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Exploring a Regional Meta-Approach to Harmonize Quality Assurance and Accreditation for Enhancing the Effectiveness of Public-Private Higher Education Institution Initiatives in Africa

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Abstract

The issue of quality assurance, with a focus on accreditation, has lately been put on the policy agenda in African higher education institutions' management and academic affairs. Following the initial declaration of harmonization of African Higher Education Ministers in Johannesburg in 2007, quality assurance as a topic has been at the forefront of inspired reform steps in Africa. The quality question has also gradually received more attention in the light of the rapid expansion of-especially private-African higher education institutions. This article investigates the potential of a new approach to accreditation, drawing on existing models from the United States, the European Union and the United Kingdom in particular, as well as regional initiatives from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the South African Development Community (SADC) and the African Union (AU)'s Pan African University (PAU) harmonization project. It will map the so-far common international models before grouping, and, in a second step, combining them with EU-African programs and the PAU's higher education cooperation kick-off as institutional joint ventures to arrive at a regional meta-approach to accreditation as a starting point for a concept featuring distinctly African elements to be developed.

The article illustrates the accomplishments of institutional initiatives and regional cooperation programs, employing both qualitative and quantitative data. The first part of the analysis features the European partnership programs TEMPUS and ERASMUS which involve higher education institution partners in projects aiming at improving the quality of education with tangible outcomes relevant for better institutional governance, quality assurance of academic programs and preparation of graduates for employment at national and regional level. Its South Mediterranean cooperation program will serve as a case study. Further, the example of Maghreb countries, which have strengthened internal quality assurance by developing a regional standard of institutional assessment, AQI-UMED, alongside their own accreditation agency, is introduced as another influence for an innovative approach. In the following, the American Accreditation Board (ABET) is portrayed as a key worldwide accreditor for engineering programs, frequently consulted by African public and private universities, in the absence of program accreditation agencies in the region and the entire continent. Having thereby scanned and linked the five regions' potential, the article concludes with the characteristics of a comprehensive reflection covering the needs and specificity of each higher education regional system, to start a discussion on an approach considering an African identity in accreditation.

Keywords: Higher Education, Quality Assurance, Accreditation, Regional Cooperation, Meta Approach

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Context and Background

In the context of internationalization, defined as “the policies and practices undertaken by academic systems and institutions-and even individuals-to cope with the global academic environment” (Altbach & Knight, 2007, p.290), it is increasingly becoming crucial for higher education institutions to take measures to adapt to this supra-regional environment. Likewise, tools resulting from strategic decisions within African institutions have been put in place and are now increasingly subject to evaluation according to quality standards at all levels.

Following the initial declaration of harmonization of African Higher Education Ministers in Johannesburg in 2007, quality assurance as a topic has been at the forefront of reform steps in African higher education. The quality question has also received increasingly more attention in the light of the rapid expansion of – especially private - African higher education institutions (Teferra, 2008). Already in 2005, the Tarragona Declaration of Mediterranean countries with 33 participating universities intended to create a so-called Euro-Mediterranean Area of Higher Education and Research(Mediterranean University Forum, European Commission Education and Culture, 2005). Around the same time, a similar regional initiative was founded, the Libreville Declaration of the Economic and Monetary Community of Central Africa (CEMAC)(Economic and Monetary Community of Central Africa, 2005).

On the Continent-level, both the African Union, in its harmonization strategy, and the African Association of Universities (AAU), supported by UNESCO and the World Bank, have been aiming at developing a quality assurance system, for which the launch of an African Quality Assurance Network (AfriQAN) in 2009 marked an important milestone (Huisman, Adelman, Hsieh, Shams, & Wilkins, 2012). In 2014, a reviewed version of the 1981 Arusha Convention was then signed by more than a third of the 41 participating African countries(United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2014), preceded by the Regional Conference on Higher Education in 2008 as preparatory step for the 2009 UNESCO World Conference on Higher Education (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2009).

