Strategic Harmonization of Higher Education Systems in Africa: The Dominance of Cross-State Organizations, Government Treaties and International Conferences in Higher Education Accreditation and Quality Assurance

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Abstract
Quality of higher education and the need for effective quality assurance systems beyond those of institutions and nations themselves are becoming precedence themes in international strategies for higher education in African continent. Although the concepts of 'Quality and Accreditation' in higher education being multi-faceted, African countries are increasingly promoting them with the notion of having comparable academic standards and qualifications that can ultimately facilitate mobility of students, professional, informational and intellectual resources across countries. This paper attempts to review and give a brief account of the cross-state organizations, government treaties and conferences in higher education accreditation and Quality Assurance movements in Africa. The introductory part briefs the concept of quality in higher education and the international trend towards harmonization of higher education that require harmonized quality assurance and accreditation systems. The second part is dedicated to give an account of the notable multi-national quality assurance and accreditation organizations, treaties and international conferences that have been in place hitherto. Lastly, the paper winds up the account by discussion and conclusive remarks.
Keywords: Accreditation, quality assurance, Higher education, harmonization

1. Introduction

Quality of higher education in Africa is challenged by the forces of globalization, information and communication technologies (ICTs), mass higher education and student-centered learning to mention few. These challenges have led to institutional, national and international quality assurance and accreditation initiatives across the continent. Accreditation as means for controlling and assuring quality in higher education involves programme and institutional accreditation. Gola (as cited in Tagoe, 2008) defines quality in higher education as "specifying worthwhile learning goals and enabling students to achieve them". It involves *articulating academic standards* to meet society's expectations, students' aspirations and the demands of the government, business and industry as well as the requirements of professional institutions.

African countries like many other parts of the world are in the move toward internationalization of their education systems particularly higher education to respond to societal demand for the creation of knowledge society that is competent and competitive nationally and internationally. Mobility of knowledge, skills and qualifications nationally and across nations dominates higher education discourses in many parts of the world. In Africa, it takes in the form of harmonization of higher education programmes. Harmonization of study programmes goes concurrently with harmonization of quality assurance and accreditation systems (Association of African Universities [AAU], 2009).

As a process towards harmonization of quality assurance and accreditation systems, a number of cross-state organizations, government treaties and conferences across Africa have been initiated with more impetus in the beginning of the last decade. Indeed, African countries have moved quickly to establish effective quality assurance and accreditation systems at the institutional, national and cross-state levels within a short period. The following part of the paper is dedicated towards reviewing and discussing the cross-state organizations, government treaties and conferences in higher education accreditation in the continent.

2. Cross-state Organizations and Government Treaties

2.1. African Union Commission (AUC)and the African Union (AU)

African Union Commission (hereafter AUC) is the Secretariat of the African Union (hereafter AU). It has embarked in the process of promoting quality assurance and developing framework for harmonization of higher education programmes in Africa. The decision to do so was reached by the Third Ordinary Session of the Conference of Ministers of Education in Africa (COMEDAF III) summoned in South Africa in August 2007 (African Union [AU], 2007). In the process of renewal and harmonization of higher education in Africa, the conference identified the promotion, development and assurance of quality in African higher education in all of its dimensions, including the development and ratification of regional and continental qualification framework to

facilitate mobility of students and staffs as priority areas to be addressed (AU, 2007). This was an important meeting in building political commitment and capacity to undertake quality accreditation and quality assurance in higher education systems as well as stimulating the dialogue about quality and quality improvement. Recognizing the importance of quality in the harmonization process, the establishment of Quality Rating Mechanism was also discussed. Bologna process was cited as one of the important case where African countries should learn in the harmonization process.

2.2. Association of African Universities (AAU)

AAU which was established in 1967 is designated as the lead implementing agency for the AUC's higher education activities (AAU, 2010a). To raise the quality of higher education in Africa is one of the missions of the association. To implement its mission, the association has the Quality Assurance Support Programme for African higher education (AAU, 2010a). The programme defines quality assurance in higher education as the planned and systematic review process of an institution or programme to determine that acceptable standards of education, scholarship, teaching, administration and infrastructure are being maintained and enhanced (Ibid). Its objectives are to lay foundation for institutionalized quality assurance mechanisms within tertiary institutions, national quality assurance and accreditation agencies and develop regional network for coordination of cross-border protocol and specialized capacity building in quality assurance. The programme provides support to member universities of the association in developing internal quality assurance systems and the national quality assurance/accreditation agencies in developing professional capacities to their staffs (AAU, 2010a). Also the programme plays an important part in developing and implementing a Regional Framework on the recognition of studies, certificates, degrees, and other academic qualifications in higher education (AAU, 2010a). Moreover, the AAU periodically does quality assurance studies and practice assessments in higher education in Africa.

