



BENCHMARKING CURRICULUM HARMONIZATION IN EAST AFRICA'S COMMON HIGHER EDUCATION AREA: LESSONS FROM REGIONAL POLICY AND PRACTICE

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ABSTRACT

The Common Higher Education Area (CHEA) in East Africa is a strategic initiative aimed at promoting regional integration, labour mobility, and socio-economic development through harmonized higher education systems. Despite the existence of regional frameworks and policies, including those developed by the Inter-University Council for East Africa (IUCEA), considerable variations persist in curriculum design, programme structures, credit systems, and quality assurance practices across universities in the region. This study reviews scholarly literature, regional policy documents, institutional publications, and selected grey literature published between 2015 and 2025 to examine the progress, best practices, and challenges of curriculum harmonization within East Africa. The review focuses on five key thematic areas: harmonization of learning outcomes, credit accumulation and transfer systems, joint academic programmes, regional qualifications frameworks, and quality assurance mechanisms. The findings indicate that while significant policy frameworks have been established to facilitate regional integration, their implementation remains uneven due to institutional, regulatory, and resource-related constraints. The study provides a benchmark for university leaders, policymakers, and quality assurance practitioners by identifying best practices and highlighting strategies for strengthening curriculum harmonization to advance the aspirations of East Africa's Common Higher Education Area.

KEYWORDS: Common Higher Education Area, curriculum harmonization, credit transfer, quality assurance, East Africa, higher education, student mobility.

1. INTRODUCTION

Background

A Common Higher Education Area in East Africa has been argued to be the vision of the region in its wider socio-economic transformation and integration. Firmly rooted in the East African Community (EAC) processes of harmonizing higher education, the CHEA aims to enable the mobility of students and labor across borders through the harmonization of qualifications and equity of access to education opportunities (EAC Secretariat, 2020). To achieve this vision it is important that the curriculum be harmonised, which will ensure that curricula in member states are similar, transferable and recognisable.

In the past 20 years, however, the region has experienced a process of coordination, such as the Inter-University Council for East Africa (IUCEA) and the East African Quality Assurance Network (EAQAN), which have supported coordinated harmonization of programme structures, quality assurance and the adoption of credit transfer mechanisms. However, curriculum heterogeneity is still a continuing issue. The duration of study, weight of credit, grading and articulation of learning outcomes varies uniformly across core programs (Materu, 2007; IUCEA, 2019). These discrepancies undermine the transferability of skills and qualifications, and cause significant administrative delays in student exchanges.

Problem Statement

Harmonization policies and frameworks exist in theory but in practice, convergence is not robust and well established throughout the region. For instance, the IUCEA has created a Regional Qualifications Framework in Higher Education (RQFHE) and guidelines on Credit Accumulation and Transfer, but their application has varied significantly among institutions and across partner states. Some of the flagship universities have embraced regional standards and recognition systems, while others are still operating in national frameworks. This incongruence undermines student mobility, exposes learners to credit appraisal procedures, reduces the potential for co-ordinated academic planning and hampers socio-economic integration in the region.

Research Objective

To review and synthesize regional policies, institutional frameworks, and scholarly literature to evaluate the progress, best practices, and operational challenges of curriculum harmonization within East Africa's Common Higher Education Area.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Curriculum Harmonization in Higher Education

It is known that curriculum harmonisation is a key element of enhancing academic mobility, mutual recognition of qualifications and global competitiveness. In essence, harmonization brings program design, credit distribution, and learning objectives into alignment to ensure that programs can be interoperable across borders (Altbach & de Wit, 2018).



The European Higher Education Area (EHEA) established by the Bologna Process in 1999, with regularized degree structures, the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS), and common quality assurance systems (Curaj et al., 2018) is still the benchmark for regionalization. The Bologna process has been shown to increase mobility of students and the introduction of joint degrees through assessments. But it is not easy to replicate political commitments and resource investment in LMICs (Zgaga, 2019).

2.2 Global Benchmarks and Lessons Learned

Other regional groups have been working towards the harmonisation with varying degrees of success outside of Europe. The ASEAN Qualifications Reference Framework (AQRf) is a tool to cross-refer national frameworks, but the uneven institutional capacity of the ASEAN member states has hindered the overall implementation process (ASEAN Secretariat, 2018). In Latin America, the Tuning Project has standardized degree profiles and learning outcomes in the participating institutions, which still has difficulties in ensuring the sustainability of its policies (Beneitone, 2017). These experiences highlight the need for a robust institutional framework, investment and a balance between regional convergence and local institutional autonomy in achieving harmonization.

2.3 Regional Frameworks

On the continental level, the African Union's Continental Education Strategy for Africa (CESA 2016-2025) pledges to harmonized higher education in order to realize the Agenda 2063. A step towards this has been the development of the African Continental Qualifications Framework (ACQF) that seeks to improve cross-border compatibility (African Union, 2021).

There is also progress in sub-regional groups, including the Southern African Development Community (SADC) Regional Qualifications Framework (SADC-RQF), and the pilot projects in ECOWAS (Mohamedbhai, 2020). However, operation is still very inequitable as a result of the weak national quality assurance capacities and low financial resources at the university level (Materu, 2007; Teferra, 2019).

2.4 East African Context

The IUCEA and EAQAN have led the way in East Africa for structural integration. The Regional Qualifications Framework for Higher Education (RQFHE) and the Credit Accumulation and Transfer System (CATS) have been created by the IUCEA to increase the comparability of degrees (IUCEA, 2019). Co-designed curricula have been shown to be feasible in professional areas such as engineering and medicine through pilot programs in the region.