In autumn 2016, the 8th International Conference on Quality Assurance in Higher Education was held. Considered “the most important African platform for the discussion of quality assurance in higher education”, it dealt with the significance of pan-African cooperation to improving the quality of higher education across the continent(European Commission, 2016). It is supported and was attended by the main regional and supra-regional stakeholders in African higher education, namely the Association of African Universities (AAU), the Inter-University Council for East Africa (IUCEA), the Conseil africain et malgache pour l’enseignement superieur (CAMES), and the Southern African Regional University Association (SARUA) plus the African Union Commission (AUC). It provided a forum for AfriQAN and the Advisory Board of the Harmonization of African Higher Education Quality Assurance and Accreditation Initiative annual meetings as well as a symposium of Rectors, Vice-Chancellors and Presidents of Universities (Global University Network for Innovation (GUNi)-Africa, African Quality Assurance Network (AfriQAN) and the Association of African Universities, 2016).

As any evaluation in a higher education setting concerns teaching and learning for degrees, research and management as well as administration (Schwarz & Westerheijden, 2005a),

quality assurance necessarily takes into account all three areas. As will be shown, this process is inherently external to the institution.

The Issue of Quality for Private Higher Education Institutions

Based on a recent appeal for more diversification in African higher education systems, more adaption to private sector-specific skills and better cost-intensive technical facilities from an economic perspective, it has been suggested that private education providers may “fill this void, leaving the government with duties of quality control and oversight” (African Economic Platform, 2016, p.3). Given the fact that—across all regions in Africa—private universities clearly outnumber or at least equal public institutions (Mashininga, 2012; United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)-International Institute for Educational Planning (IIEP), Association of African Universities (AAU), Association for the Development of Education in Africa, 2006) in a few states, including some of the most populous, their role in any African regional higher education landscape must not be underestimated and their profile must therefore be taken into account with regards to quality assurance aspects, too.

In this context, accountability of a variety of new institutions and initiatives such as distance/open learning offers, offshore foreign campuses, franchises - many of them private and thus for-profit-has become a key issue to which accreditation provides an answer (Wangenge-Ouma & Langa, 2011). In some African countries, quality monitoring and accreditation is used only in private higher education institutions (Université Libre du Burkina, 2017). The political dimension of this state of affairs may be described as follows: “External accountability measures are about power, legitimacy, and trust” as “attempts by policy makers and higher education institutions’ significant publics to exercise control over higher education” (Wangenge-Ouma & Langa, 2011). Not least, the Bologna-based LMD system implementation comes with new requirements regarding quality assurance, too (Benstaali & Mohieldin, 2011).

In the absence of accreditation organisms in Africa, North African higher education systems are preparing for the development of national quality assurance agencies and accreditation boards for the evaluation of higher education institutions. On the African continent, some higher education institutions took the initiative to look for international organisms to get their engineering programs accredited. Twenty-two engineering programs provided in some African higher education institutions are accredited by the American Accreditation Board for Engineering and Technology (ABET), a non-governmental accrediting agency for programs in applied science, computing, engineering and engineering technology. To date, ABET has accredited over 3,700 programs at more than 750 colleges and universities in 30 countries worldwide. Approximately 85,000 students graduated from ABET-accredited programs each year, and millions of graduates have received degrees from ABET-accredited programs since 1932 (Accreditation Board for Engineering and Technology, 2017).

Most of ABET engineering programs offered at African universities are in Computer science, Engineering, Electrical and Control, Electronics and Communications, Industrial and Management, Marine, Mechanical, Construction and Building, and Information Systems. Al Akhawayn University in Morocco and the University of Pretoria in South Africa have one accredited program each in Computer Science and Information Systems respectively. The other courses are offered at three Egyptian higher education institutions: the Arab Academy

for Science and Technology and Maritime Transport (Alexandria - Abu Kir, nine programs), the Arab Academy for Science and Technology and Maritime Transport (Cairo, six programs) and the American University in Cairo (five programs).

Despite these commendable initiatives, they stay insignificant compared to other parts of the world where the number of accredited programs is annually increasing. The MENA region is the most attracted part of the world by looking to ABET to improve the quality of its engineering programs provision (Figure 1). Unfortunately, Africa is lagging behind with only twenty engineering programs involving only four universities.

