

## **The contribution of university research to the achievement of sustainable development goals within the context of the East African Community Common Higher Education Area**

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### **ABSTRACT**

In the contemporary sense, a Common Higher Education Area designates a geographic region where higher education systems are based on comparable, compatible, coherent and harmonised frameworks accepted in the region as providing objective basis for mutual recognition of education and training systems, and the qualifications attained in the region's individual states as well as from overseas, for the countries to effectively collaborate as common market blocks. This is the aspired destination of the East African Community (EAC). Thus, from 2006, the Inter-University Council for East Africa (IUCEA) has been developing a harmonised quality assurance system as the critical entry point for mutual recognition and collaboration in higher education among the EAC Partner States. The IUCEA has also developed the East African Qualifications Framework for Higher Education. These developments have culminated into EAC being declared a Common Higher Education Area during the Heads of State Summit on 20th May 2017. This entails that EAC Partner States will now have to harmonise their national higher education systems under the regional framework. Likewise, universities will have to harmonise their higher education and research systems for them to support cross-border engagements. This will enable university researchers to team up in integrated, multi-/inter-disciplinary partnerships with other players in other universities and non-university institutions across the EAC common market block.

Key words: East African Community, harmonisation, Higher education, qualification frameworks

### **RÉSUMÉ**

Dans le sens contemporain du terme, un espace commun d'enseignement supérieur désigne une région géographique où les systèmes d'enseignement supérieur sont fondées sur des cadres comparables, compatibles, cohérents et harmonisés acceptés en fournissant la base objective pour la reconnaissance mutuelle des systèmes d'éducation et formation de la région ainsi que les qualifications atteints dans la région. Ainsi, depuis 2006, le Conseil interuniversitaire pour l'Afrique de l'est (IUCEA) a développé un système d'assurance qualité harmonisé comme point d'entrée essentiel pour la reconnaissance mutuelle et la collaboration dans l'enseignement supérieur entre les États partenaires EAC. IUCEA a également développé le cadre régional de certifications des qualifications de l'enseignement supérieur pour l'Afrique de l'Est. Ces évolutions ont abouti au lancement de l'espace commun d'enseignement supérieur pour l'Afrique de l'Est, au cours du sommet des Chefs d'État du 20 mai 2017. Cela implique qu'Etats membres de l'Afrique de l'Est devront maintenant harmoniser leurs systèmes nationaux d'enseignement supérieur au niveau. De même, les universités devront harmoniser leurs études supérieures et les systèmes de recherche, notamment en vue de soutenir les engagements transfrontaliers. Cela permettra aux chercheurs d'Universités de s'engager dans des équipes intégrées, multi- / interdisciplinaires d'universités et d'autres établissements non universitaires à travers le marché commun de l'Afrique de l'Est.

Mots clés : East African Community, harmonisation, Higher education, qualification frameworks

## INTRODUCTION

Globalization has promoted the creation of regional common market blocks in different parts of the world. Such regional common market blocks existing in Africa include the Arab Maghreb Union (AMU – [www.maghrebarabe.org/en/](http://www.maghrebarabe.org/en/) ), Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA – [www.comesa.int/](http://www.comesa.int/) ), East African Community (EAC – [www.eac.int](http://www.eac.int) ), Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS – [www.ceeac-eccas.org](http://www.ceeac-eccas.org) ), Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS – [www.ecowas.int](http://www.ecowas.int) ), and Southern Africa Development Community (SADC – [www.sadc.int/](http://www.sadc.int/) ). In a way, the socio-economic agenda of these organisations is linked to that of the African Union (AU – <https://au.int> ), a Pan-African organisation aspiring for a prosperous Africa based on inclusive growth and sustainable development.