While this convergence in policy has been achieved, the real convergence is yet to be accomplished. There are still separate program lengths, grading systems and credits across universities (Chacha, 2018). For example, a 4-year Bachelor's in Kenya does not necessarily match a 3-year Bachelor's in Uganda, making it difficult to transfer. The adoption of IUCEA framework is voluntary, and thus, there is a level of compliance among public and private universities (Jowi, 2019).

2.5 Quality Assurance and Harmonization

Quality assurance (QA) systems are the bases on which to harmonize curricula as they build trust across the different educational systems. In the modern notion of quality that stresses excellence, fitness for purpose and transformation (Harvey & Green, 1993), the support of outcome-based education and competency frameworks is gaining momentum (World Bank, 2021).

There is no uniformity across East Africa regarding national QA regulatory bodies, with national bodies such as CUE in Kenya, TCU in Tanzania and NCHE in Uganda monitoring local bodies. Regional QA benchmarks have been provided by EAQAN, but there are limited interagency coordination, institutional inertia, and funding constraints to implement them (Teferra, 2014). Operational alignment of the national agencies is necessary for the regional curriculum frameworks to become a transformative structure.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative desk review approach to examine literature on curriculum harmonization within East Africa's Common Higher Education Area (CHEA). The review drew on peer-reviewed journal articles, regional policy documents, institutional reports, books, and selected grey literature published between 2015 and 2025. Sources were identified through searches of Scopus, ERIC, JSTOR, Google Scholar, and institutional repositories, including those of the Inter-University Council for East Africa (IUCEA), the East African Community (EAC), UNESCO, the African Union, and the World Bank.

Literature was purposively selected based on its relevance to curriculum harmonization, qualification frameworks, credit transfer systems, quality assurance, student mobility, and higher education regionalization. The selected literature was reviewed and synthesized thematically to identify recurring concepts, emerging best practices, implementation challenges, and policy implications relevant to East Africa.



4. RESULTS & DISCUSSION

4.1 Harmonisation of learning outcomes

Harmonising learning outcomes is a key requirement for achieving equivalence between regional programs, the review confirms. In Kenya, Uganda, and Rwanda, universities have begun pilot institution-level transitions to an outcomes-based approach, notably in regulated professions such as medicine and engineering (IUCEA, 2019).

But the uptake of the institutions is low. While there are some Academic Departments that still use content rich, input-based structures instead of competency-based modules (Oketch, 2019). Also, the national systemic variations like the deep differences in the shift to Competency Based Curriculum (CBC) in Kenya and the more traditional and subject-oriented curricula in the neighboring partner states, pose structural challenges to regional alignment.

4.2 The credit transfer and Accumulation Systems.

The IUCEA's Credit Accumulation and Transfer System (CATS) is the technical instrument to facilitate students' mobility throughout the region. However, in practice, it is rather limited in terms of its use. The definition of standardized credit hours varies between countries: for instance, in one country, one academic credit, may equal a different number of hours of taught or self-study in another country (Chacha, 2018).

Furthermore, academic calendars do not match and there are significant administrative challenges due to different grading systems. Financial factors also play into institutional resistance: some financial committees at universities see loose credit migration as a financial risk that harms tuition income.

4.3 Joint Academic Programs

Joint and dual-degree arrangements are a very effective means of curriculum harmonization of the curricula. Current inter-university regional collaborations will provide evidence of ways to co-design curricula and share faculty knowledge between East African universities. The working experience of existing inter-university regional partnerships will provide evidence of how curricula can be co-designed and faculty expertise shared between universities in East Africa.

However, the review indicates that these programs are small, and very fragile. Most collaborative projects are donor-funded pilots that are difficult to sustain once grant money runs out. Additionally, competing national Professional Licensure policies and different institutional accreditation cycles inhibit long term integration.

4.4 Regional Qualifications Frameworks

The IUCEA's Regional Qualifications Framework for Higher Education (RQFHE) offers an important reference point for lining up national qualification frameworks with international ones such as the Bologna cycles.

The main structural constraint of the RQFHE is the absence of binding enforcement mechanisms. The EAC follows a consensus model, meaning that regional education guidelines are not binding obligations, but rather recommendations. Nations thus negotiate the framework at uneven paces; while some countries set up a national qualifications framework in compliance with the framework, others have not done so because of lack of capacity.

4.5 Quality Assurance Alignment

Quality Assurance Alignment is needed as the vital link to achieve a high level of quality assurance. The key enabler and the weak link in the harmonisation chain is quality assurance. EAQAN has developed capacity through the regional peer reviews; however, there are numerous internal institutional QA units that are functioning in a symbolic mode of compliance and not in a mode of developmental enhancement.

The lack of resource, such as low staffing levels within the QA directorates, and the lack of ICT infrastructures, are undermining the validity of the evaluations (Teferra, 2019). The absence of officially recognised equivalence in standards between different states, which has been verified and is cross-border, will keep universities and employers suspicious about the qualifications of the neighboring states, reducing the project's initial goal of the Common Higher Education Area.

5. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The problem is not not having a policy, but having a policy that is not being enforced at the operational level and/or lack of capacity of institutions to enforce the policy in question. The following measures are recommended to take the Common Higher Education

Area from paper to practice:

- a) **For the IUCEA:** develop more robust regional indicators of accountability, and shift towards discipline-specific "Tuning" groups (medical, engineering, business faculties) and move towards grassroots academic ownership of the process of harmonization.



- b) **For National Governments and QA Agencies:** Embed the RQFHE and CATS directly in national legislation. Coordinate accreditation and monitoring processes among professional councils for smooth graduate registry and labour mobility.
- c) **Universities:** Ensure institutional support for internal quality assurance institutions; shift credit-evaluation processes to modernisation; shift training of faculty to outcome-based education.

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