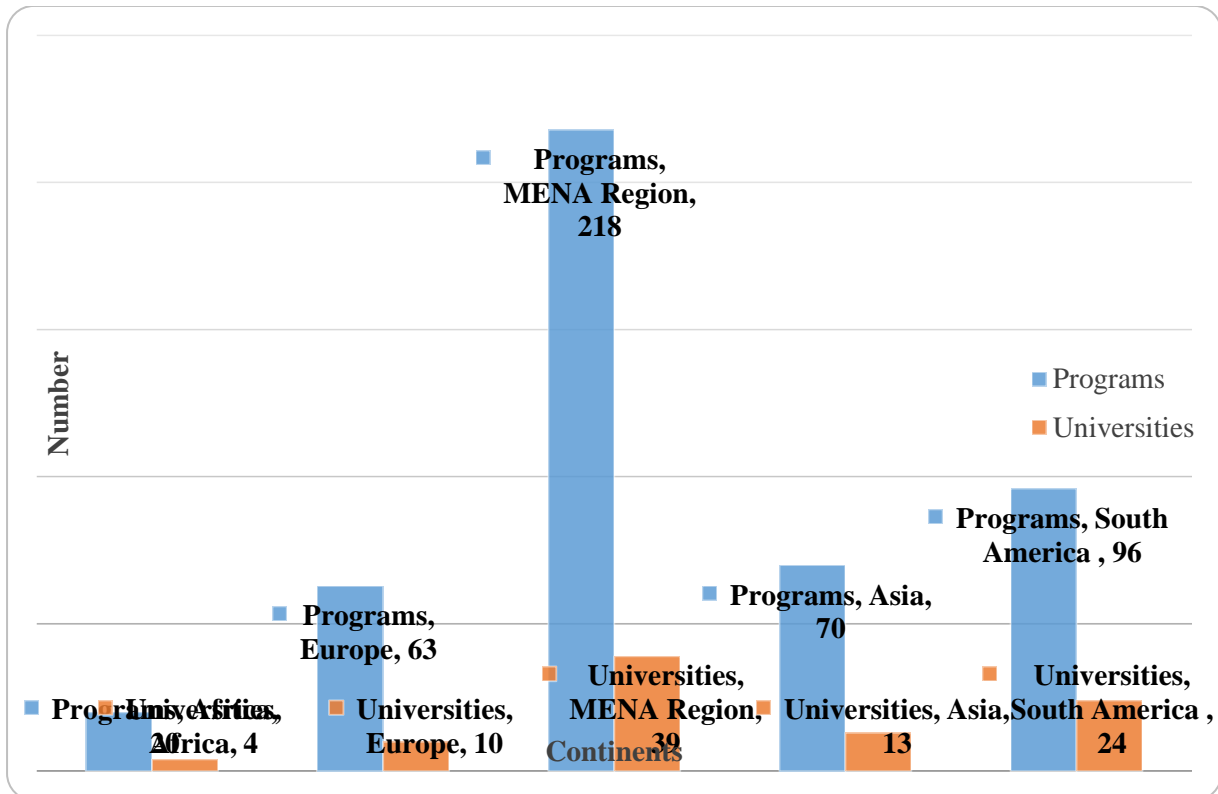


Figure 1: Number of ABET Accredited Programs and Universities involved

Existing internationally common Quality Assurance Models

A general overview of concepts in the form of a summary with key elements and cornerstones are outlined while details necessary for a deeper and more comprehensive analysis of the different regional systems are beyond the scope of this article and will need to be addressed separately.

Since the early 2000, higher education institutions in Europe have had to react to external developments, most notably the Bologna Process, which, with its Continent-wide streamlining efforts, has brought about the biggest upheaval of the sector to date. Hence, the process is driven by external factors rather than internal quality management on institutional level (Schwarz & Westerheijden, 2005a). Within this framework, (quasi-) non-governmental institutions, have since taken over the process from formerly more or less direct state control (ibid). Those are defined as “institutions at the supra-institutional level that manage a quality assurance process of higher education institutions, degree types and/or programs that end in a formal summary judgment that leads to formal approval regarding the respective institution, degree type and/or programme” (Schwarz & Westerheijden, 2005b, p.2). In

Europe, accreditation has been manifesting itself as the method of evaluation in higher education (Stensaker, 2011). This most straightforward form of evaluation is still largely nation-state-based as shown in a compilation of 20 European country practices in the field, due to the fact that the vast majority of national systems is publicly-financed (Schwarz & Westerheijden, 2005a).

