

Harmonization of Higher Education Programmes: A Strategy for the African Union

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Abstract: *In pursuit of the vision of an integrated Africa, the African Union Commission (AUC) has 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.*

This paper provides an overview of existing harmonization initiatives globally and continentally. It considers some of the challenges and opportunities for harmonization, as well as their implications for the AU HEP Harmonization Strategy. It introduces the strategy, outlining the goals, purpose, developmental objective and implementation plan to achieve the strategy.

A full version of the strategy can be accessed from: <http://www.africa-union.org/comedaf3.htm>

Harmonisation des Programmes d'Enseignement Supérieur : Une Stratégie pour l'Union Africaine

Résumé : *Dans la poursuite de la vision d'une Afrique intégrée, la Commission de l'Union Africaine (CUA) s'est embarquée sur le développement d'une stratégie pour*

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l'harmonisation des Programmes d'Enseignement Supérieur (PES) en Afrique afin de stimuler la coopération dans l'échange de l'information, l'harmonisation des procédures et des politiques, et l'accomplissement de la comparabilité des qualifications, afin de faciliter la mobilité des Africains à travers les pays africains pour l'emploi et la continuation des études.

Ce document fournit une vue d'ensemble des initiatives d'harmonisation qui existent au niveau global et continental. Il considère certains des défis et des opportunités pour l'harmonisation, aussi bien que leurs implications pour la stratégie UA-PED d'harmonisation. Il présente la stratégie, décrivant les buts, la logique, l'objectif de développement et le plan de mise en oeuvre pour réaliser la stratégie.

Une pleine version de la stratégie peut être accédée de : <http://www.africa-union.org/comedaf3.htm>

Introduction

The African Union (AU) vision of integration, peace, prosperity and peerage in the global economy is predicated on the development of Africa's human resource capital. Education is therefore key in achieving its vision of developing quality human resources. Higher education in particular will enable Africa to contribute to the global knowledge economy and claim its rightful place, both in history and in the future. The Plan of Action for the Second Decade of Education for Africa identifies Higher Education as one of seven areas of focus.

The African Union considers African Universities as "a partner and a resource for regional co-operation 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 results of this 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) has therefore undertaken to develop a framework for harmonization of Higher Education Programmes in Africa, taking into account other similar initiatives.

Before considering the strategy in further detail, it is necessary to consider a definition of harmonization so that it conjures up similar connotations and implications to all stakeholders:

Harmonization refers to the agreement, synchronization, and coordination of higher education provision in Africa. Harmonization is not synonymous with standardization, creating uniformity, or achieving identical higher education systems. Whilst developing and agreeing to minimum standards and ensuring equivalence and comparability of qualifications between and within countries are important elements of this 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 continent.

Research Approach:

The strategy has been developed through: desktop review to determine the current trends and initiatives in harmonization internationally and in Africa; questionnaire and interview responses from key stakeholders; review by an AU experts' meeting held in March 2007; comments from meetings of the Steering Committee and Bureau of the Conference of Ministers of Education of the African Union in May 2007, and; the full Conference of Ministers of Education of the AU

(COMEDAF III) in August 2007. It has also been subjected to critique through an e-forum.

Rationale for Harmonization of Higher Education in Africa:

Since the 1980s, higher education in Africa experienced reduced investment 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 (HEIs) (Association of African Universities website, no date). All major global initiatives for development and education, including Millenium Development Goals (MDGs) and Education for All (EFA) in the 1990s ignored higher education, notwithstanding the fact that higher education is key for attainment of the goals in these initiatives. At the same time, 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 HEIs. This 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 (Sawyerr, 2002). The result is that most HEIs experience difficulty 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 the 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 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 Convention¹ and harmonising related work to create synergy among relevant agencies, initiatives, and programmes at continental and regional levels.

The African Union Strategy for Harmonization of Higher Education Programmes (AU HEP Harmonization Strategy) 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. Harmonization 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. It will 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. On a broader level, it has the potential to create a common African higher education and research space, and achieve the AU's vision that African HEIs become a 'dynamic force in the international arena'.

