

THE INTER-UNIVERSITY COUNCIL FOR EAST AFRICA



THE NEED TO ESTABLISH A REGIONAL SYSTEM OF ACCREDITATION OF HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS AND PROGRAMMES IN EAST AFRICA

1.0 Introduction

According to the World Bank, accreditation is a process of self-study and external quality review that is used in higher education to scrutinize an institution and/or its programmes for quality standards and need for quality improvement. The process is designed to determine whether or not an institution has met or exceeded the published benchmark standards of quality (set by an external body such as a government, national quality assurance agency, or a professional association) for accreditation and is achieving its mission and stated purpose. The process usually includes a self-evaluation, peer reviews and site visits. Success in this process results in the accreditation of a program or an institution.

Both quality assurance and accreditation are new phenomena in most parts of the world. Thus, while in North America accreditation systems have existed for a long time now, in Europe they only came into being with the establishment of the Bologna Process in 1999. In Africa the emergence of private higher education institutions triggered development of quality assurance agencies. Initially, the main purpose of quality assurance was to regulate private higher education institutions rather than to enhance accountability and improve quality. However, with time public universities and governments have recognized that quality assurance is an important tool to promote continuous quality improvement of universities so as to make them remain competitive nationally and internationally, to be accountable to the public, and to promote continuous innovativeness and reforms.

Accreditation goes by various names, such as quality assurance, recognition, licensing etc. It is also considered as the major vehicle for external quality assurance or as a process of quality control and assurance in higher education, whereby as a result of inspection or assessment or both, an institution or its programmes and products therefrom (i.e. graduates, publications, etc.) are recognized as meeting minimum

acceptable standards. Accreditation enables a Minister responsible for higher education or any other prescribed authority in a respective country to grant approval for an institution to operate as a higher education or professional institution, and to award recognized degrees or diplomas, hence giving the institution powers as a degree-granting authority.

2.0 Accreditation versus Registration, Chartering, or Licensing of Universities

There has always been a mix up between accreditation and registration or chartering, or licensing of university institutions. The latter three terms refer to giving permission to the institution or institutions to legally operate in a particular country. While accreditation is associated with adherence to prescribed benchmark quality standard as set nationally or regionally by a body or bodies external to the university institution, registration, chartering or licensing of a university institution, whether a national or foreign institution, goes beyond requirements set for accreditation. It focuses on issues like the institution meeting national higher education vision, objectives and goals as specified in national policies and political aspirations, satisfying national social and cultural norms, peculiarities, and ideals, national security considerations, etc. Therefore, in all instances where regional accreditation is recognized and practiced, registration, chartering or licensing of university institutions has remained the prerogative of national rather than regional authorities.

3.0 Geographic Accreditation

Worldwide, there are different arrangements of accreditation. These include those by countries or regions or similar groups of countries. An example of geographic accreditation arrangements may be cited for the United States of America (USA) where there are two types of accreditation, namely institutional and specialized accreditation. Institutional accreditation is granted by the regional and national accrediting agencies, which collectively serve most of the institutions that are chartered or licensed in the United States. These agencies only accredit total operating units. Specialized accreditation of professional or occupational institutions and programs is granted by national professional organizations in such fields as journalism, health sciences, engineering, law etc. In USA only the Department of Education (a governmental entity) and the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (which is non-governmental) are mandated to recognize the national systems of accreditation.

In Europe the process to harmonize the European higher education systems started in 1999 through the establishment of the Bologna Process. The aims of establishing the Bologna Process were to create a European Higher Education Area through harmonization of higher education, adopting a system of easily readable and comparable degrees, promoting mobility of both students and teachers, and promoting European co-operation in quality assurance in higher education. Although more than 46 European countries (both members and non-members of the European Union) are members of the Bologna Process, regional accreditation has not yet been established in Europe. So far accreditation in Europe is entrusted to one or more agencies in each

country.

The European national accreditation agencies are often owned by - or at least approved by - the government in the country where they operate. In most cases there is an arrangement that enables accreditation decisions in one country to be recognized in another country. Such system of recognition operates within the framework of the European Consortium for Accreditation in Higher Education, which was founded on a pan-European level in November 2003. The Consortium was founded by twelve accreditation organizations from eight countries to help realize the European Higher Education Area by means of mutual recognition of accreditation decisions so as to promote greater mobility of students and staff, to inform the labor market on the values of degrees, and to contribute to the recognition of higher education credits and degrees within Europe.