Among others, the evolving regional economic blocks and the ensuing globalisation has brought in the need to develop appropriate frameworks to facilitate free movement of goods, services, and human capital. In the case of higher education, the regional economic community frameworks are meant to facilitate easy mobility of students, study programmes, and education providers across the blocks and beyond. The frameworks are also expected to facilitate enhanced collaboration in education delivery across borders for the purpose of promoting regional integration. To achieve that, the economic blocks have moved into the development of harmonized regional systems for trade and customs, establishment of common amenities such as infrastructural systems, security arrangements, health regulatory systems, and provisions for harmonisation of higher education and training systems. The latter also include the development of frameworks for quality assurance, curriculum benchmarks, accreditation of educational programmes and institutions, and mutual recognition of qualifications based on regionally agreed arrangements.

These provisions are meant to provide appropriate ground promoting free movement of goods, services, people, and labour, within the context

of the regional economic blocks and the overall global socio-economic settings. Furthermore, in the area of higher education, the outcome of these arrangements is the designation of the regional economic blocks as Common Higher Education Areas. In the contemporary sense, a Common Higher Education Area designates a geographic region where higher education systems are based on comparable, compatible, coherent and harmonised frameworks accepted in the region as providing objective basis for mutual recognition of education and training systems, and the qualifications attained in the region's individual states as well as from overseas, for the countries to effectively collaborate as common market blocks. This is the aspired destination for EAC, as highlighted in this article.

**The Development of Common Higher Education Areas.** The development of Common Higher Education Areas is an outcome of the emergence of regional economic communities, as higher education is seen as a vital intellectual resource for fostering economic growth and expansion of the knowledge economy across borders. Furthermore, regional collaboration in higher education within the context of a common higher education area has become an important factor for promoting cross-border socio-economic cooperation, as this facilitates easy mobility of goods, services, labour, and people. Thus, the launching of the Common Higher Education Area in Europe in 2010 as the outcome of European cooperation in higher education under the Bologna Process, was meant to provide a framework for ensuring more comparable, compatible and coherent systems of higher education in Europe ([http://ec.europa.eu/education/policy/higher-education/bologna-process\\_en](http://ec.europa.eu/education/policy/higher-education/bologna-process_en)).

The Bologna Process in itself as launched in 1999 set out a vision for a Europe of knowledge, aimed at increasing the international competitiveness of the European higher education system for Europe's global economic competitiveness (<http://www.eua.be/policy-representation/higher-education-policies/the-european-higher-education-area-and-the-bologna-process>). The aspirations of European

countries under the Bologna Process enticed other regional blocks, including the EAC, to initiate efforts towards developing similar arrangements. In that regard, the declaration of the EAC Common Higher Education Area by the EAC Heads of State during their Summit held in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania on 20th May 2017 ([www.iucea.org](http://www.iucea.org)) was a culmination of the process that the Inter-University Council for East Africa (IUCEA) had initiated in 2006. At that time, the initiative was aimed at developing a regional quality assurance system as one of the instruments to promote harmonisation of higher education in East Africa.

The EAC Common Higher Education Area declaration is also a follow up to the coming into force in July 2010 of the Protocol for the Establishment of the EAC Common Market, which is simply referred to as the EAC Common Market Protocol (<http://www.eac.int/resources/documents/protocol-establishment-eac-common-market>). The provisions in the Protocol, among others, required putting in place operational set ups for the Protocol to be fully operational by 2015. This included setting up arrangements to facilitate easy mobility of learners and labour across the EAC partner states. In that regard, there was need for a framework for harmonisation of higher education systems in the EAC partner states, which would facilitate comparability and compatibility of the systems for their mutual recognition among the partner states.

Under the context of the EAC Common Market Protocol, regional accreditation was initially considered an important parameter to facilitate harmonisation of the education systems in the EAC. Hence, in 2010, the East African Legislative Assembly (EALA) came up with a Draft Bill to amend the IUCEA Act, 2009, in order to mandate IUCEA to undertake regional accreditation of universities in the EAC. The Draft Bill was brought to the attention of Ministers responsible for Higher Education in the EAC partner states.