2.3. African Quality Assurance Network (AfriQAN)

In 2009, the AAU in collaboration with the Global Initiative for Quality Assurance Capacity (GIQAC) launched the African Quality Assurance Network (AfriQAN), a network for quality assurance practitioners in African higher education (AfriQAN, 2010a). This was a response to Dodowa Declaration of April 2009 in Ghana that called for continent-wide network. The network is set up to provide assistance to institutions concerned with quality assurance in higher education in Africa to enhance quality in the continent through collaboration with those institutions and other similar organization on other continents (AfriQAN, 2010a).

2.4. The Inter-University Council for East Africa (IUCEA)

IUCEA is a regional inter-governmental organization established in 1980 by the three East African Community (EAC) partner states (Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda). It was later revitalized in 1999/2000 to become a corporate entity aiming at facilitating contact between the universities of East Africa, providing a forum for discussion on a wide range of academic and other matters relating to higher education and helping to maintain high and comparable academic standards across the region (Inter-University Council for East Africa [IUCEA], 2009; 2010a).

Recently, the council programmes have extended over to the newly invited East Africa Community partner states of Rwanda and Burundi. According to IUCEA report (2009) the council is in line with the EAC treaty's Sections (d) and (e) of Article 102 that states about education and training for human resource development. These sections stipulate about member states desires and commitments to harmonize curricula, examination, certification and accreditation of education and training institutions in the partner states through the joint action of the relevant national bodies charged with the preparation of such curricula (IUCEA, 2009). Therefore, promoting the quality of higher education - quality assurance and maintain international standards - for common regional development is one of the three functions of the council (IUCEA, 2010a; 2010b). To build and maintain high and comparable academic standards in higher education in the region, the council is coordinating the programme to develop the **Regional Quality Assurance Framework (IUCEA, 2010c)**

2.5. The African and Malagasy Council for Higher Education / Conseil Africain et Malgache pour l'Enseignement Supérieur (CAMES)

According to Materu (2007, pp. 38) CAMES is a semi-autonomous inter-governmental organization of Francophone African countries based in Burkina Faso. It was established in 1968 to promote equivalence of qualifications and awards, harmonize promotion and mobility of academic staff, and take responsibility for quality assurance. CAMES is also responsible for accreditation of higher education institutions- mostly new institutions- across member states. The council accredits both institutions and study programmes. It has been observed that due to the responsibility and power vested to the council, many member states have delayed to establish national quality assurance and accreditation systems by governments assuming the responsibility of quality assurance to the council, (Materu, 2007). However, the quality of higher education remains the issue of

concern for Francophone African countries as they have been revitalizing their quality assurance system and participating in international conference and workshops.

2.6. The Regional Centre for Health Evaluation and Accreditation of health institutions in Africa/ Centre Régional d'Evaluation en Santé et d'Accréditation des établissements sanitaires en Afrique (CRESAC).

The CRÉSAC is a regional organization that is geared towards strengthening Evaluation and Promotion of quality of health service institutions and health services in Africa, (CRESAC, 2010). It was established at the founding assembly of April 27, 2005 along with its related structures which are: Evaluation Unit of Health and Quality Assurance/UESAQ and the Regional Institute for Evaluation and Quality Assurance /IREAQ, (CRESAC, 2010). The CRÉSAC is supervised by the Ministries in charge of Health and Higher Education of Member States - Benin, Cameroon, Cote d'Ivoire, Gabon and Senegal，(CRESAC, 2010).

2.7. The African Council for Distance Education (ACDE)

The ACDE is a continental educational organization comprising African universities and other higher education institutions which are committed to expanding access to quality education and training through Open and Distance Education (ODE), (Hoosen, et al, 2009). The ACDE is currently in the process of developing open and distance learning (ODL) standards and establishing a continental Accreditation Agency for Distance Education in Africa. The ACDE-Quality Assurance and Accreditation Agency (QAAA) is an independent and project-driven unit within the ACDE, established to contribute to the development of an indigenous model of quality assurance and accreditation. The agency will therefore monitor, audit, accredit and advise on programmes with a view to playing an effective role in institutional quality assurance mechanism and processes (Hoosen et al, 2009).

2.8. The Southern Africa Development Community Technical Committee on Certification and Accreditation (SADC-TCCA).

The Southern African Development Community (SADC) is regional socio-economic integration of 15 southern African countries, (SADC, n.d). SADC developed the Protocol on Education and Training which emphasizes the importance of maintaining acceptable standards at all educational levels, thus calling for the implementation of quality management at higher education institutions. The SADC regional protocol on education has been ratified by all the SADC member countries. To reinforce the protocol, SADC has the Technical Committee on Certification and Accreditation (TCCA). The SADC-TCCA in 2006 initiated the process of establishing a regional qualifications framework known as the Southern African Development Community Qualifications Framework (SADCQF) and higher education is one of the focuses of the framework (Hoosen et al, 2009; The SADC, no date)

3. Conferences in Higher Education Accreditation and Quality Assurance in Africa

As the process towards harmonization of quality assurance systems in Africa, a number of regional and sub-regional conferences, workshops, forums and capacity building seminars have been organized in the last decade. Most of these assemblies have been initiated by continental level associations -AUC, AAU and AfriQAN - and regional university association such as IUCEA. Some of these meetings include:

