

Policy brief

Harmonization of Higher Education in Africa or Why We Need to Hang in There Together...

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Benjamin Franklin had once said that, “We must indeed all hang together, or most assuredly we shall hang separately”. Emerging from a colonial history, African leaders have felt the need to hang together or to collaborate for greater strength and confidence in African systems, structures and institutions. Among these structures, Higher Education (HE) has long been seen as a driver for development: it is the incubator for research, knowledge generation and data management as well as capacity development. The need for collaboration also arises among HE institutions. Harmonization implies the agreement, synchronization and coordination of education systems to strategically develop and strengthen the capacity of HE institutions to respond simultaneously to the educational and employability needs of populations. 21 out of 54 African leaders have shown their willingness for such collaboration by signing and ratifying the Arusha Convention (1981), that delineates guidelines for harmonizing HE through the mutual recognition of qualifications as well as inter-country collaboration.

For many reasons however, harmonization of HE in Africa has remained elusive. The globalized world, which is characterized by an increasingly mobile intellectual and labor force, has shown that growing attention must be paid to quality assurance of HE in Africa. Building on existing efforts for harmonization and informed by global developments in this area, this policy brief explores the pitfalls of a harmonization deficit, stresses the urgency to align continental HE agendas within a framework of sustainable development and recommends African policymakers to reenergize the Arusha Convention towards the development of an African Higher Education and Research Space (AHERS). It also proposes a roadmap for action through existing mechanisms to open up opportunities for development in Africa.

WHY HARMONIZATION?

Education is seen as a catalyst for equity, meritocracy, employability, economic performance, happiness and sustainable development. Harmonization fosters trust.

It enables the consolidation of African systems of education and assures the quality of educational provision against locally, regionally and eventually internationally agreed benchmarks of excellence, ultimately leading to regional integration.

In a harmonized environment, there is transparency regarding curriculum development, and a synchronized understanding of definitions of regarding HE including: of the learning load, the duration of courses, credit accumulation and recognition of experiential learning. There is also improved visibility concerning how individuals progress along and across educational systems.

“ It is the trust and confidence, produced by consensual agreement over higher education... that enable portability and transferability of qualifications as well as intra-continental and international mobility of African citizens ”

Interestingly, harmonization at continental level is expected to respect country-level cultural and contextual specificities. Moreover, it is the trust and confidence, produced by consensual agreement over HE related definitions that enable the portability and transferability of qualifications as well as intra-continental and international mobility of African citizens.

Harmonization efforts in Africa are not new: East Africa carries memories of HE harmonization during the colonial period and the immediate post-colonial period through the provision and training services based on a common curriculum and through established regional organizations and institutions. The East African National Examination Council ensured standardization and quality assurance of education in East Africa while the University of East Africa served the region's HE needs. The various colleges of the University of East Africa



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were located in the then three Partner States, Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda, each specializing in a specific discipline. Such cooperation provided sharing opportunities amongst the people of East Africa as well as their mobility. However, this cooperation ceased with the break-up of the East African Community in 1977. The breakup introduced fragmentation of HE initiatives, diversity and barriers.

THE ISSUE IN FOCUS: EFFECTS OF HARMONIZATION DEFICIT

This fragmentation was echoed across Africa contributing to a weakening of HE systems, which has manifested itself through a the deterioration of existing institutions; brain drain of qualified staff and associated economic deficits; foreign exchange going offshore through the importation of foreign education and a continued history of enrolment rates in HE. Selected World Bank 2012 data demonstrates the low HE enrolment rate across Africa, ranging from 1.4% in Seychelles to 39% in Mauritius [See Map below: Enrolment rates in Higher Education across Africa (2012)].

Harmonization deficit in HE has compromised the achievement of sustainable development goals, snowballing into quagmires in other levels of education. Documented effects include the delay in developing appropriate capacity towards achieving Education for All goals and formulating sustainable solutions to address peace deficit and the rise in conflicts, environmental migration, food insecurity, water shortage, poverty and human misery.