The Ministers considered it to be impracticable. This is because EAC is not a federal state/

government where such a supranational arrangement could be set up. Therefore, during the joint meeting between the Ministers and members of the EALA General Purpose Committee held on 11th November 2011 in Nairobi, Kenya, there was a disagreement on the intended amendment of the IUCEA Act, 2009. Therefore, as the way forward, it was agreed that EAC should first be declared a Common Higher Education Area before regional accreditation could be considered under the ambit of EAC. Hence, based on this decision, IUCEA undertook the initiative to develop the basic tools for operationalisation of the Common Higher Education Area.

**East Africa as a Common Higher Education Area: Historical Perspectives.** During East Africa's colonial era, in effect the region existed as "an undeclared Common Higher Education Area", which was characterised by one regional higher education institution, namely Makerere College, established in 1922. Later, the University of East Africa was established in 1963 as a regional university for Kenya, Uganda, and Tanganyika and Zanzibar (currently Tanzania), and catering for students from the then Federation of Northern and Southern Rhodesia (currently Zambia and Zimbabwe) and Nyasaland (currently Malawi). Makerere College in Uganda became the main campus of the University (Nakayiwa, 2016) with constituent colleges in Kenya (Royal College, established in 1956) and Tanganyika (University College, Dar es Salaam established in October 1961, just before the country's independence).

Each of the three colleges constituting the University of East Africa specialised in specific academic areas catering for students from all East African countries. The University of East Africa was one of the regional institutions under the East African Common Services Organisation (EACSO) established in 1961 (Gladden, 1963). When the first East African Community was established in 1967 as a successor to EACSO, it took over all the institutions under EACSO, including the University of East Africa.

The University of East Africa was dissolved in

1970 (Nakayiwa, 2016; Mukhwana *et al.*, 2017). In its place, national universities were established in each of the East African Community member countries: Makerere University in Uganda, University of Nairobi in Kenya, and University of Dar es Salaam in Tanzania. In order to ensure that the three newly established universities maintained the collaboration that was enshrined in the University of East Africa, the Inter-University Committee (IUC) for East Africa was also established in 1970, in order to foster that collaboration.

The IUC survived the collapse of the first EAC in 1977. In 1980 IUC was transformed into the current IUCEA. Under IUC and later IUCEA, each of the three universities in Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda maintained the institutional system of the University of East Africa. As such, the universities easily exchanged students and lecturers, and collaborated through regional academic bodies.

**Is IUCEA akin to Colonial Era Higher Education Coordination Mechanism?** Although historical records do not indicate the precedence under which the establishment of IUC and later IUCEA was based, the name Inter-University Committee and later Inter-University Council for East African appear to be synonymous to the institution established during the British colonial era to coordinate and support the evolution and development of higher education institutions in East Africa and other British colonies. Thus, in 1946 the British Empire established the Inter-University Council (IUC) for the purpose of promoting co-operation between universities and other higher education institutions in the United Kingdom and the colonies, independent of government (<http://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/details/r/C3494> ). This included the provision of advice on academic policy to overseas universities, and assistance with staff recruitment for higher education institutions being established in the colonies.

In 1955 IUC was transformed into the Inter-University Council for Higher Education Overseas (ICHEO) and its boundaries extended beyond

the Commonwealth countries. However, by the 1980s the functions of ICHEO had considerably diminished. Therefore, on 1st April 1981 the Council was amalgamated with the British Council (<http://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/details/r/C3494> ).

### **Development of EAC Higher Education harmonisation instruments**

After the collapse of the first EAC in 1977, IUC (later IUCEA) went through a turbulent and unstable period. The IUCEA was revitalised in 2000 after the re-establishment of EAC in 1999 ([www.iucea.org](http://www.iucea.org) ) and incorporation of IUCEA into the new EAC as one of the surviving institutions of the first EAC (1967 – 1977) (EAC Treaty, 1999). Subsequent to this revitalisation, IUCEA embarked on the revival of its original mandate of promoting collaboration of universities in the region. In that regard, the establishment of a harmonised quality assurance system in East Africa was considered one of the critical entry points for the IUCEA mandate revival. Hence, in September 2005, the IUCEA Governing Board made a decision to establish an East African quality assurance framework. Thereafter, in March 2006, the Governing Board went on to establish a standing committee for quality assurance. The standing committee was given the responsibility to develop the regional quality assurance framework.