- International Conference on Accreditation, Quality Assurance and Recognition of Qualifications in higher education in Africa- held in Kenya (2006) and Tanzania (2007), (Tagoe, 2008; UNESCO, 2007)
- IUCEA and AfriQAN Advocacy Meeting on Quality Assurance in East Africa held in Tanzania (June, 2010), (AfriQAN, 2010b)
- The distance education course on external quality assurance for higher education for English –speaking African countries (2006) and French-Speaking African Countries (2007) organized by International Institute for Educational Planning (IIEP)-UNESCO in partnership with Association of African Universities (AAU), (Michaela Martin, et al, 2006; IIEP, 2007)
- Distance learning course in quality assurance offered by AAU in partnership with AfriQAN, UNESCO, GIQAC, IIEP, Neil Butcher and Associates, and the South African Institute for Distance Education. The online course, both in English and French, was held between September and October, 2010. (AfriQAN, 2010b)
- Capacity Building Workshop for National Quality Assurance/Accreditation Agencies in Ghana (2009)[1] organized under the Quality Assurance Support Programme of the AAU in collaboration with World Bank and UNESCO, (AfriQAN, 2010b)
- AfriQAN Capacity Building Seminar, Forum and AfriQAN General Assembly held in Tanzania

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[1] Apart from providing a platform for sharing experiences, reinforcing regional harmonization and facilitating regional networking, the workshop created the basis for promoting the establishment of AfriQAN. Source: http://www.aau.org/?q=content/capacity-building-workshop-national-quality-assurance-accreditation-agencies

(November, 2010), (AfriQAN, 2010b)

- Forum on The Reactivity of Quality Assurance Agencies: the 11th Forum of International Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE) (The Namibia Qualification Authority, 2010)
- The Conference of Rectors, Vice Chancellors and Presidents of African Universities (COREVIP) to be held in May/June 2011 in Stellenbosch, South Africa, (AfriQAN, 2010b)

Moreover, Regional socio-economic integration /cooperation communities are also fostering quality assurance and regional recognition of academic standards and qualifications. For instance, Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) in 2006 held a meeting of the ad-hoc committee on the equivalence of certificates in West Africa, (Hoosen, et al). In the Southern African Development Community (SADC) Region, the community has the so called SADC Technical Committee on Certification and Accreditation (TCCA) (Hoosen et al, 2009; Materu, 2007: pp 39).

When looking at the themes of these conferences, quality assurance and accreditation of higher education has been dominating in most cases. Also the timing of these gathering –second half of the last decade- signifies how African countries are currently striving to harmonize their higher education system throughout the continent by having comparable academic standards. Harmonized education system is expected to increase intra-regional mobility of students, professionals, and information and intellectual resources.

4.   Discussion and Conclusion

Formal quality assurance and accreditation activities in higher education in Africa are a recent phenomenon that emerged from late 1980s, but the activity is rapidly surfacing. The documented decline in quality of higher education and proliferation of private higher education may explain the scenario (Materu, 2007). Some countries have already developed strong quality assurance and accreditation systems while others are still crafting. Succinctly, higher education sector in Africa have expanded tremendously in the last two decades than ever before. The public-private partnership and increased use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) in the provision of higher education has resulted for such expansion. With such expansion, quality control mechanism is an inevitable endeavor to separate authentic from fake and sub-standard higher education outcomes and qualifications in the market pool.

Despite of having national quality assurance and accreditation agencies, most countries have embarked to the development of cross-state quality assurance agencies, networks and general regional collaboration in matters related to quality assurance. As shown above, the last decade has been an era of international quality assurance and accreditation discourses in higher education in Africa and the entire world. Conferences in various forms involving various international participants from Africa and the rest of the World have been dominant. Most of the projects have either been sponsored or involving international organizations like World Bank, UNESCO and the Global Initiative for Quality Assurance Capacity (GIQAC). These organizations have been sponsoring studies to evaluate the status of quality assurance and accreditation in Africa, for instance that of Materu (2007) and many conferences as shown previously on this paper. These entire scenarios provide clues that, the current movements for cross-state –even national - quality assurance and accreditation movements are not free from international influences outside Africa. This can also be verified from the historical perspectives of the origin of the existing higher education system in Africa. As it originated from former colonial masters-mainly European countries - therefore, their education systems and movements are used as benchmarks for higher education in Africa. Although, African countries have tried their level best to contextualize their higher education system, still it is difficult to divorce it from Western hegemony.

However, regardless of whose interests are saved in the ever increasing cross-state organizations, government treaties and international conferences on higher education accreditation in Africa continent, they are likely to provide both private and public benefits; and positive externalities for societies involved. These movements signal the future realization of harmonized higher education in some regions and the Africa continent featured by comparable academic standards and qualifications that can ultimately facilitate mobility of students, human resources, intellectual and information resources. There is evidence of harmonization movements for higher education in the East Africa Community (EAC) that was promulgate by the East Africa Legislative Assembly in 2008 (IUCEA, 2010 d).

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