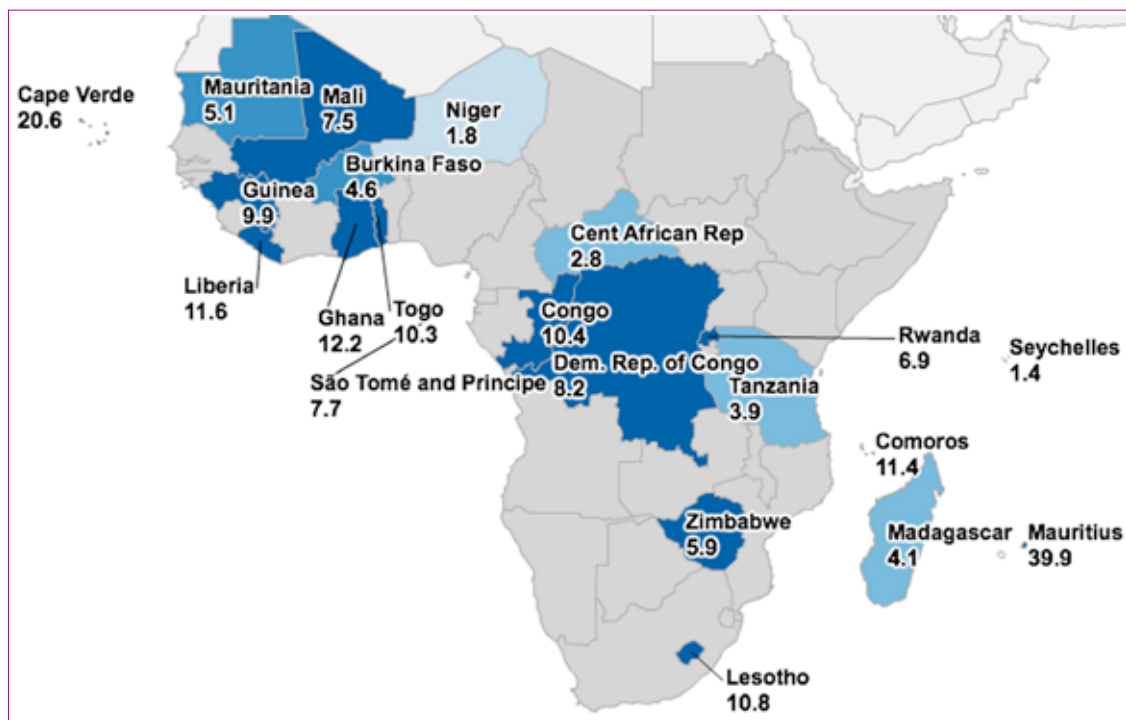
The specific challenges facing HE systems is underpinned by gender and regional disparities, the mismatch between skills and industry requirements, inflexible admission criteria, the absence of credit transfer arrangements (locally, regionally and internationally) and poor recognition of African qualifications externally. Additionally, coupled with the tendency for African governments to liberalize educational provision, local and [sometimes dubious] private HE is rapidly growing unfettered by quality assurance requirements in the absence of clearly defined quality standards and regulations in many African countries. Overall, African HE is viewed with a suspicion that weakens its competitive edge internally as well as externally. Besides the reputational risk, poor quality HE entails capital and financial losses for African countries.

Genesis of harmonization

Globally, five regions have established conventions to harmonize their HE systems : Latin America and the Caribbean (1974), the Arab States (1978), Europe (1979), Africa (1981) – through the Arusha Convention – and Asia and the Pacific (1983) .