Within the EU, the UK plays a special role – which, not least, will also be manifested by the now decided, so-called Brexit with the United Kingdom leaving the European Union. In 1997, with the establishment of the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAAHE), the focus was shifted to standards of academic achievements and research quality assessment, by means of the three components Quality Audits, Teaching Quality Assessment and Research Assessment Exercise in 69 units in total (Stanley & Patrick, 1998). Out of these, quality assessments address one subject rather than the quality audits where the whole institution is concerned. It is conducted separately in the parts of the United Kingdom: England, Northern Ireland, Wales and Scotland, whereby the latter system's distinctness provides an additional challenge for a national-scale approach (ibid). To complement, external examiners are supposed to ensure the comparability of degrees in the same subject awarded by different institutions, however, the growth and diversity of UK higher education institutions makes this task increasingly difficult to achieve (ibid).

Prevailing in the US are the following major processes: Regional Accreditation/Specialized Accreditation, Performance Indicator Systems and Academic Program Review; in addition, the US system includes the elements Student Outcomes Assessment, Study of Research-Doctorate Programs, and Publisher's Rankings (Stanley & Patrick, 1998). Accreditation, consisting of extensive self-study, drawing on voluntary peer review and typically granted for 10 years, is provided by six regional accreditation associations and several national associations for a particular type of institutions, e.g. faith-based, which are also the basis for federal-level funding eligibility (ibid).

African Quality Assurance Initiatives

In January 2016, Consortium members of the Harmonization of African Higher Education Quality Assurance and Accreditation (HAQAA), as an important tool in the Pan-African Quality Assurance and Accreditation Framework to come, met to discuss activities for a “revitalized, attractive and globally competitive African higher education space through enhanced intra-African collaboration”, which is also unique as it takes a “truly continental approach, as opposed to working bilaterally with certain African countries and regions” (Makoni, 2016). The HAQAA -together with another new program, the Benchmarking initiative, supported by a Chinese university which first started global ranking-are supposed to overcome past difficulties in African higher education quality assurance efforts such as dependency on donor funding, lack of coordination and lack of comprehensive stakeholder involvement by their innovative approaches which places emphasis of the African particularity of the system or model and collect and compile institutional data, respectively (Mohamedbhai, 2016).

In addition to AfriQAN mentioned above, another important element is the African Quality Rating Mechanism (AQRM) as an element of the AU strategy for harmonizing higher education, initially implemented in 32 African universities in 2010. Its objective is to strengthen self-assessment according to set criteria to enhance international competitiveness

as a bottom-up process in the context of global ranking systems favoring research outputs over other strengths of institutions, therefore as a tendency disadvantaging African institutions (Woldegiorgis, 2017). In particular, it highlights the indication for future improvement which is also supposed to make up a management cycle on the institutional level (ibid).

Intergovernmental Quality Assurance Consortia: ECOWAS, SADC, AARU

For the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), consisting of sixteen countries in the region, Senegal is the first one to have established a quality assurance agency (2013). Quality assurance and accreditation systems are seen as “a possible solution to sustainably improve the quality of higher education, and to facilitate both the recognition of qualifications and the student mobility within the region” (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)-International Institute for Educational Planning, 2013).

The Southern African Development Community (SADC) embeds a Technical Committee on Certification and Accreditation which, during a meeting in April 2017, presented the launch of the SADC Qualification Verification Network (SADCQVN). Besides the set-up of regional quality assurance systems, including a SADC Credit Accumulation and Transfer System, the implementation of a public relations and communications strategy was discussed and it was agreed on a timely submission of qualification verification statistics by member states (Southern African Development Community, 2017).

The Association of Arab Universities (AARU) was founded in 1964 and presently includes 280 universities in Arab League member countries. Its headquarters are in Amman, Jordan and it comprises 22 faculty societies and four dedicated councils, one of them on Quality Assurance and Accreditation, whose mission is “to assist Arab Universities to improve higher education quality, through disseminating of quality culture, preparing QA manuals, providing advice and training to support the QA and Accreditation processes of institutions and programmes” (Association of Arab Universities, 2017).

The North African Approach to Quality Assurance and Institutional Assessment

Several national higher education systems and institutions from different sub regions of Africa undertook initiatives to improve the quality of higher education on the continent, provide quality educational programs and prepare national quality assurance and accreditation agencies. Initiatives were local or facilitated by the involvement in partnership programs funded by the European Commission. Program partnerships with the European Union such as the Tempus program - initially limited to European universities - were extended to South Mediterranean countries involving Maghreb and Middle East countries in 2002.

