

African Harmonisation: An Academic Process for a Political End?

By

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Introduction

The intention of the Strategy to Harmonise Higher Education Programmes in Africa was good: the countries of Africa should work together in close collaboration to ensure quality higher education for their people. The Strategy was embedded in the African Union Commission's Plan of Action for the Second Decade of Education for Africa (2006-2015) as a measure to ensure that academic certificates and diplomas gained in one country of Africa can be used or recognised in another. The rationale was based on the belief that such an initiative would help foster cooperation in information exchange, harmonisation of procedures and policies, attainment of comparability among qualifications and possibly the standardisation of curricula, so as to facilitate mobility for both professional employment and further study.

The Arusha Convention -The Policy Platform

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) mooted the original idea for regions to ensure the comparability of academic certificates and diplomas by instituting regional and inter-regional conventions on the recognition of studies. This was a visionary move that came before the world realised that globalisation was coming to break political boundaries across the world. Indeed, Africa had an early start. Political leaders met in Arusha, Tanzania in 1981 to formulate a plan for the recognition of academic qualifications across the continent through the "Arusha Convention", formally the UNESCO Regional Convention on the Recognition of Studies, Certificates, Diplomas, Degrees and other Academic Qualifications in Higher Education in the African States. However, while the leaders talked the talk in Arusha, they were not able to walk the walk when they returned to their respective countries. As a result, not many countries in Africa have ratified the Arusha Convention.

While Africans were still trying to convince themselves of the need to ratify the Arusha Convention, other parts of the world were putting together what the Africans failed to do. In Europe, the need to ensure the quality of the educational process across the various countries was broadly understood, with the final purpose of ensuring the comparability of academic qualifications. This was the root of the Bologna Process, which led to the creation of the European Higher Education Area. The Process appears flawless, but this was not without some strategic actions to ensure its survival and success. The Process first required the agreement among ministers of education throughout Europe to work together. It has also involved the mobilisation of all stakeholders, including universities, politicians, academics, and students to get them committed to the broader vision. Unfortunately, these strategic steps have yet to be seriously taken in Africa.

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The African Situation

While the Arusha Convention remains unsigned by many African countries, the African Union Commission (AUC) came up with a Plan of Action for the Second Decade of Education for Africa, in which harmonisation of higher education is one of the flagship programmes. This is to be a process of mutual recognition of the contents and quality of education programmes, degrees and certificates in different nations and regions, with appreciation for the equivalences or comparability within and beyond any African nation or region. The Europeans had earlier toyed with the term "harmonisation" but they decided not to adopt it because it is confused with "uniformity", "synchronisation", "standardisation", "regulation", "condensation", "homogenisation" and/or "unification" of all higher education systems.

The goal of the Strategy to Harmonise Higher Education Programmes in Africa is to establish "harmonised" 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. The Strategy intends to ensure that "the quality of higher education is systematically improved against common, agreed benchmarks of excellence and facilitates mobility of graduates and academics across the continent" (AUC). The broad developmental objective is the production of graduates who have the competences to drive Africa's economic and social development and who, with systems that facilitate economic integration, cultural relevance and mobility, should increasingly enable the continent to rely on its own, substantial human resources.

Collaboration and free mobility across the continent have been hampered as a result of the multiple and diverse systems of higher education that emerged from the different national, colonial and other legacies across Africa. One consequence is the lack of mutual recognition of different forms of academic certification, which limits African integration and the mobility of students across Africa. The idea behind the AUC's Plan was that harmonisation of higher education would be the strategy to tackle this challenge, but some unexpected confusions have surfaced.