¹ The Arusha Convention is a framework for recognition of degrees and certificates among African Universities, developed in 1980 under the auspices of UNESCO. Only 20 African countries have ratified the Convention so far, hence the need to review it.

I. Literature Review

1.1. Global Trends in Harmonization of Higher Education Programmes

Globalization in education has led to a marked increase in mobility of people, programmes and institutions across national borders. There has also been a marked increase in participation of the private sector in the provision of higher education. Several new programmes have been established, including short courses leading to certificates, diploma courses, and distance and virtual education programmes (UNESCO Division of Higher Education Section for Reform, Innovation and Quality Assurance (RIQ), 2005). Cross-border provision has also increased in type and scope. Some national institutions have begun to use Information and Communication Technology (ICT) for teaching, learning, information management, and dissemination purposes, while many cross-border providers have adopted ICT as their main mode of programme delivery. Under the General Agreement in Trade Services (GATS) regime, a few African countries have also made commitments in the education sector, thus paving the way for the increasing commercialization of education (Association of African Universities, 2004).

As a consequence of these developments, the portability of qualifications in higher education is becoming an issue of concern to all countries. Expansion of cross-border provision 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. Likewise, use of ICT for programme delivery and increasing expansion in private sector provision of higher education has the potential to increase access and efficiency in programme 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 and/or profit maximization (Magagula, 2005). The global response to these and related economic challenges of globalization has been greater regional and international cooperation, partnership and integration (Association of African Universities-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.

There are various global initiatives that address the issue of harmonization. These activities 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 – Education, 2006). UNESCO has also launched the Global Forum on International Quality Assurance, Accreditation and the 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).

Perhaps 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 by the year 2010. 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 (The Royal Statistical Society, no date). Since its signing, meetings have been held every two years to discuss the evolving objectives of the process, and progress towards achieving those objectives as well as the

inclusion of new member states (Fuller, Pears, Amillo, Avram, and Mannila, 2006).

With the positive reforms, there have also been a number of critiques raised. There has been a general lack of research around the process, and where there has been research, it has tended to lack a strong theoretical or critical perspective, and seldom related to wider academic debates in the political and social sciences (Keeling, no date). Other critiques are that the Bologna Process is prioritizing a market-based understanding of higher education, excessive bureaucratic activities caused by accreditation, and the lack of 'complementarity' between the 'top-down' policy programme and its 'bottom-up' reception, especially at the departmental, administrative, and student levels. (Mencinger, 2004), calling for a need to understand how the process is being experienced at the grassroots level. Despite steady progress made in implementing many of the Bologna reforms, degree structures among countries remain different. In certain specialised subjects, progression and prerequisite knowledge can be very specific where an advanced course depends on understanding of a prerequisite course, and therefore, early subject curricula that are not standardized nationally or internationally create a barrier to achieving the Bologna objectives (Sedgwick, 2003). Doubts have also been raised about whether mobility will indeed be increased, with language issues remaining a potential obstacle in some countries.

Besides the Bologna Process, which has made much progress and thus contains many lessons for Africa, there are various other regional initiatives underway. For example in the Asia-Pacific Region, UNESCO and Asia Pacific Quality Network (APQN) have developed a toolkit for 'Regulating the Quality of Cross-Border Education'. UNESCO is also in the process of reviewing its Conventions on the Recognition of Qualifications (UNESCO Division of Higher Education Section for Reform, Innovation and Quality Assurance (RIQ), 2005). In the Arab States, an expert committee set up

by the Association of Arab Universities (AARU) developed guidelines for self-assessment and accreditation of higher education institutions for all members of the Association. Currently the UNESCO Regional Office for Arab States is conducting a survey of the efforts of quality assurance and accreditation in the Arab States. Important issues in the survey include the form and structure of a proposed regional body and cooperation with international frameworks (Global University Network for Innovation, no date). In Latin America, there are plans to integrate initiatives at a sub-regional level, through the Caribbean Community and Common Market Secretariat's (CARICOM), which plans to create a regional accreditation framework and accreditation agency. In addition, the Caribbean Association of National Training Agencies (CANTA) is involved in establishing a common framework for regional standards and recognition of qualifications in technical and vocational training through creating a Caribbean Area Network for Quality Assurance in Tertiary Education (CANQATE) (UNESCO Division of Higher Education Section for Reform, Innovation and Quality Assurance (RIQ), 2005).