In 2002, the European Commission decided—in common agreement—to include ten South Mediterranean neighboring countries in partnership programs such as Tempus and Erasmus Mundus. Those involved five North African countries -Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, Libya and Egypt- in partnership projects with European universities. Program objectives were to strengthen quality assurance in higher education institutions, update curricula, create links with the socioeconomic sector and enhance the mobility of students and staff between partner institutions (Benstaali, 2014). They were structured under three main pillars: curricular

reform, governance reform and higher education and society. Tempus projects were funded based on the criterion that they should meet either national, regional or both priorities. A total of 56 partnership projects involved three Maghreb countries (see Figure 2) and aimed to improve quality education in higher education (ibid).

The curricular reform as an inherent element focuses on the modernization of curricula in academic disciplines identified as priorities by partner countries, using the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS), the three-tier LMD cycle system and the recognition of degrees. The reform was a popular axis of development attracting various higher education institutions from either side of the Mediterranean to work on improving and proposing new Bachelor and Master curricula (Benstaali, 2014).

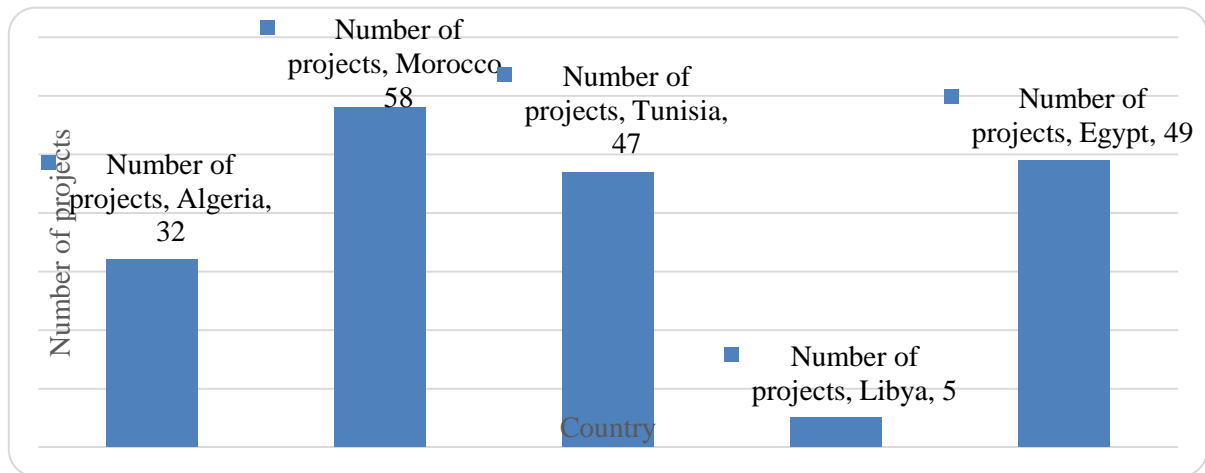


Figure 2: Number of projects per participating country during the TEMPUS IV

The second priority was a governance reform of institutions comprising university management and services for students, introduction of quality assurance, institutional and financial autonomy and accountability, equal and transparent access to higher education and development of international relations. Those interventions were targeted at improving the governance of higher education institutions and systems as structural measures answering national priorities of higher education systems and involving the ministry. They were focusing on developing tools to improve the management of institutions such as: System of Information and Numerical Governance of the Algerian Higher Institutions in the LMD, Numerical Governance of Moroccan Universities and Strengthening governance in Moroccan universities through the implementation of the Moroccan Code of Good Governance Practices (Benstaali, 2014).

The third axis, “Higher Education and Society” highlighted the development of partnerships with enterprises, the so-called knowledge triangle education-research-innovation, and training courses for public services (ministries, regional/local authorities). Existing links between higher education institutions and external socioeconomic partners were strengthened by involving them in relevant training, among others: Public Management; strengthening links with the socio-economic sector; Strategic communication plan development; Knowledge transfer and innovation and Institutional internationalization. New structures were installed through sponsoring, thereby creating offices inside university campuses supposed to enhance university-enterprise partnerships and facilitate employment for graduates. They also assisted in the development of training courses for the socioeconomic sector (Benstaali, 2014).