The Harmonisation Process

The confusions arise not from the term "harmonisation", but from the process, which has been driven through the political level of the regional economic blocs and some few regional higher educational regional bodies, under the big "umbrella" of the AUC. There have been dialogues, consultative meetings and consultancies on the subject over many years. Unfortunately, the higher education institutions and the academics who are supposed to be the executors and the main players of the harmonisation initiative were left out of the Programme. Relatively few academics across the continent are aware of the African Union's Strategy to Harmonise Higher Education Programmes. They have already surrendered themselves to the colonial harmonisation models that cemented the systems of old colonial masters and continue to alienate neighbours in other colonial blocs. Today, many academics in Africa remain ignorant of UNESCO's Arusha Convention and of the various political initiatives of the African Union in education.

The Constraints

One major challenge to the Arusha Convention was the absence, in some countries, of national regulatory agencies that can ensure the quality of higher education. The concepts of quality and quality assurance still need to be promoted, not only at the national level but, most importantly, at the institutional level. There is a need for aggressive capacity building

for quality assurance in higher education. It is not difficult to convince African institutions of this need, especially since the emergence of university world rankings. This need is, however, persistently challenged by “massive” enrolment, poor funding, old and dilapidated infrastructure, among other constraints.

It is becoming clear that, for the Harmonisation Strategy to be advanced, national and regional regulatory agencies need to be put in place and institutional quality assurance needs to be promoted. The world rankings have awoken African universities to these realities more effectively than the less successful efforts of political leaders to append their signatures to the Arusha Convention.

Hope on the Horizon

There is hope that the objectives of the Harmonisation Strategy will still be achieved. This is because, apart from the emerging national quality assurance initiatives, some African regions are coming together to formulate regional qualification frameworks. There is also the European Union effort to promote the Tuning Approach in higher education for Africa, which appears to be capturing part of the Harmonisation strategy that the political systems in Africa have had difficulty in addressing. The Tuning Approach is bringing African academics and universities together to focus on the skills and competences that graduates should possess for particular professions. It is one of the first efforts involving academics and universities across the five regions of Africa to ensure that young people not only merely earn degrees, but that they can also match their academic qualifications with the requisite competences and skills that will drive the African future.

If well implemented, the harmonisation of higher education programmes will help bridge the gaps between disparate systems by coordinating efforts among national accreditation bodies and regional entities to discuss and resolve issues such as the African Credit Transfer System. It will facilitate the development of effective quality assurance mechanisms, while promoting mobility of African students, graduates, academics and researchers across the continent.

Conclusion

The African Union Commission should be commended for its initiative in promoting the Strategy to Harmonise Higher Education Programmes. At this point, the Strategy cannot be driven further at the political level. The time has come for the various countries to ensure harmonisation in higher education programmes at home before they should also ensure harmonisation across the continent. At home, countries are still struggling with poor quality facilities, poor access, and poor funding. Distance learning is posing a confusing distraction in a continent where ICT facilities are meagre. Important concepts that enhance harmonisation such as credits, teaching methods, skills and competences still receive confusing interpretations in many African countries. Indeed, these are issues that the African higher education harmonisation process will be able to address if it is taken beyond the political level.

There is a need to give further support to the EU’s Tuning Africa project, as it has proved to directly and effectively involve academics and institutions in the harmonisation discussions. Furthermore, the AUC and UNESCO need to ensure that more African countries endorse the (revised) Arusha Convention. The Committee of Education Ministers in Africa (COMMEDAF), currently chaired by Nigeria, could probably take this up as an important assignment that needs to be addressed urgently.

Africa is waking up to the reality that certificates and diplomas are only good as long as they are appropriately complemented with relevant skills and competences. If higher education institutions, national governments and the African Union can help use harmonisation as an instrument to ensure students succeed in acquiring the knowledge they need, it will not matter if harmonisation is labelled a “political tool” or not. In this case, harmonisation would have emerged to be a useful tool for driving development in Africa.

The Second Decade of Education for Africa (2006-2015) has only three more years to run its course. In this short time, it will be important to move the African harmonisation initiative from the political platform to legitimate implementing entities so as to deliver a high quality higher education that foster African development. This is a first important challenge that needs to be surmounted.