These global trends confirm the emergence of harmonization of higher education as a key global issue, with many lessons to be learnt from these experiences.

1.2. Higher Education Harmonization Efforts in Africa

In recent years, there has been a growing tendency for African governments to liberalize 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:

- Gender and regional disparities;
- A mismatch between skills acquired by university graduates and those demanded by the industry;
- Imbalances in terms of the number of students studying sciences 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 (Association of African Universities, 2006);
- The brain drain, and;
- The threat posed by HIV and AIDS (UNESCO, no date).

At the beginning of the 1990s, all major higher education stakeholders in Africa had agreed that there was a need to revitalize higher education systems. Within this challenging context, a number of initiatives were undertaken to promote regional cooperation and harmonization in higher education in Africa.

1.2.1.Continental Level

At a 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 and fewer still are proactively implementing it (Shabani, 2004). The convention is implemented at three different levels: at the national level, by the national commissions for the recognition of studies and degrees; at the regional level, by regional organs; and at the continental level, by the

Regional Committee in charge of implementing the Arusha Convention (UNESCO BRENDA, no date). The Regional Committee has held eight ordinary sessions to respond to concerns regarding accreditation, quality assurance, and recognition of qualifications. Currently, the final version of the revised Arusha convention is being circulated among African experts for amendments (Rakingama, 2007).

At the continental level, the Association of African Universities, provides a forum for consultation, exchange of information, and cooperation among HEIs in Africa. The AAU provides leadership in identification of emerging issues and support for debating them and facilitating appropriate follow-up action by its members, partners, and other stakeholders (Association of African Universities, no date b). The AAU has been working for a number of years to obtain international recognition of higher education qualifications from different parts of the continent and has been organizing and coordinating networks of HEIs for regional cooperation in graduate training and research (Higher Education Newsletter, 2001). The AAU has initiated a set of strategies for regional cooperation and partnership in quality assurance, accreditation and recognition, research, and advocacy. An important proposal introduced by the AAU through the workshop on WTO/GATS was the establishment of the African Higher Education Area (AHEA). The AAU aims to explore and consider AHEA as an African collective response to the challenges of globalization and the need for harmonization and partnership within the African higher education domain (Association of African Universities, 2004). The AAU has also recently proposed a Quality Assurance Initiative, whose goal is to promote quality assurance in higher education, by fostering collaboration and laying the foundation for institutionalized quality assurance mechanisms, strengthening national quality assurance and accreditation agencies, and eventually establishing a continental network for coordinating cross-border protocols and capacity building in Quality Assurance in Africa (Association of African Universities, 2006).

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. Through this, the ACDE will focus on capacity enhancement in quality development and management in ODL among African Universities, and will undertake quality assurance processes and accredit institutions, thereby promoting harmonization of higher education programmes in ODL (Barasa, 2007)

The Association for the Development of Education in Africa (ADEA) activities focus on strengthening policy dialogue between governments and agencies, between governments, and between development agencies. Through its Working Group on Higher Education (WGHE), ADEA activities are also aimed at enhancing institutional and technical capacities within Africa by establishing networks for the sharing of information and the dissemination of successful strategies and innovations. Within this context, ADEA fosters continental, regional, and cross-country exchanges, as well as partnerships with civil society institutions. The WGHE is housed at the AAU offices in Accra, Ghana (Association for the Development of Education in Africa, no date).