The African Arusha Convention was meant to address the current fragmentation of HE in Africa through regional co-operation and the mutual recognition of qualifications. This has been achieved through national, bilateral, sub-regional and regional mechanisms that exist or are created to implement the recognition of studies and degrees. The main aim has been to promote capacity development and the mobility of students and professionals across Africa while ensuring that their

Enrolment rates in Higher Education across Africa (2012)



Source: <http://siteresources.worldbank.org/EXTEDSTATS/Resources/3232763-1314192505774/StatPlanet.html>

qualifications, skills and competencies are appropriately recognized and transferable.

The convention has led to improvements in implementation at three levels: (i) at the national level through the growing interest in and establishment of national regulatory bodies; (ii) at the sub-regional level, through sub-regional organs like the African and Malagasy Council for HE (CAMES) and the technical committee of the Southern African Development Community (SADC); (iii) at the regional level, through the regional committee (comprising 20 members representing 19 ratifying African States). The secretariat of the regional committee is accountable to the UNESCO regional office for education in Africa (BREDA).

Critique of the Arusha Convention

There have been a number of general, structural and technical challenges facing the Arusha Convention. HE structures were poorly delineated and this has complicated the sharing of information. At the structural level, regulatory frameworks were not uniformly available across Africa, the Regional Committees were notably inefficient and their composition needed to be revised. Indeed, a lack of qualified and experienced holders of the harmonization portfolios at country level was noted, as well as inconsistent attendance at coordination meetings compromising smooth follow-up of action, and a high turnover rates of responsible officers at the coordination meetings. Permanent Secretaries who are administrative and not technical cadres are often those who attend such meetings. Besides their lack of technical expertise, they are highly mobile, shifting from a Ministry to another and therefore cannot be champions of harmonization. The lack of harmonization champions/has impeded the follow-up and commitment in human and financial resources. Additionally, the process has often been critiqued for its lack of national consultation among academic and non-academic stakeholders.

At the technical level, there have been variations in (i) the processes for establishing credits, their integration in curriculum development and eventual transfer, (ii) institutional calendars, and (iii) the understanding of credit loads and program duration. Generally, another noteworthy critique is the focus required by several 'competing' international agendas for development e.g. the EFA, ESD (UNESCO, 2014) or MDGs, which despite their common aim of sustainable development have dispersed energies and resources and at times diminished the attention given to the Arusha Convention.

Review of the Arusha Convention

To address the above challenges, the Convention was reviewed several times. In 2010 it was amended to strengthen its implementation given the challenges of globalization and the growing awareness of the need for quality assurance. Particular attention has been given to the following areas: the consolidation of Centers



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of Excellence and academic mobility; transparency, coherence and credibility of the procedures and criteria for the recognition of qualifications; the growing use of innovative technologies in distance education; Open Source resources and courses; private education and the emerging AHERS.

Promising initiatives

The following harmonization efforts are noted. The Association for the Development of Education in Africa (ADEA) has long focused on strengthening policy dialogue between governments, and development agencies through its higher education coordination networks. From a regulatory perspective, the African Council for Distance Education (ACDE) has focused on harmonizing distance education, which has included the development of regulations and establishing a continental Accreditation Commission for Distance Education in Africa. The International Conference on Quality Assurance in HE in Africa (ICQAHEA) – hosted by UNESCO and the Global University Network for Innovation (GUNI)-Africa – have been vested with similar networking missions to monitor progress of national and regional action plans on quality assurance, recognition of degrees and students mobility.

In the East African region, the Inter-University Council for East Africa (IUCEA), an inter-governmental organization established by Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda, has also revived strategies for harmonization of their HE operations.

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 (involving the shift to the Licence-Master-Doctorat approach which was strongly

supported by the Association of African Universities (AAU) and ADEA.

Eight countries of the Association of Arab Universities' (AARU's) are African countries. Its mission includes the coordination of the establishment of regional mechanisms for quality assurance.

The 15 members of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) aim at promoting economic integration and development through a protocol on Education and Training developed during the first Decade of Education for Africa (1997-2006), which outlined various areas of cooperation in education as well as a General Convention on the recognition and equivalence of Degrees, Diplomas, Certificates and other qualifications in ECOWAS Member States.