Quality assurance in the African higher education landscape so far has been predominantly initiated through cooperation programs funded by the European Commission, involving European universities as well as universities from the South Mediterranean countries. Several projects were entirely dedicated to quality assurance during the Tempus program, among others:

- Quality Assurance and Certification Procedures in the Higher Education System of Tunisia: The objective was to develop criteria and methods of quality assurance which comply with both the various national standards for quality assurance systems in the EU, and the European Qualifications Framework (National Erasmus + Office of Tunisia, 2010).
- Strengthening of institutional capacity in Arab Universities whose specific objective is the development of sustainable Quality Culture and Capacity Building in Quality Assurance within selected Arab Universities (AUs) involving universities from Morocco and Egypt and five QA and Accreditation agencies (2010) (European Commission. Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency, 2008).
- Fostering quality assurance culture at Libyan universities (FOCUS): The project had the objective to support the modernization agenda of Libyan universities through the promotion of a quality assurance culture (International Project Management Office, University of Alicante, 2017).
- Strengthening the Internal Quality Assurance in Universities of the Mediterranean Algeria - Morocco and Tunisia (AQI-UMED). The project resulted in the development of the AQI-UMED standard for institutional quality assessment. It consists of four main domains: “Education”, “Research”, “Governance”, and “Life at University”, allowing institutions to carry out self-assessments in the respective categories. It was used as a reference evaluation tool for the development of a national standard for internal quality assurance assessment (Algeria) (European Commission. TEMPUS, 2011).

Harmonization of Academic Programs

Tuning projects involve large-scale partnerships of higher education institutions, varying from 30 to 120 per project. Tuning Middle East and North Africa (T-MEDA) is a Tempus project with the objective to build a framework of comparable, compatible and transparent programs of studies in the following five subject areas: Law and Good Governance including Human Rights; Healthcare and Nursing; Construction Trades, Engineering and Architecture; Tourism (Tuning Middle East and North Africa, 2017).

The project is designed to facilitate the modernization of higher education by applying the Tuning methodology for the development of degree programs in partner universities and the evolution of the following areas: curricula design and delivery, employability of graduates, recognition of the degree programs, quality of higher education, staff training. The consortium is composed of 33 universities: eight European universities, 11 universities from the Maghreb region and 14 from the Middle East (ibid).

Towards a Continental Approach to African Quality Assurance and Accreditation

In a recent study testing the application of a business total quality management (TQM) system to higher education, it has been found that quality systems are not often socially

accepted, that they neither follow a clear philosophy and theory nor show the productivity of institutions, are less progressive, have low harmonies and are unrealistically publicized (Mehralizadeh & Safaeemoghaddam, 2010). This fact is the basis of a new approach towards a distinctly African system which takes into account elements of African identity in higher education, a concept which was introduced to an international audience in the beginning of the 2000s (cf. Seepe, 2004). Interesting initiatives financed by the AU and EU are implemented at the continental level to ensure quality assurance of teaching and degree programs by the involvement of universities in the five African regions.

Pan-African University (PAU)

The PAU is a continental initiative of the AUC to revitalize higher education and research in Africa. It aims to exemplify excellence, nurturing quality, enhance the attractiveness and global competitiveness of African higher education and research and establish African Universities at the core of Africa's development. Five thematic institutes established Master and Ph.D. programs and engage in collaborative and development-oriented research programs. They will work with centers in other African regions while cooperating closely with the public and private sector and civil society. Currently, the four existing institutes of the PAU are hosted in different regions of Africa and are supported by the so-called Key Thematic Partners—for example, Germany for the PAU Institute of Water and Energy Sciences (including Climate Change) (PAUWES) at the Abou Bakr Belkaid University of Tlemcen in Algeria. PAUWES is supposed to tackle challenges in the Energy and Water sector as stipulated by the African Union Agenda 2063 like the other Institutes in their respective fields: the PAU Institute for Basic Sciences, Technology and Innovation (PAUSTI) in Kenya, the PAU Institute for Life and Earth Sciences (PAULESI) in Nigeria, the PAU Institute for Governance, Humanities and Social Sciences (PAUGHSS) in Cameroon and, yet to be established, the PAU Institute for Space Sciences (PAUSS) in South Africa. In addition, there will be satellite centers connected to the five main hubs in the long term (African Union Commission, 2017).

