance mechanisms.

At regional levels, there is need for cooperation and networking in cross-border projects on quality assessments and mutual recognition agreements, implementation of frameworks and standards of meta-accreditation of quality assurance agencies on an international and global level, and development of international quality assurance schemes (Rwamasirabo and Beebe, 2006).

Open, Distance and Technology-Mediated Learning

Accreditation and quality assurance mechanisms also need to deal with open, distance and technology-mediated learning (UNESCO EFA News, 2006). Despite its potential, e-learning and open and distance learning have enormous scope for poor quality provision higher education. These forms of delivery also open opportunities for unregulated trans-national education and unfettered competition from private providers, which has historically been a major motivation to initiate regional and continental harmonization processes. The **African Council for Distance Education** (ACDE) seeks to tackle these challenges through the creation of a continental quality assurance framework and an accreditation body. Processes such as this need to be effectively harnessed to form part of a broader AU Strategy for harmonization of higher education

programmes. It is important to have effective accreditation and quality assurance mechanisms that will help HEIs to attain agreed minimum standards of quality in their programmes and then enable them to continue improving this quality through ongoing quality assurance, with a clear intent to become internationally competitive institutions over time.

Measuring Institutional Performance

An important part of the process of harmonization is to be able to compare the performance of universities against common, agreed criteria.

This would establish a deepening commitment to quality across HE systems, while providing benchmarks at a continental level so that African HEIs are equipped to position themselves as equal players in the global HE. This would also achieve a goal of ensuring that Africa's processes of harmonization take cognizance of other harmonization processes, so that the status of programmes on the African continent is respected around the world.

Sharing of Intellectual Resources and Research Potential

One of the major opportunities that harmonization opens up, is the potential to share intellectual resources and research opportunities. Working together can ensure the development of specific areas of specialization benefit from synergies in the use of resources, thereby optimizing efficiency and effectiveness, and possibly reducing operating costs. It also provides the potential to jointly address and respond to common challenges and issues from a position of strength.

Mobility of Students and Graduates

The UNESCO Global Digest (2006) states that university students from Sub-Saharan Africa are the most mobile in the world, with one out of every 16 of Sub-Saharan students going abroad for studies (Labi, 2007). In addition, internationalization of HE also affects the liberalization of trade in professional services. Lack of recognition of foreign qualification and competencies is a big obstacle in liberalizing trade in professional services, since it often requires foreign professionals to retrain locally and often unnecessarily for lengthy periods (Kameoka, 1996). Professional bodies at the international, continental and national levels play a crucial role in education and quality assurance, and thus will form an important part of the overall harmonization strategy. It is important to strengthen existing collaboration and encourage new partnerships between international organizations and professional bodies.

There is a risk that 'brain drain' might be exacerbated by cross-border higher education. The recognition of foreign qualifications can potentially increase the growing mobility of academics, professional and skilled workers, especially given the usually less attractive terms and conditions of service, salary structures and work environments in developing countries. If this happens, it will be difficult for African countries to compete in the global knowledge economy, and harmonization processes might have the unintended consequence of accelerating the loss of skilled labour. Therefore, it is important to develop strategies to check and then reverse brain drain (Magagula, 2005).

In the mobility of students and graduates, it is also important to consider existing country policies outside of education that can impact on mobility, for example, immigration policies,

where there may be need to give preference in the allocation of work visas to skilled Africans as opposed to labour from other parts of the world. Thorough review of policies such as these will form a critical component of encouraging mobility of graduates across the continent. A number of issues described above fall outside the purview of the education sector and will require multi-sector approaches.

However, they are noted as they will become priority challenges that will need to be tackled as harmonization processes begin to succeed. This implies that various departments of the Commission of the African Union will need to play an active role in developing complementary strategies to ensure the success of this harmonization strategy.

The AU Higher Education Harmonization Strategy

The specific purpose of harmonization is to establish harmonized higher education systems across Africa, while strengthening the capacity of higher education institutions to meet the many tertiary educational needs of African countries through innovative forms of collaboration and ensuring that the quality of higher education is systematically improved against agreed benchmarks of excellence.

Harmonization also facilitates mobility of graduates and academics across the continent. *Harmonization has the following goals:*

1. Facilitate and promote mobility of African students, graduates and academic staff across the continent.
2. Bridge the gap between disparate educational systems that exists as a result of colonial legacies, by coordinating efforts of national accreditation bodies and regional bodies to maximize their successes and address their challenges.
3. Provide an integrating platform for dialogue and action to develop strong regional harmonization initiatives that cohere into a continental process of harmonization.
4. Facilitate the development of effective quality assurance mechanisms
5. Ensure that African higher education institutions become an increasingly dynamic force in the international higher education arena.

Principles of Harmonisation

The AAU has identified the following principles as vital in guiding all harmonization efforts in Africa.

1. Harmonization should be an African-driven process.
2. Harmonization should be a true, mutual partnership of all key players.
3. Harmonization should be enhanced with appropriate infrastructural support and funding.
4. Harmonization should involve the mobilization of all stakeholders in governments, institutions, civil society and the private sector.
5. Harmonization should not disrupt, but enhance, national educational systems and programmes and should involve improvement of quality through appropriate funding and infrastructural provisions in each country.
6. Harmonization processes should seek to make a specific and measurable contribution to achieving gender equity in African higher education.

7. Harmonization should be located within broader issues, such as the crisis in higher education, benchmarking of pre-university qualifications, and the 'brain drain' experienced by many African countries.
8. Harmonization should take into account the concurrent state of general education systems in Africa, and existing variations in curricula, examination systems, and the lengths of general education careers. Harmonization of higher education will be difficult unless corresponding efforts tackle these challenges simultaneously
9. A fundamental part of harmonization initiatives is building the quality of higher education. Harmonization will only be successful if there is quality.

Conclusion

The provision of quality higher education and harmonization of curricula and qualifications in higher education in Africa is a key factor in the development of the African continent. African universities can only compete successfully in the global knowledge economy if serious investments are made in institutions of higher learning. Harmonization of higher education systems has a significant role to play in the socio-economic and political development of Africa. Harmonization of higher education will also be important for the integration of Africa and, for optimal use of Africa's institutional and human resources in education.

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