A series of conferences - International Conference on Quality Assurance in Higher Education in Africa (ICQAHEA) - are being hosted by UNESCO and the Global University Network for Innovation (GUNI)-Africa, in order to keep abreast of global developments in higher education quality assurance and to monitor progress of national and regional action plans on quality assurance, recognition of degrees and mobility of students. The first Conference on Accreditation, Quality Assurance and Recognition of Qualifications in Higher Education in Africa was convened in Nairobi in February 2006. The Second Conference was held in Dar Es Salaam, Tanzania in September 2007. The

theme of the conference was 'Promoting Sustainable Quality Assurance Policy and Practice in Higher Education in Africa', and the objective of the conference was to provide an opportunity for stakeholders to deliberate on how higher education development in Africa can be stimulated through sustainable policies and practices in quality assurance (UNESCO Harare Cluster Office & The Open University Of Tanzania, no date)

The African Development Bank (AfDB) has recently announced a development strategy for higher education, science and technology, which aims to establish public-private sector partnerships and programmes that are aimed at developing technological skills and strengthening science and technology infrastructure in order to bring about institutional and policy reforms (Sawhel, 2007).

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 (The African Capacity Building Foundation, no date). The ACBF has participated in several discussions leading to the AU's Second Decade of Education for Africa Plan of Action, and has shown keen interest in providing support continental institutional mechanisms that would be responsible for implementing the harmonization of project activities.

1.2.2.Regional Level

In the Southern African Development Community (SADC) Region, the Protocol on Education and Training was developed to foster the harmonization of Education and Training. The protocol emphasizes the importance of harmonizing regional education 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 overly rigid and ask member states to adopt the system (SADC Technical Committee on Accreditation and Certification, 2006).

Among the 14 SADC countries, only three countries have a national qualifications framework (Mauritius, Botswana, and South Africa), while one (Lesotho) is in the process of implementing one. SADC has initiated a study to look at QA systems in its member states. From there, it hopes to develop a QA framework that will help those countries that lag behind to get their systems in order (Mavimbela, 2007).

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, providing a forum for discussion on a range of academic and other matters pertaining to higher education, and helping to maintain high and comparable academic standards. The Inter-University Council for East Africa. (no date) The 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 Conseil Africain et Malgache pour l'Enseignement Supérieur (African and Malagasy Council for Higher Education) (CAMES) aims to enhance mutual

recognition of qualifications and promote professional mobility amongst its predominantly Francophone Member States (CAMES, no date). In 2006, CAMES passed a resolution to reconfigure university structure and syllabi so as to implement the LMD (Licence, Masters et Doctorate) reform in the universities of its 17 francophone African member countries (Mohamedbhai, 2007) It is particularly important in a continental context because of its potential to resolve the structural differences between higher education in Francophone and Anglophone Africa.

Of the Association of Arab Universities' (AARU's) 20 member states, eight are African countries. AARU has been tasked with coordinating the establishment of regional mechanisms for quality assurance. In addition, it has been involved in developing and distributing guidelines for self-assessment and accreditation of higher education institutions (Babiker, no date).

Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) is a regional group of 15 West African countries whose mission is to promote economic integration and development. Under the Revised Treaty of ECOWAS, Article 60, Human Resources, member states agreed to cooperate in the full development and 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)

1.2.3.National Level

On a national level, there is great diversity amongst countries in progress around accreditation and quality assurance issues. In addition, the nature of national bodies in charge of recognition differs according to linguistic zones. In French-speaking countries, this

responsibility is entrusted to national commissions for recognition of studies and degrees. These commissions are usually made up of representatives of HEIs, the Ministry of Higher Education, Ministry for Foreign Affairs and Ministry of Labour. The main task of national commissions is to advise the Minister of Higher Education on issues relating to recognition. Shabani (2004) notes that the national commissions have achieved significant results in the field of recognition of studies and degrees. In English-speaking countries, recognition of studies and degrees of higher education is usually entrusted to a HE commission, which also deals with accreditation of HE programmes and quality assurance.

