

Quality Regimes in Africa: The Reality and the Aspirations

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Introduction

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

Quality Regimes

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 enrolments, 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 and research at national, sub-regional and continental levels.

At National Level

The first national quality assurance agency was established in 1962 in Nigeria. By 2012, twenty-one 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.

Quality assurance agencies were initially established to ensure 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.

At Sub-Regional Level

Two major quality assurance agencies operate at a sub-regional level: the African and Malagasy Council for Higher Education (in its French acronym CAMES) and the Inter-University Council for East Africa. CAMES was established in 1968 with the objective to harmonise academic programs and policies as regard staff recruitment and promotion in its nineteen member states.*

Since 2005, harmonisation of programmes under CAMES is implemented through the “*Licence-Master-Doctorate*” (LMD) reform that aims at aligning the seven higher education degrees in Francophone countries—*Diplôme d’études Générales, Licence, Maîtrise, Diplôme d’études approfondies, Doctorat de troisième cycle, Doctorat unique* and *Doctorat d’Etat*—to the three Anglophone degrees of Bachelor’s, Master’s and PhD. However, implementation of this reform faces some challenges mainly due to lack of national quality assurance agencies to accredit programmes and maintain a level of quality that meets regional and international standards.

The Inter University Council for East Africa (IUCEA) 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 sub-regional quality assurance framework. An IUCEA Handbook has been developed and used between 2008 and 2013 to train 71 quality assurance trainers and 52 peer reviewers from universities and quality assurance agencies. These experts are now instrumental in strengthening the capacity of quality assurance units in member institutions and regional offices.

At Continental Level

Quality assurance at the continental level involves the Association of African Universities (AAU) and the African Union Commission. The AAU oversees two initiatives: the African Quality Assurance Network (AfriQAN) and the Europe-Africa Quality Connect Pilot Project. AfriQAN 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 faces the challenge of mobilising funds to implement its activities.

The Europe-Africa Quality Connect Pilot Project, funded by the Erasmus Mundus program, was implemented in 2010-2012 by the AAU and the European Universities Association. The project has helped to enhance institutional evaluation capacities in five African universities. Whether or not this project will be expanded to other universities is not yet clear.

Currently, the African Union implements three initiatives: The African Higher Education Harmonisation Strategy, Tuning Africa, and the African Quality Rating Mechanism. The African Higher Education Harmonisation Strategy was adopted in 2007 to ensure comparability of qualifications. Therefore, this Strategy may be considered as a mechanism for implementing 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 (1981).

The revision of the Arusha Convention began in 2002 under the auspices of UNESCO and the Commonwealth of Learning and has continued since 2007 under the African Union. The process is not yet complete. This could be an indication of ineffectiveness of mechanisms used to oversee the revision process. Indeed, although the Arusha Convention and the Harmonisation Strategy focus primarily on quality of academic programs and institutions, their implementation does not adequately involve higher education and quality assurance stakeholders. This may partly explain the limited progress made on these initiatives.

Recent reports on higher education show that some of the objectives of the Harmonisation Strategy will not be achieved by 2015, as anticipated by the work plan approved by the Conference of Ministers of Education in 2007. The plan foresees results such as 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. On the other hand, signature of the revised Arusha Convention might be further delayed by internal mechanisms of the African Union regarding approval of legally binding documents.

The second initiative, the Tuning Africa Pilot Project, is anticipated to promote the implementation of the Harmonisation Strategy. This project was launched in 2011 with funding from the European Union Commission to contribute to the development of a qualifications framework in five subject areas in collaboration with nearly 60 African Universities, the AAU and other higher education partners. The project focuses on intended learning outcomes, skills and competences. Efforts are underway to expand the scope of the Tuning Africa project, which fully engages the academic community at the grassroots level.

The third initiative is the African Quality Rating Mechanism (AQRM), which encourages higher education institutions to assess their performance on a voluntary basis against a set of established criteria. These criteria are largely consistent with the standards for institutional quality assurance used in Nigeria and South Africa. The AQRM is different from ranking systems. It helps to put African universities in clusters according to the quality standards required for participation in regional academic mobility programs such as the Mwalimu Nyerere scholarship scheme.

In 2009-2010, thirty-two higher education institutions from eleven countries participated in an AQRM pilot project undertaken on the basis of self-assessment. A project report produced by the African Union Commission noted some shortcomings, including lack of external validation of the self-

assessment results and difficulty in drawing relevant conclusions from the information collected since some institutions failed to complete the entire survey. The report recognises the need to revisit the survey and implement another pilot phase prior to scaling up the mechanism to all higher education institutions.

Challenges

Today, quality assurance is at the heart of all efforts toward revitalising and developing higher education in Africa. These efforts have led to a rapid increase in the number of quality assurance agencies. More than 60% of these agencies have been created during the last decade and many of them still lack the capacity needed to implement their mandates effectively. This is why human capacity building is a high priority for all quality assurance stakeholders in Africa.

Since 2006, UNESCO and its partners have organised five international conferences that have helped to train more than 700 experts in several key issues, such as: Accreditation at Programme 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 QA trainers. The annual conferences are believed to have played a positive role on human capacity building in quality assurance, fostering awareness of major actors, emergence of several relevant agencies and the promotion of regional cooperation in quality assurance.

Aspirations

Throughout the continent, the major aspiration is to build an African Higher Education and Research Space (AHERS). In 2010, the ADEA Working Group on Higher Education commissioned several analytical studies to inform the process of building AHERS, including a feasibility study on the establishment of the African Regional Quality Assurance Framework. The African Union, in a complementary effort, recently launched the process of establishing the African Regional Accreditation Framework. It should be noted that these processes merge, since accreditation is the first step of any quality assurance mechanism and the two processes provide a strong basis for development of the African Regional Qualifications Framework, a key objective of the Harmonisation Strategy and therefore fundamental to AHERS.

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; these include (i) The Bologna Process partly built on the implementation of the “Lisbon Convention” on mutual recognition of qualifications in Europe. What role should the Arusha Convention play in the process of establishing AHERS? (ii) How should the Harmonisation Strategy build on the Tuning Africa project, the AQRM and the African regional accreditation and quality assurance frameworks in order to develop an African regional qualifications framework and a credit transfer and accumulation system? (iii) How should the Harmonisation Strategy involve higher education and quality assurance stakeholders to enhance implementation of the Arusha Convention? And (iv) What lessons can be learned for the LMD reform from the experience of Anglophone countries to establish viable mechanisms of quality assurance at national and sub-regional levels?

* CAMES member countries: Benin, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Congo, Democratic Republic of Congo, Equatorial Guinea, Ivory Coast, Gabon, Guinea, Guinea Bissau, Madagascar, Mali, Niger, Rwanda, Chad, Senegal, and Togo.

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