Three EAC Partner States (Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania) have also established a similar arrangement, which is facilitated through a memorandum of understanding signed in 2006. IUCEA subscribes to that arrangement.

Similar arrangements also exist in other parts of the world, such as in Latin America and South East Asia. Regional accreditation requires the establishment of harmonized higher education systems, such as quality assurance and credit accumulation and transfer systems. This is indeed the case in USA, Europe and other regions where either regional accreditation systems exist or where there is mutual understanding such that accreditation decisions in one country are recognized in another country.

4.0 The Need for Regional Accreditation in East Africa

For a long time now there have been discussions in the region focusing on the need to establish a regional system of accreditation in East Africa. To this effect, the East African Legislative Assembly (EALA) has gone further by coming up with a private member's motion to amend section 6 of the IUCEA Act, 2009 so as to empower IUCEA to accredit foreign university institutions operating in the EAC region. All along in these discussions IUCEA has continued to express its opinion regarding this move; that while the initiative is good since it will be part of implementation of harmonization of (higher) education in East Africa as EAC envisions, there are a number of issues that need to be addressed before it can be feasible.

Additionally, IUCEA does not support setting up two parallel accreditation systems in the region, one for foreign universities and another one for local university institutions as the EALA member's private motion entails. Such arrangement will defeat the whole purpose of harmonizing the entire higher education system in the region. Actually, this will lead to the development of fragmented, parallel quality assurance systems for maintenance of the quality standards of university education in the region, i.e. one for local institutions under national accreditation systems and another one foreign university institutions under IUCEA. This may also have an overall negative effect on the quality of education in the region.

Some of the issues that need to be addressed so as to attain the establishment of systems

for regional accreditation of university institutions and the education they provide in the region are as follows:

- a) Comprehensive amendment of the IUCEA Act 2009 so as to make IUCEA a truly EAC institution and not partly remaining an association of universities as it is currently the case;
- b) Establishment of a regional quality assurance framework that will guide the envisaged accreditation process to be implemented;
- c) Carrying out an IUCEA institutional review so as to make IUCEA a truly EAC institution by aligning the former's institutional structure to the operational structure of EAC, and to take into consideration IUCEA mandate, roles and functions as spelt out in the IUCEA Act 2009, as well as emerging issues including regional accreditation of university institutions; and
- d) Establishment of an appropriate legal linkage between national higher education commissions/councils and IUCEA so as to harmonize national accreditation systems with those set regionally, and hence to avoid ambiguities and contradictions between national and regional systems of accreditation, or, alternatively to scrap the existing national accreditation systems, but no where in the world have national systems of accreditation been scrapped in favor of regional arrangements, most probably due to the need to maintain national interests and identity in higher education systems.

IUCEA believes that while a regional accreditation system could be established, registration, licensing and chartering of university institutions should continue to be the prerogative of the individual Partner States, due to reasons stated in **section 2.0** above.

5.0 IUCEA Efforts to Harmonize Higher Education Systems in East Africa

Currently, quality assurance and accreditation systems in East Africa are handled at national level in each of the five EAC Partner States (Burundi, Kenya, Rwanda, Tanzania and Uganda), in accordance with the existing legal framework in each country. However, in order to promote regional collaboration in higher education as it has been the case since the era of the University of East Africa and later under the Inter-University Committee/Inter-University Council for East Africa, higher education commissions/councils in Uganda, Tanzania and Kenya have all along been working closely together in the area of their quality assurance and accreditation systems. Therefore, the current systems of accreditation are more or less harmonized, such that the accreditation status of an institution in one country is recognized in the other countries. Similarly, an institution registered in one Partner State can be allowed to operate in another country provided that the basic national requirements for it to operate in the other country have been met. In that regard, Kampala International University, which is registered and accredited in Uganda, has been allowed to operate in the other East African countries. Similarly, Jomo Kenyatta University of Agriculture and Technology (JKUAT), which is registered in Kenya, has been allowed to open a campus in Tanzania without being required to undergo another accreditation and chartering process in Tanzania.