II. Challenges and Opportunities for the Harmonization Process

Analysis of developments, both around the world and in Africa, highlights some key issues for consideration in developing a strategy to facilitate harmonization of higher education across the continent. These are outlined below.

2.1. Modelling the Bologna Process?

It has been noted in various fora that Africa should look towards the Bologna Process as a model to adopt in seeking to harmonize higher education in the region, thus bringing together such issues as quality assurance, student mobility, and recognition of degrees, diplomas, and certificates. There is therefore a need to determine whether Africa sees itself as creating its own system of harmonization, while learning from lessons of the Bologna Process where relevant, or whether it sees herself as aligning its procedures and policies to the Bologna Process.

It is important to draw on the lessons learned in Europe while acknowledging the significant cultural and material differences between the two continents.

The AU will need to secure strong political commitment from member states at institutional, national and Regional Economic Community levels. Significant human and financial resources will need to be dedicated to the process. As witnessed elsewhere, harmonisation processes take time, and there will be significant challenges in aligning systems with different structures.

2.2. Coordination of Harmonization Efforts

As mentioned earlier, 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 in Africa, it has been significantly harder to determine how much progress has been made. In some instances, processes are running behind initial schedules, while others seem to be suffering from absence of strong political commitment amongst participating countries. In other cases, harmonization projects have been identified as a priority, but implementation has not yet begun in any meaningful way.

Thus 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 a 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.

2.3. Revision and Ratification of the Arusha Convention

Although the Arusha Convention has been in existence for approximately 26 years, to date it has only been ratified by 20 African states. Currently, the work of the Regional Committee is considered to be ineffective at least for the following reasons:

1. Between two biannual sessions, the Regional Committee does not carry out any activities, nor does it follow up its decisions and recommendations.
2. Several countries do not take part in the ordinary sessions of the Regional Committee. In addition, country representatives change from one session to another, with the result that there is no continuity in the activities of the Committee.
3. Implementation of the convention needs to be carried out through national and regional bodies. However, there are no formal cooperation agreements between UNESCO's African Regional Committee in charge of implementation of the Arusha Convention and the various national and regional bodies involved in recognition of studies and degrees. This partly explains why the convention is not well known in African countries, and consequently why several countries have not ratified it.
4. Commitments on recognition of qualifications do not explicitly refer to the quality of degrees obtained, in which case it may be feared that ratification would compel member states, in theory, to automatically recognize the degrees delivered by the other contracting States with no guarantee of quality education (Shabani, 2004).

There have recently been calls to continue revision of Arusha Convention in light of suggestions on inclusion

of issues such as lifelong learning, ICT and GATS (International Conference On Accreditation, Quality Assurance And Recognition Of Qualifications In Higher Education In Africa, 2006). As mentioned earlier, the draft of the revised version is currently being circulated for comments. Ratification requires greater advocacy with decision makers and coordinating various partners on the issue. In particular, the Conference of Ministers of Education of the African Union (COMEDAF), and therefore the AUC as secretariat, need to be involved in such a continental process that involves AU member states.

Given that only 20 African countries have ratified the Arusha Convention, one of the main challenges facing the development of a regional framework on harmonization of higher education programmes is achieving buy-in from Member states. On a continental level, there is a need for leadership and direction to drive the process. Another challenge is to decide whether efforts should be focused on revising the Arusha Convention to make it agreeable to all member states, or whether there is a need for a new framework. However, drawing up a new agreement will not necessarily improve buy-in from member states. For example, at the SADC regional level, there are only 14 member countries, and they face the problem of agreeing on the qualifications framework.

It is proposed that the Arusha Convention be retained, bringing it within the framework of the African Union, investing resources in finalizing its review and updating, and providing the human and financial resources necessary to coordinate the lobbying and marketing processes necessary to secure ratification by all AU member states. Thus, this current AU strategy does not propose the replacement or duplication of the Arusha Convention, but rather to implement strategies in partnership with UNESCO and the AAU to provide the necessary impetus to make the Convention a dynamic and relevant platform for harmonization of higher education programmes in Africa.