The Southern African Development Community (SADC) Region has innovatively proposed a first concrete instrument- National Qualifications Frameworks – for harmonization, standardization of the education and training systems leading to the mutual recognition of qualifications within the Regional Qualifications Framework (RQF) -which is the metaframework- as required by the SADC Protocol on Education and Training. The ILO informs us that 6 SADC countries have established their NQFs [See table 1. Below].

While this is an encouraging start, progress is slow. International experience (Scotland, Ireland, UAE, Australia and New Zealand) confirms the appropriateness of the SADC decision and points to the advantages of the incremental adoption of NQFs, while considering existing politico- economic and labor policies. Botswana and Tunisia had NQFs designed only for technical and vocational education and are now ready to progress to the adoption of common definitions, arrangements for recognition of prior learning as well as benchmarks for quality. This introduces a new layer to NQFs- a Credit Accumulation & Transfer System (CATS). This addition gradually recast NQFs as National Qualifications and Credit Frameworks (NQCF). Moving towards the development of a Knowledge Hub, the Mauritian apex regulatory agency, the Tertiary Education Commission, has recently developed a draft CATS, which now has to be transposed onto the existing NQF.

Table 1. An overview of NQF development in Sub-Saharan Africa

STATUS	COUNTRIES
1.Established	Botswana, Mauritius, Namibia, South Africa
2. Developing & Implementing	Lesotho, Seychelles
3. Planning and/or designing	
4. Under consideration	DRC, Ghana, Madagascar, Mozambique, Swaziland, Tanzania, Zimbabwe
5. Competence and Credit Framework	Mauritius (draft) (TEC, 2014)

Adapted from ILO, 2010

Furthermore, a noteworthy arrangement supported jointly by the ADEA and the AAU is the development of the African Higher Education Research Space (AHERS) in response to the challenges of globalization and the need for harmonization and partnership within the African HE realm.

AAU is as an apex agency which has initiated a set of strategies for regional cooperation and partnership in quality assurance, accreditation and recognition, research, and advocacy.

This brief builds on the two proposals described above: the SADC NQF and RQF and the AAU/ADEA AHERS.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS: MOVING TOWARDS AN AFRICAN HIGHER EDUCATION AND RESEARCH SPACE

Following initiation of the Bologna process,harmonizing efforts in Europe have resulted in the development of a European Higher Education Area – the equivalent of the AHERS – and the development and implementation of the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) which has had a stabilizing effect on HE in Europe.

Table 2. What a National Qualifications and Credit Framework can do

1	Promote understanding and visibility concerning possibilities for individual progress through life chances and market opportunities
2	Promote understanding how to accede to higher and different levels of education and training over a lifetime as well as plan for children's educational progress
3	Contribute to capacity development
4	Promote the comparability and transferability of qualifications and skills
5	Enhance employer confidence in staff recruitment and training
6	Facilitate educational and labour market mobility
7	Facilitate curriculum design and development with the aid of credit descriptors as they exist within NQFs
8	Respond to the requirements for sustainable development by enabling the recognition of [formal, non-formal and informal] learning in lifelong and lifewide settings and providing possibilities for "people of all ages and circumstances to access appropriate education and training over their lifetime to fulfil their personal, social and economic potential"(Scottish Qualifications Framework).
9	Inspire confidence among local, regional and international stakeholders

The following steps are recommended:

1. Inspired by the several documented advantages of the ECTS, and niched within the UN Agenda 21 and the Aichi-Nagoya Declaration on an ESD framework, it is proposed that African countries first develop their individual NQCFs. Table 2 lists the advantages of developing NQCFs.