IUCEA is aware that socio-economic trends fostered by globalization and the new world economic order has turned higher education into a tradable good. Thus, while higher education has continued to be a public entity, its delivery across geographic borders is no longer restrictive. Similarly, private (for profit) higher education providers continue to proliferate worldwide, including in East Africa. This has made it necessary to attach greater emphasis to higher education academic values in driving international competitiveness and cooperation in exchanging students, academic expertise and the labor force, and allowing foreign university institutions to operate in a particular country. In this regard, emphasis continues to grow on the need for structured academic programmes and higher education systems that are responsive to the national, regional and international environment focused on:

- a) Promoting student and staff mobility among institutions and countries;
- b) Establishing appropriate systems of credit accumulation and transferability between institutions and beyond national boundaries;
- c) Adopting a system of easily readable, comparable and compatible qualifications within the country, region and globally;
- d) Promoting national and regional higher education dimensions through the involvement of attractive regional higher education areas;
- e) Promoting lifelong learning and e-learning systems;
- f) Promoting accountability to stakeholders;
- g) Promoting graduate employability in the existing and emerging national, regional and international job market opportunities; and
- h) Promoting comparability of higher education quality standards and systems at national, regional and international levels.

These developments require appropriate systems that adhere to nationally, regionally and internationally recognized higher education benchmark standards, in the form of systematic quality assurance frameworks and accreditation systems. Therefore, since 2006 in collaboration with higher education commissions/councils in the EAC Partner States as well as member universities, IUCEA has been implementing a process to introduce a regional higher education quality assurance framework in East Africa that will facilitate international comparability, compatibility and competitiveness in the quality and relevance of university education delivered in the region. That process is well in an advanced stage and the needed operational instruments have already been developed in the form of a handbook. The quality assurance framework is aimed at:

- Developing an East African higher education area;
- Enabling universities in the region to participate in cross-border education in and outside East Africa;
- Setting common higher education quality standards for East African university institutions as a process to facilitate mutual recognition of education and training systems, and qualifications and skills;
- Promoting and safeguarding comparability and compatibility of higher education standards and quality assurance processes in East Africa and beyond;
- Promoting graduate labor mobility regionally and internationally; and

Enhancing the drive towards the development of knowledge driven economies in the East African Community.

Currently, a good number of university institutions as well as all the five national commissions/councils for higher education in each EAC Partner State are part of the process to establish the regional quality assurance framework. Furthermore, way back in 2007 a process to develop an East African credit transfer system was also initiated. IUCEA has decided to follow up that initiative and accomplish it in the coming 2 – 3 years. Also IUCEA will soon initiate a process to develop a regional qualification framework that will aim at, among others, facilitating mutual recognition of qualifications among EAC Partner States so as to ease free movement of human capital in the region as envisioned in the EAC Common Market Protocol.

Meanwhile, IUCEA is finalizing an institutional review process, aimed at making IUCEA a truly EAC institution by aligning the former's institutional structure to the operational structure of EAC, and to take into consideration IUCEA mandate, roles and functions as spelt out in the IUCEA Act 2009, as well as emerging issues including the possibility for introducing regional accreditation of university institutions.

6.0 Conclusion

The initiatives that IUCEA is taking are important preparatory frameworks for the possibility of eventual establishment of a regional system of accreditation of higher education in the region. In that regard, IUCEA has been working and will continue to work closely with higher education commissions/councils in the EAC Partner States and professional bodies in the region so as to arrive at a common understanding for the establishment of a harmonized higher education framework for East Africa, encompassing commonly accepted quality assurance and benchmark standards, and accreditation processes. This will also require an overhaul of the current Inter-University Council for East Africa Act 2009 and extensive review of the IUCEA institutional structure so as to make IUCEA not only a strategic institution of EAC responsible for the coordination of human resource and research development in the region, but also to make it a legal entity responsible for handling quality assurance and accreditation systems for the regional, in a manner that will be determined by the EAC Partner States. IUCEA is already working towards this direction. It is expected that a comprehensive framework in this process will have been established by the end of June 2012.