Tuning Africa

Tuning Africa is one of the major joint initiatives of the African Union and the European Union which contributes to the harmonization of African higher education. The objective of the project is to contribute and support the harmonization of higher education programs, aiming at a globally competitive African higher education space through an enhanced intra-African collaboration. It is a network of African scholars who discuss, design and elaborate learning instruments and share results. They work around a single discipline or theme proposing clear aims, objectives and learning outcomes in order to design degree profiles which cover generic and subject-specific competences. They focus on eight subject areas: Medicine, Teacher education, Agricultural sciences, Mechanical engineering, Civil engineering, Economics, Applied geology and Higher education management, assisting each other in developing curricula that are tailored to the needs expressed by local markets and society (Tuning Africa, 2017).

The number of partner universities doubled from 60 to 12 out of which five private universities from phase I to phase II, representing the five sub-regions of Africa with their great linguistic (French, English, Arabic and Portuguese) and cultural diversity. The Tuning Africa network of communities of academic experts elaborated learning instruments and

shared results to expand higher education institutions clusters in more than 40 African countries. As part of this on-going initiative, 18 generic competences, applicable to any degree, have been proposed (ibid).

Intra-Africa Academic Mobility Scheme

The Intra-Africa Academic Mobility Scheme is an instrument whose objective is to support higher education cooperation in improving skills and competences of students and staff through enhanced mobility between African countries. It aims to contribute to the enhancement of the quality of higher education through the promotion of internationalization and harmonization of programs and curricula within participating institutions. Furthermore, it enables students, academics and staff to benefit linguistically, culturally and professionally from the experience gained in the context of mobility to another African country. The results of the 1st Call for Proposals allocate funds to seven selected projects covering 48 higher education institutions from all regions of Africa where each project includes at least six higher education institutions from three different regions of Africa (European Commission. Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency, 2017).

Conclusion

To conclude, as of today, there are several ongoing initiatives with significant achievements in terms of quality assurance and accreditation in Africa. The overview of practices currently implemented and programs existing on the continent, however, show that those are rather unconcentrated overall and partly or wholly depend on funding from outside Africa, either in the form of bilateral or multilateral programs as defacto hybrid systems or in the form of financial assistance for conferences and meetings. Consequently, despite continent-wide actions involving all parts of Africa, in particular the PAU, Tuning Africa and the Intra-Africa mobility scheme discussed, there is no end product as a corresponding African accreditation initiative which would adequately reflect a cultural identity such as multi-culturally and diversity in higher education. With regards to programs proposed, global issues with an immediate as well as long-term effect on Africa, such as global warming and climate change, are still underrepresented.

African systems see themselves increasingly under pressure as there is neither feedback nor a sufficiently recognized African contribution internationally. African countries may presently be viewed as observers rather than active members in the quality assurance and accreditation process and development. Nevertheless, combining featured characteristics and existing best practices should serve as a starting point towards a concept of an African accreditation system as a meta approach. Beyond scrutinizing the commonly referred to Anglophone models, the first step towards increased contribution may constitute in learning from the European Bologna Process as a reflection of how the harmonization of extremely different national systems including languages—for example, streamlining France, Germany, Italy and the Netherlands—could be implemented, without simply adopting copying to a larger extent.

In this context, a meta approach is proposed, which should incorporate the uniqueness, realities, policies and specific agenda of the African continent while taking into account compatibility with an international framework. As opposed to the lengthy and very complex Bologna Process, an African harmonization initiative is likely to be more straightforward as there are few inter-state conflicts and as various economic regions are already

institutionalized so activities and policies can build on those organizations and structures, e.g. ECOWAS for the West African region. Likewise, North Africa, which features a blend of French and Arabic higher education systems, may negotiate and identify synergies with other regions.

In order to achieve the objective of this meta approach enhancing African-specific, innovative harmonization, an agency should be created which would be charged with overall coordination of any streamlining activities such as agenda, plans, roadmaps, structures, timelines and - equally important - public, non-governmental organization and International institution consultation processes in the form of summits and corresponding papers and policy briefs with new terms of accreditation. As a result, the authors propose the project of conceptualizing this agency and welcome any expressions of interest.

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