Table 3. A proposed starting point for NQFs that will articulate with the African Credit & Transfer System

Level	Sustainability competencies/ learning outcomes: progressive level of difficulty	Corresponding Credits	Pre-Primary/ Primary/ Secondary Education	TVET/Workplace/ Professional/Agri-culture/Maritime Education...	Tertiary Education	Non-Formal/ Informal Education/ RPL& APL
10		Not typically rated			Professional Doctorate/PhD	Recognition of learning in Lifelong & Lifewide settings
9		180/120/60	Continuing education		Masters PG Cert/Dip	
8		360			B. A Honors	Use of Alternative Pedagogies , e.g. Literacies: 1. Climate Literacy 2. Environmental Literacy 3. Health Literacy 4. Indigenous Knowledge...
7		300			B.A General	
6		240			Diploma	
5		120			Certificate	
4			HSC/A Level/IBAC/ French BAC	CERTIFICATE 4		
3			SC/GCE 'O' Level	CERTIFICATE 3		
2				CERTIFICATE 2		
1			Primary school level	CERTIFICATE 1		

Arrangements must be made for to respect contextual/cultural specificities like the inclusion of Anglophone, European, Francophone and American aspects wherever they influence country-level provision.

Source: Adapted from Gokool-Ramdoe, 2014

- The second recommended step is the development of national Credit Accumulation and Transfer Systems (CATS) that would pay attention to contextual and cultural realities of each African country. The CATS that carries cross-cutting [sustainability] competencies clustered into notional learning hours and credit loads, acquired at progressive levels of difficulty.
- The CATS should then be transposed on the NQFs and be recast as NQCFs. The NQCF classifies qualifications according to a set of criteria [level descriptors] for levels of learning outcomes .
- Finally, the NQCF should articulate with an eventual African Qualifications and Credit Framework (AQCF), [See Table 3. Above].

Towards the AHERS, the development of an AQCF is recommended within the provisions made in the reviewed Arusha Convention that should be retained. The NCQF and ACQF should articulate with one another and there should be provision for (1) different levels of learning (Levels 1-10); (2) sectors (General Education [pre-primary to tertiary], Vocational, Professional, Agriculture, Maritime); (3) learning pathways including arrangements for Recognition/Accreditation of Prior Learning in formal, non-formal and informal settings without losing transparency at the national level & inclusion of alternative pedagogies and (4) credits. As seen with the ECTS, adherence to an AQCF provides the basis for improving the quality, accessibility, linkages and public or labor market recognition of qualifications within a country or internationally (OECD, 2007).

Proposed terms of reference of the Standing and Regional Committees

The development of the AQCF should be carried out and enforced through a collaborative African Union/ UNESCO, BREDA and ADEA partnership involving the creation of a Standing Committee. This move will ensure that this project can benefit from adequate political, human and financial resources.

The Standing Committee, comprising of members of Regional Committees reports to the Director-General UNESCO and Directors of AU/ADEA and UNESCO-BREDA. In turn, the Regional Committee will comprise Ministers of Education, one or two local experts selected on the basis of qualifications and experience

Table 4. Functions of the Standing Committee on Harmonization

1. Harmonize development and education agendas
2. Agreement on role of higher education in Africa
3. Commitment to Arusha Convention.
4. Resolution to develop an African Higher Education Research Space (AHERS)
5. Commitment to recognize and address internal weaknesses through an audit.
6. Review composition of Regional Committee
7. Budget and Time Frame
8. Recruitment
9. Language of instruction
10. Equity
11. Global developments
12. Quality Assurance and Monitoring Committee

who will ensure the implementation the Standing Committee functions listed in Table 4.

ROADMAP FOR REGIONAL EFFORTS IN SUPPORT OF THE AHERS

The following is a proposed Road map to support the development of an African Higher Education and Research Space (AHERS).