2.4. The Problem of Comparability

Ensuring that information about HEIs and programmes can be compared in meaningful ways is one of the biggest challenges facing any regional harmonization process. Different higher education systems are structured in different ways, and alignment 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 systemic 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.

It is acknowledged that countries' abilities to participate in an information-sharing system will be influenced by: whether or not they have functional national accreditation and quality assurance bodies in place; the extent of systemic reform required to submit comparable data to a continental system; the quality of data contained in national EMIS systems, which will typically be maintained by the relevant accreditation body, and; the extent to which this has been fully computerized. Sharing data on a continental level will not be sustainable without computerized EMIS systems capable of exporting data using pre-defined, open standards. It is noteworthy that EMIS is one of the areas of focus of the Plan of Action for the Second Decade of Education for Africa, in recognition of the dearth of accurate, timely education statistics.

Clearly, countries require ongoing support and capacity building to be able to join continental information-sharing systems. A continental information-sharing system covering a critical mass of

higher education practice on the continent is necessary for harmonization to advance beyond political discussion, onto a practical reality that brings benefits to students, academics, employers, and governments.

2.5. Cross-Border Higher Education and GATS

Cross-border provision of higher education and GATS 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 and 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.

However, there are very few national regulatory mechanisms for trans-national higher education. The AU Strategy will 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.

2.6. Quality Assurance and Accreditation

Not all countries in Africa currently provide the full range of quality programmes necessary for economic and social development of their countries nor do they all have the capacity to absorb all students qualifying for entry into higher education. Thus, many rely on other countries to train their citizens in certain disciplines. Since education systems in Africa are very diverse, access by students becomes limited. Access and quality 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. There is thus a need to develop national quality assurance bodies and frameworks, and to develop capacity in developing quality assurance mechanisms.

At a regional level, there is a 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 & Beebe, no date).

2.7. 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 of 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. These potential concerns often mean that quality programmes offered using these methods are unfairly denied equal recognition by employers and other institutions. The 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.

There is thus a need to incorporate a strong focus on establishing effective accreditation and quality

assurance mechanisms that will help HEIs first 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.

2.8. Measuring Institutional Performance

A critical 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 global HE. This would also achieve a goal of ensuring that Africa's processes of harmonization take cognisance of other harmonization processes, so that the status of programmes on the continent is respected around the world, not just across Africa. This will facilitate the growth of healthy competitive forces.

2.9. 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 optimising 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.

2.10. Mobility of Students and Graduates

According to UNESCO's Global Education Digest 2006, 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 college (Labi, 2007). In addition, internationalisation of HE also

affects the liberalisation of trade in professional services. Lack of recognition of foreign qualification and competencies is a big obstacle in liberalising 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. There is therefore the need to strengthen existing collaboration and encourage new partnerships between international organizations and professional bodies.

There is the risk that 'brain drain' might be exacerbated by cross border higher education. Trade liberalization of WTO/GATS 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. There is thus a need to develop strategies to check and then reverse brain drain (Magagula, 2005).

There is also a need to consider existing country policies outside of education that can impact on mobility, for example, immigration policies, where there may be a 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.

2.11. Other issues for consideration

Discussing and initiating harmonization processes is easier than sustaining them and driving them to conclusion. To avoid this, a comprehensive long-term strategy is required, together with the resources to sustain its implementation. Many strategies also create unrealistic expectations of what can be achieved within identified timeframes, and usually fall behind schedule quickly as a result. There is also a significant risk that harmonization processes can proliferate unnecessary bureaucracy, which may further tax already scarce resources with negative implications for the quality of education delivery. Conversely, however, when harmonization processes do not introduce adequate mechanisms to establish minimum standards for participation, this can lead to withdrawal by key players. There is therefore need for a careful balance to be struck between extremes, for instance, not creating unrealistic expectations of what can be achieved, while ensuring that targets are not too loose to prevent the process from gaining momentum.

