



THE AFRICA-EU PARTNERSHIP
LE PARTENARIAT AFRIQUE-UE



Regional case study

Inter-University Council of East Africa
(IUCEA)

IQA-4-Africa

From Pan-African Policy to Practice

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1. INTRODUCTION

The Quality Assurance of higher education in East Africa is one of the mandates of the Inter-University Council for East Africa (IUCEA). IUCEA is a strategic institution of the East African Community (EAC) responsible for coordinating the development of higher education and research in the region. The mission of IUCEA focuses on the promotion of strategic and sustainable development of strong higher education systems and research for supporting East Africa's socio-economic development and regional integration agenda.

Since mid-1980s, East Africa has experienced an expansion of tertiary education systems that was prompted on one hand by the liberalization of higher education delivery by the countries in the region as a result of changes of their respective socio-economic policies. This liberalization resulted into a continuous increase in the number of private higher learning institutions leading to an exponential student enrolment amidst scarce public financial, human, and educational resources hence, in some cases, compromising the quality of education. Liberalisation together with the expansion of cross-border education made it necessary to put in place mechanisms to control and harmonise the quality of higher education at national and regional levels.

In order to ensure that such expansion of higher education did not compromise the quality of the education provided, higher education stakeholders deemed it necessary to develop a regional quality assurance system for higher education. The urge to develop the quality assurance system was also prompted by the need to have competent and adequate human resources required to drive the socio-economic development of East Africa and the desire to promote student and graduate mobility as envisioned in the EAC Common Market Protocol.

IUCEA, as the strategic institution responsible for higher education in the region, embarked on an initiative to develop a harmonised regional quality assurance system for higher education in East Africa. In 2006, IUCEA in collaboration with the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD); the Germany Rectors' Conference (HRK) in the frame of their joint Higher Education Management Support Programme, referred to as "Dialogue on Innovative Higher Education Strategies (DIES)," started a process to develop the needed regional capacity for the quality assurance system. The collaboration also involved National Commissions and Councils for Higher Education in the EAC Partner States. Consequently, a number of Quality Assurance meetings and workshops took place at country and regional levels in a bid to map out a strategy on how to come up with tools that would be a guide towards developing quality assurance systems and culture in universities in the East African Partner States. The aim was to ensure that all performance indicators and quality benchmarks are agreed upon and owned by all end-user institutions.

The successful development and operationalisation of the East African Quality assurance framework and subsequently the East African Qualifications Framework for Higher Education resulted into the Declaration of the EAC as the Common Higher Education Area in May 2017 by the Summit of the East African Community Heads of State.

The East African Quality Assurance System

The East African Quality Assurance system has been adopted and mainstreamed into the national systems through the Commissions/Councils for Higher/University Education in the EAC Partner States and into quality assurance systems of higher education institutions. Thus,

regional quality assurance policy frameworks, principles and guidelines, quality assurance tools, benchmarks for selected academic programmes have been developed and implemented in the EAC Partner States. These instruments guide the implementation and sustainability of the regional quality assurance system.

2. ACHIEVEMENTS

A. DEVELOPMENT OF STANDARDS AND GUIDELINES

a) Principles and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in Higher Education in East Africa

These principles and Guidelines were developed in order to guide and harmonize quality assurance processes and practices. They provide a common frame of reference that assists and guides higher education institutions and National Commissions/Councils for Higher/University Education in developing and practicing a common quality assurance culture (IUCEA, 2014).

b) Standards and Guidelines for Postgraduate Studies

In the recent past, universities in the East African region have witnessed unprecedented growth in graduate student enrolment that was hampered by, among others, the shortage of experienced supervisors and mentors. This therefore prompted an urgent need to develop standards and guidelines for postgraduate programmes to enhance the quality of postgraduate studies in the region and also to harmonise good practices in the supervision of postgraduate studies (IUCEA, 2018).

c) Quality Assurance Guidelines on Disability and Special Needs

The Guidelines have been developed as a response to the growing need to provide adapted learning environments for students and staff with Disabilities (SWD) in higher education institutions in East Africa (IUCEA, 2017).

B. THE HANDBOOK FOR QUALITY ASSURANCE – ROADMAP TO QUALITY

This roadmap was developed in order to provide a common understanding of the concept of quality and quality assurance as applied to higher education, and to use common quality assurance approaches by facilitating the region to “talk the same language” in quality and quality assurance in higher education. The Handbook, which was developed in 2007 and subsequently revised in 2015, consists of 5 volumes:

- Revised and combined Volume 1&2 gives Guidelines for Internal and External programme assessment, (IUCEA, 2015);
- Volume 3 consists of guidelines for self-assessment at institutional level (IUCEA, 2010);
- Volume 4 provides guidelines for the implementation of a total quality assurance system (IUCEA, 2010); and
- Volume 5 covers Principles, Practices and Management of External Quality Assurance in East Africa (IUCEA, 2016).

