

Quality Regimes in Africa: Reality and Aspirations

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Since the middle of 2000, a number of initiatives have been launched in Africa to develop common frameworks for comparable and compatible qualifications, to promote academic mobility. Quality and quality assurance play a crucial role in these initiatives. This article identifies and analyzes the various higher education quality regimes and briefly discusses the challenges to implementing quality assurance, as well as the aspirations of African countries identified in recent commissioned research.

It is generally agreed that over the last two decades the quality of higher education has declined in several African countries, mainly due to rapid increase in student enrollments, poor standards of libraries and laboratories, inadequate pedagogic training of academic staff, and limited capacity of quality-assurance mechanisms. Several quality-assurance agencies have been established to enhance quality of higher education at national, subregional, and continental levels.

NATIONAL LEVEL

The first national quality-assurance agency was established in 1962, in Nigeria. By 2012, 21 African countries had already established such agencies, and a dozen other countries were at relatively advanced stages in this direction. Francophone Africa is lagging behind, with only five countries in sub-Saharan Africa with quality-assurance agencies.

Such agencies were initially established to ensure the quality of programs delivered by private institutions through the face-to-face mode. This mandate has gradually been expanded to include public institutions and other modes of delivery.

SUBREGIONAL LEVEL

The African and Malagasy Council for Higher Education was established in 1968, with the main objective of harmonizing academic programs and policies related to staff recruitment and promotion in its member states. Since 2005, the council implements harmonization of programs through a reform that aims at aligning the degrees structure in Francophone countries to the three Anglophone bachelor's, master's and PhD degrees. However, this reform faces some challenges, mainly due to the lack of national quality-assurance mechanisms.

The Inter-University Council for East Africa has the responsibility of ensuring internationally comparable standards in the five member states of the East African community: Burundi, Kenya, Rwanda, Tanzania, and Uganda. This mandate is implemented through the establishment and use of a subregional quality-assurance framework. This council's handbook has

been developed and used to instruct quality-assurance trainers and reviewers who are now instrumental in strengthening the capacity of quality-assurance units in member institutions.

CONTINENTAL LEVEL

The Association of African Universities implemented in 2010–2012 the Europe-Africa Quality Connect Pilot Project in collaboration with the European Universities Association. The project has helped to enhance institutional evaluation capacities in five African universities.

The Association of African Universities also hosts the African Quality Assurance Network, which implements its main mandate of promoting collaboration among quality-assurance agencies through capacity building and the African Quality Assurance Peer Review Mechanism. Currently, the network is facing financial challenges to implement its activities.

The African Union Commission implements three initiatives. The first initiative, the African Higher Education Harmonization Strategy, was adopted in 2007 to ensure comparability of qualifications and therefore to facilitate implementation of the “revised Arusha” convention—originally the UNESCO Regional Convention on the Recognition of Studies, Certificates, Diplomas, Degrees and other Academic Qualifications in Higher Education in the African States, adopted in 1981 in Arusha, Tanzania. A conference of African Ministers of Education will be held in March 2014 to adopt and sign the revised Arusha convention.

The revision of the Arusha convention began in 2002. Since 2007, this process, which is not yet completed, is jointly coordinated by UNESCO and the

African Union Commission. The progress made on the harmonization strategy and the revision of the Arusha convention are limited. This may be partly explained by the poor involvement of higher education and quality-assurance stakeholders in these initiatives.

Some of the results expected from the harmonization strategy will not be achieved by 2015, as anticipated by the work plan approved by the Conference of Ministers of Education in 2007. These include the establishment of an African Regional Qualifications Framework and the development of an African Credit Transfer and Accumulation System, which are key instruments for the implementation of the Arusha convention.

The second initiative, the Tuning Africa Pilot Project, is anticipated to promote the implementation of the harmonization strategy. This project was launched in 2011 to contribute to the development of a qualifications framework in five subject areas in collaboration—with nearly 60 African universities, the Association of African Universities, and other higher education partners. The project focuses on intended learning outcomes, skills, and competences. Efforts are underway to expand the scope of this project.

The third initiative, the African Quality Rating Mechanism, encourages higher education institutions to assess their performance on a voluntary basis against a set of established criteria. This one is different from ranking systems. It helps to put African universities in clusters according to prescribed standards. In 2009/2010, 32 higher education institutions from 11 countries participated in this pilot project, undertaken on the basis of self-assessment. A project report produced by the African Union Commission noted some shortcomings and suggested to revisit the survey and implement another pilot

phase prior to scaling up the mechanism to all higher education institutions.

CHALLENGES AND ASPIRATIONS

Today, quality assurance is at the heart of all efforts toward revitalizing higher education in Africa. These efforts have led to a rapid increase in the number of quality-assurance agencies. However, at least 60 percent of these agencies lack the human capacity needed to implement their mandates effectively.

Since 2006, UNESCO and its partners have organized five international conferences that have helped to train more than 700 experts in several key issues—such as: Accreditation at Program and Institutional levels; Quality Assurance of Teaching, Learning and Research; Institutional Audit and Visitation; and Use of ICT in Quality Assurance Practices. UNESCO has also developed a guide for training quality-assurance trainers. The annual conferences have played a positive role on human capacity building, fostering awareness of major actors, emergence of several agencies and the promotion of regional cooperation in quality assurance.

Throughout the continent, the major aspiration is to build an African Higher Education and Research Space. To inform the process of building it in 2010, the Association for the Development of Education in Africa Working Group on Higher Education commissioned several analytical studies, including a feasibility study on the establishment of the African Regional Quality Assurance Framework. The African Union has recently launched the process of establishing the African Accreditation Framework. These initiatives and the Tuning Africa project will provide a strong basis for the development of the African Regional Qualifications Framework and the

credit transfer system.

CONCLUSION

In the last decade, quality-assurance efforts have experienced major developments and progress in Africa. Despite these achievements, major challenges and questions that require further attention and research still abound. First, the Bologna Process was partly built on the implementation of the European Convention on mutual recognition of qualifications. What role should the Arusha Convention play in the process of establishing African Higher Education and Research Space? Second, how should the African Higher Education and Research Space harmonization strategy involve higher education and quality-assurance stakeholders to enhance implementation of the Arusha Convention. Final, what lessons can be learned for the reform in Francophone countries from the experience of Anglophone countries to establish viable mechanisms of quality assurance at national and subregional levels?