1. Harmonize development goals and reconcile ‘competing’ agendas to generate a concerted effort.
2. Over the first 12 months, through strategic high-level meetings, achieve agreement on general and country-specific development goals and policies, aligned with the Aichi-Nagoya World Declaration on Education for Sustainable Development (UNESCO, 2014) and the UN Agenda 21 and reorient HE in the light of the above.
3. Promote understanding and advocacy of the Arusha Convention.
4. Inculcate an iterative, consultative and participative process for the development of the qualifications, credit system frameworks, standardization and harmonization of data between research institutions including a wide-ranging group of stakeholders (NGOs, IGOS, RCEs etc.).
5. Develop National Qualifications Frameworks as main instrument to promote learning in lifelong and lifewide settings as well as capacity development, labor mobility and transferability of qualifications across the continent and the globe.
6. Ensure the simultaneous development of a Credit Accumulation & Transfer System (CATS) that articulates the culturally and contextually responsive but cross-sectoral sustainability competencies that have to be developed for each corresponding level of learning.
7. Transpose the CATS onto the NQF at country level.
8. Assist participating countries, through recruitment of expertise as and when required to engage systemic reform at national level to develop the Qualifications and Credit Frameworks.
9. Facilitate the development of supportive quality assurance mechanisms that will ensure that educational structural and instructional development will be compatible with local needs and inclusively reflect the needs of all groups, improve internal as well as external efficiency of the HEIs.
10. Align African efforts with existing global effort of competency-based qualifications and credit frameworks, while respecting contextual and cultural specificities.
11. Ensure that African HEIs are re-energised to participate in research and knowledge development as

part of the international HE and Research Areas as well as sharing of intellectual resources and favour the development of synergies that will contribute to internal and external efficiencies and effectiveness.

12. Develop a scale and benchmarks to measure institutional performance to encourage cultures of internal and external quality improvements as well as global respect for African HE programs.
13. After the initial 12 months, harmonize curriculum through networked and interrelated group of curriculum and examination systems, through a common educational agenda like Education for Sustainable Development (UNESCO, 2014), that is domesticated based on contextual and cultural specificities.
14. Harmonize education structures in terms of levels of learning, sectors of education, duration of programs and learning credit load as well as the different pathways of learning [see Table 3 above].
15. Transpose NQCFs with the African Qualifications and Credit Framework which will be the meta-framework.
16. Ensure that NQFs are designed in ways that make them become national properties, independent of the institutions that use them but a guide for the latter if sustainable development objectives including improved life chances and market opportunities are to be achieved.
17. Provide quarterly monitoring and evaluation reports to the Standing Committee.

HARMONIZATION IS AN URGENT PRIORITY FOR AFRICA...

The development of an AHERS harmonized by common definitions and understanding is more than ever urgent if Africa is to respond to the economic, cultural, educational and employability needs of its citizens. Moreover, in the globalized world, such an AHERS requires the appropriate mechanisms to foster the competitiveness of its HE, create barriers of entry to dubious private (local and foreign) providers, and retain its talents and foreign exchange reserves. The harmonization effort will ensure that Africans have a chance to hang together and to develop intrinsic confidence and trust in their own HE systems and structures to simultaneously engage in sustainable development.

The author

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Association for the Development of Education in Africa (ADEA)

ADEA was created in 1988. Since its founding it has grown from a donor-driven platform for coordinating development aid to a Pan-African Organization working closely with the Africa Union and hosted within the African Development Bank.

ADEA represents a partnership between African ministries of education and development partners. It is also a Forum for policy dialogue bringing together a vibrant network of African Ministries of Education, bilateral and multilateral development agencies, researchers and stakeholders from Africa and around the world.

Collectively the network aspires to the vision of high quality education and training. Programs focus on supporting education systems to develop the critical knowledge and skills needed for Africa's accelerated and sustainable development.

In 2013, the African Union's Heads of State endorsed the Strategic Policy Framework developed by ADEA to guide the transformation of African education and training systems.

ADEA programs are implemented by the ADEA Secretariat, which is based within the AfDB, and by its Working Groups, Task Forces and Inter-Country Quality nodes, which address specific education and training themes and challenges.

Members include 15 bilateral and multilateral development agencies and 18 Ministries of Education.

For more information go to the ADEA web site at www.adeanet.org

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