C. BENCHMARKS FOR ACADEMIC PROGRAMMES

The benchmarks provide a frame of reference for universities when developing and reviewing academic programmes and curricula in order to ensure that the programmes and curricula in the region are harmonised. They are also meant to inform the labour market and other stakeholders on what the graduates are able to do after completion of their studies and also National Commissions/Councils for Higher/University Education in the EAC Partner States to assess the quality of the related academic programmes in the process of accreditation. Furthermore, they also enhance regionalisation of the labour market, which is one of the goals of EAC as a common market block. So far the following benchmarks have been developed: Business related Studies (IUCEA, 2013), Computer Science, and Information Technology (IUCEA, 2015), Education (IUCEA, 2017), Medicine and Dentistry (IUCEA, 2017), Agriculture and Engineering (IUCEA, 2017). The benchmarks for Undergraduate and Postgraduate programmes (MSc and PhD) in Mathematics were also developed. Benchmarks of the subject areas will continue to be developed progressively.

D. CAPACITY BUILDING

a) Capacity Building for QA practitioners

From 2008 to 2015, IUCEA in collaboration with the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) and the German Rectors Conference (HRK) carried out capacity building training of quality assurance coordinators in higher education institutions and the National Commissions/Councils for Higher/University. The trainings were aimed at providing knowledge and capacity to the quality assurance practitioners to undertake quality assurance functions; in their respective institutions; in a sustainable manner based on the regional quality assurance system. So far, more than 90 quality assurance coordinators have been trained in four cohorts of 2007/2008, 2009/2010, 2012/2013 and 2016/2017.

The process also involved training of peer reviewers for external programme evaluation. In that regard, more than 80 peer review experts have been trained and participated in the evaluation of more than 60 academic programmes in all the EAC Partner States.

In order to make the quality assurance capacity building initiative structured and sustainable, IUCEA has developed training modules that will be used by trainers and trainees in East Africa. Furthermore, IUCEA has developed a regional pool of quality assurance experts in internal quality assurance of programmes and institutions from the previously trained staff from the National Commissions/Councils for Higher/University Education and the higher education institutions. These are now facilitating the quality assurance capacity building process for the region.

b) Capacity Building on Quality Supervision of Postgraduate Students

IUCEA initiated the capacity building on Quality supervision of postgraduate studies in order to enhance the quality of supervision of postgraduate students at both masters and doctoral levels. The purpose is to overcome the challenges of the limited number of qualified senior university lecturers and researchers to meet the demands for the ever expanding postgraduate and mentorship programs which has had a negative impact on the universities' capacity to sustainably educate the next generation of university lecturers and researchers. So far 98 postgraduate supervisors were trained.

c) IUCEA Higher Education Leadership training (IUCEA-HELP)

The last two decades were characterised by an increase in the number of universities and university colleges caused by the ever-increasing demand for higher education. However, the governance of these institutions, though important for delivering quality education, has always not been taken into consideration. It has been the practice that leaders of universities are simply extracted from lecture rooms or research institutions to administration without having been trained on how to manage higher education institutions. The absence of arrangements and/or requirements for such persons to undertake 'in-service' training or induction once appointed, helps perpetuate poor leadership and management of the institutions.

Considering this challenge, IUCEA developed a regional capacity building programme for individuals in leadership and management of universities to strengthen leadership and management competencies of university managers in East Africa by equipping them with the required basic knowledge and tools to effectively manage these institutions in order to fully realize their potential in promoting social and economic development.

E. EAST AFRICAN HIGHER EDUCATION QUALITY ASSURANCE NETWORK

One of the sustainability strategies of the regional quality assurance system in East Africa was the establishment of an East African Higher Education Quality Assurance Network, which was formed in 2011. The aim of the Network is to provide an avenue for continuous knowledge and experiences sharing and networking among quality assurance practitioners in East Africa. Currently, the Network has more than 150 members from all the EAC Partner States, who meet annually in a forum where they share experiences in quality assurance practices in their institutions, and undergo training on current global trend in quality assurance and higher education management systems in general. The forum also brings together policy and decision makers in higher education to dialogue on strategic issues geared towards driving change management issues and strategic planning and management of higher education in the region and benchmarking from global dynamic trends in higher education.

3. CHALLENGES

At the beginning, the development of a harmonised regional quality assurance system for higher education in East Africa faced resistance from university leaders who were of the view that they already had quality education and did not need any quality assurance system. However, with time they came to realise the importance of having the structured quality assurance systems in their institutions as entailed in per the regional quality assurance system.

Another challenge is the inadequate funding of quality assurance activities at higher learning institutions level that results in incomplete planned quality assurance activities and this may hamper the quality of education.

The high attrition rate of quality assurance officers/directors at institution level is another big challenge. This calls for continuous capacity building in quality assurance, yet financial resources are not enough to do so.

4. CONCLUSION

The process of establishing and implementing the Higher Education regional quality assurance system is continuous, complex and requires a significant amount of time and resources to be achieved.

Its success and effectiveness depend on full support by the universities, National Councils/Commissions for Higher Education and the commitment and support of the East African Community Partner States.

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