

Harmonization and Tuning: Integrating African Higher Education

KAROLA HAHN and DAMTEW TEFERRA

Karola Hahn is managing director of the Ethiopian Institute of Architecture, Building Construction and City Development, Addis Ababa University, Ethiopia. E-mail: karola.hahn@eiabc.edu.et. Damtew Teferra is founding director of the International Network for Higher Education in Africa, Boston College. E-mail: teferra@bc.edu. Both are members of the Steering Committee of the Tuning Africa initiative. Opinions in this article do not necessarily reflect the views of the Steering Committee or other organizations mentioned here.

The harmonization of higher education in Africa is a multidimensional process that promotes the integration of higher education in the region. This objective is to achieve collaboration across borders, subregionally and regionally—in curriculum development, educational standards, and quality assurance, joint structural convergence, and consistency of systems, as well as compatibility, recognition, and transferability of degrees to facilitate mobility.

The African Union Commission promotes this process for African higher education. The European Commission supports these efforts through the Africa-European Union Strategic Partnership including the Africa-European Union Migration, Mobility and Employment Partnership and the Joint Africa-European Union Strategy Action Plan. Various initiatives to foster harmonization have been launched in the last three decades—the most prominent, including the Arusha

convention (1981) and the SADC Protocol on Education and Training (1997). The convention that is being revised will serve as the legal framework for the harmonization of higher education in Africa.

TUNING: PIONEERING INITIATIVES

Tuning is a complex methodology to improve teaching, learning, and assessment in higher education reform. It guides the development of curriculum, a credit accumulation mechanism, and transfer system—so as to obtain intended learning outcomes, skills, and competences. One of its objectives is to ensure consensus of academics across borders on a set of reference points for generic and subject-specific competences, alongside subject lines.

Tuning as a tool has been developed in Europe following the Bologna process. So far, tuning projects have been completed in over 60 countries around the world—including Europe, Latin America, Russia, and the United States. Projects have recently started in Australia, India, and China. More than 1,000 universities, ministries, agencies, and other bodies have been involved in such projects. Tuning Africa is part of this larger initiative, to help harmonize and reform higher education in the region.

TOOLS OF INTEGRATION

The importance of tuning as a tool to implement harmonization of higher education in Africa has been first discussed at a political level. The European Union commissioned a feasibility study in 2010, to explore its potential, relevance, and timeliness. Following the study and a broad consultation, the tuning approach has been started in a pilot project. Unlike many top-down initiatives, the tuning

process in Africa began in a dual mode of interaction, combining top-down (first) and bottom-up (later) approaches.

In a Validation Workshop held in Nairobi in March 2011, five priority areas were identified for the pilot project—including agricultural sciences, civil and mechanical engineering, medicine, and teacher education—that will be coordinated across the five regions.

THE PILOT PROJECT

A call for participation in the “Harmonization and Tuning African Higher Education” was launched in October 2011. In November 2011, a selection workshop was held in Dakar, followed by an international conference on “Tuning, Credits, Learning Outcomes and Quality: A Contribution to Harmonisation and the Space for Higher Education in Africa,” attended by stakeholders—including the African Union Commission, the European Commission, the Association of African Universities, the Conseil Africain et Malgache pour l’Enseignement Supérieur, the Inter-University Council for East Africa, the Council on Higher Education (South Africa), the African Council for Distance Education, national quality-assurance agencies such as the South African Qualifications Authority, and national ministries.

The selection workshop screened 96 applications. As not all short-listed universities were finally selected, further efforts of recruitment are being made to reach 60—the designated number of potential participants for the pilot phase.

OUTSTANDING ISSUES

Ownership, inclusiveness, and leadership. Initially, the tuning Africa initiative was promoted by political convictions of regional integration, mobility, and harmonization. At the launch of the initiative, concerns were raised about ownership, inclusiveness, leadership, and strategy. In a direct response, it was agreed to start the initiative with a feasibility study.

As the tuning process needs to involve numerous and diverse stakeholders—such as administrators, ministries, higher education and quality-assurance agencies, policymakers, employers, the public sector, students, regional bodies, intermediary actors, and university associations—a continuous consultation over a reasonable period of time has been advised.

The initiative is now ushering into a new phase, where the African Association of Universities is identified as implementing agency under the guidance of the African Union Commission. In this phase, it is expected that the association would engage African universities in a consultative, transparent, and effective way by facilitating and ensuring their full leadership and ownership of the dialogue.

Coherence, consistency and dissemination. The prevalent plans contain a plethora of national and regional quality assurance, accreditation, qualification frameworks, credit accumulation and credit transfer systems, and curricula reforms. In addition, it needs to be ensured that these efforts are effectively integrated and synchronized, to create coherence and consistency.

Tuning still remains a new lexicon in the African higher education landscape. In the tuning Africa pilot project, only 60 universities are involved; and this comprises a small critical mass of champion universities, along with sup-

porting political and intermediary bodies. Therefore, an appropriate dissemination strategy to popularize the initiative is imperative.

Resources. Implementing harmonization and tuning requires resources. As most African universities experience chronic financial constraints, the provision of resources still must be negotiated by numerous constituencies. The success of the initiative may also be hampered by the disparate institutional infrastructure and the weak human resources base, in many institutions.

Outcome-oriented learning: Issue of viability. The successful implementation of a paradigm shift from input-oriented teaching to outcome-oriented learning—with all its associated implications to competence assessment and quality assurance—remains a key challenge to tuning Africa. The rapid massification of higher education, meager and overstretched resources, poor management and leadership, underqualified staff, and underprepared students will pose imminent threat to its success. Therefore, appropriate, contextualized, and realistic approaches need to be put in place, for the tuning Africa pilot project to succeed.

Distance education has an important role in expanding access to higher education and training in Africa. Thus, the pilot project is pioneering in integrating distance education into the mainstream. This component has never been tested in a tuning project, so far.

CONCLUSION

The tuning higher education in Africa pilot project is expected to be a consultative process that will foster discourse at a grassroots level across borders, through a number of regional seminars and conferences. These will provide the platform of dialogue for quality assurance, improvement of teaching and learn-

ing, and assessment. As the dialogue on credits and a common credit system is one of the central pillars of the tuning approach, the pilot project might also advance the discourse toward an African credit system.

The success of the pilot project will depend on the involvement of a critical mass of universities and stakeholders, sustained resources, well-organized dissemination, as well as transparent and credible leadership. The direct linkage and integration of the tuning pilot project into existing quality-assurance initiatives—including regional and national qualification frameworks—are expected to contribute to a sustainable, institutionalized, and harmonized reform.