Having outlined some key factors, an African Union Strategy for Harmonization of Higher Education Programmes is presented.

III. The AU HEP 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 common, agreed benchmarks of excellence. Harmonization also

facilitates mobility of graduates and academics across the continent.

3.1. Broad Developmental Objective

The broad objective is to develop quality higher education that produces graduates with the competencies required to drive Africa's economic and social development, and that increasingly enable the continent to rely on its own, substantial human resources, combined with systems that facilitate economic integration, cultural relevance, and mobility of this growing pool of talents across various regions of Africa. Quality higher education is also essential for Africa to be competitive in the global knowledge economy.

3.2. Goals of the Strategy

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 exist as a result of colonial legacies, by coordinating efforts of national accreditation bodies and regional bodies to maximise 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; and
5. Ensure that African higher education institutions become an increasingly dynamic force in the international higher education arena.

3.3. Principles of Harmonization

The following principles should underpin all harmonization efforts in Africa:

1. Harmonization should be an African-driven process.
2. Harmonization should be a true, mutual partnership of all the 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.²
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

² Although a focus on gender equity is included in this strategy, it is noted that this issue is considered sufficiently important to justify possible consideration of a dedicated AY Strategy on Gender Equity in Higher Education, with its own dedicated budget.

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.

3.4. Implementing the Strategy

It is recognised that the process of harmonization of Higher Education Programmes is complex and requires a significant amount of time to achieve. In considering implementation of the strategy, it is necessary to differentiate the long-term vision of harmonization as outlined below in the Proposed Result Areas, from the attainment of realistic, short-term objectives. The initial focus of the Strategy is on the following:

- o Building political commitment and ensuring streamlining of current harmonization efforts at regional and continental levels;
- o Building national and regional capacity to undertake quality accreditation and quality assurance in national higher education systems;
- o Supporting regional integration, within a framework of continental alignment and coordination;
- o Creating transparent, streamlined mechanisms for sharing information about higher education qualifications and programmes; and
- o Focusing on dialogue about quality and quality improvement

3.5. Proposed Result Areas for the Second Decade of Education

The AU HEP Harmonization Strategy comprises the following core result areas and specific results during the Second Decade of Education:

1. Establishment and maintenance of continental political commitment to the process of harmonization:
 - 1.1. Endorsement of the AU HEP Harmonization Strategy by African Ministers in charge of Higher Education;
 - 1.2. Statements of Commitment from Key Agencies;
 - 1.3. Revision and Expanded Ratification of the Arusha Convention;
 - 1.4. Creation and Promotion of Forums for Networking.
2. Cooperation in information exchange:
 - 2.1. Establishment and maintenance of a central database of African higher education institutions and programmes;
 - 2.2. Establishment of an African system to measure performance of higher education institutions;
 - 2.3. Representation of African interests in global higher education ranking systems.
3. Development and maintenance of a continental framework for higher education qualifications:
 - 3.1. Provision of support to countries in establishing and running accreditation and quality assurance bodies
 - 3.2. Establishment and maintenance, through RECs, of regional higher education harmonization processes that are aligned with each other and integrated into a common, continental system of harmonization.
 - 3.3. Commissioning of research in key areas.

4. Creation of minimum standards in targeted qualifications.
5. Establishment of joint curriculum development and student mobility schemes.

Conclusion

There is widespread agreement that provision of quality education in general, and higher education in particular, is a key factor in national development and for nations to compete successfully in the global knowledge economy. Of equal importance is the crucial role of higher education in the socio-economic and political development of Africa. Thus investment in higher education is vital. Harmonization of higher education systems has a significant role to play in encouraging mobility of students and academics, while it can also become an effective vehicle for ongoing, systematic improvement in the quality of higher education delivery across the continent. Harmonisation of education systems, particularly higher education systems will be important for the integration of Africa, and for optimal use of Africa's institutional and human resources in education and research.

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