Through the standing committee, IUCEA started the process to develop a harmonised quality assurance system for East Africa as one of the critical instruments to facilitate mutual recognition and collaboration in higher education among the EAC partner states. Thus, when a decision to transform EAC into a Common Higher Education Area was made, the regional quality assurance framework (that had already been developed in the form of a handbook) became one of the tools for operationalisation of the EAC Common Higher Education Area.

The handbook, which is published in five volumes, provides guidelines for self-assessment at the programme level, external assessment at the programme level, self-assessment at institutional level for discovering more about the quality of

the institution, implementation of the quality assurance system at all levels of the institution, and principles, practices and management of external quality assurance in East Africa ([www.iucea.org](http://www.iucea.org)).

In addition, as part of the quality assurance system, in 2014 IUCEA also developed a regional quality assurance policy framework, referred to as Principles and Guidelines in Quality Assurance in Higher Education in East Africa. And since 2011 IUCEA has been developing generic benchmarks for academic programmes as reference points for harmonisation of the curricula in universities in East Africa. The generic benchmarks are part of the regional quality assurance system. At the moment, the quality assurance handbook, the Principles and Guidelines in Quality Assurance in Higher Education in East Africa, and curriculum benchmarks already developed are being used in the region. In 2011 IUCEA supported the establishment of a regional quality assurance network, namely, the East African Higher Education Quality Assurance Network (EAQAN). EAQAN members meet annually to deliberate on, among others, regional and global trends in quality assurance, as a way of promoting the development of quality assurance culture and practices in universities in East Africa.

The other operational tool for the EAC Common Higher Education Area is the East African Qualifications Framework for Higher Education developed by IUCEA in 2014. The qualifications framework was subsequently adopted by the EAC Council of Ministers in the same year. The regional qualifications framework is a generic instrument onto which the national qualifications frameworks of the EAC partner states would be anchored for the purpose of facilitating comparability, compatibility and synchronization of education and training systems in the region. It also acts as a platform to facilitate mutual recognition of the qualifications attained in and outside EAC.

**EAC Common Higher Education area supportive framework.** All stages in the development of the two operational tools for the EAC Common Higher Education Area, namely the regional quality assurance system and the East

African Qualifications Framework for Higher Education involved the full participation of higher education institutions, national commissions and councils for higher/university education, and the ministries responsible for higher education in all the EAC partner states, as well as the EAC Secretariat. It also involved other stakeholders in each of the EAC partner states, including the East African Business Council (EABC), employers' associations, and professional bodies. Therefore, there is now a common conceptual understanding of the higher education harmonisation process, goals and tools among the EAC partner state governments, commissions and councils for higher/university education, higher education institutions, and other relevant higher education stakeholder institutions.

Furthermore, the involvement of the stakeholders throughout all the stages in the development of the higher education harmonisation tools was meant to ensure acceptability and ownership of the principles pertaining to operationalisation of the EAC Common Higher Education Area, at the institutional, national (commissions/councils for higher/university education up to the governments), and regional (EAC) level. In addition, the EAC Common Higher Education Area operational tools are non-prescriptive in their operationalisation, meaning that institutionalisation of the tools is based on "speaking the same language but in different ways that accommodate national/institutional diversities", rather than through supranational enforcement regimes.

The tools are also premised on the aspiration for international recognition for legitimacy of the region's higher education systems and the products therefrom. Also, the tools were conceived with due cognisance of the need for sustainability of the EAC Common Higher Education Area, based on quality culture that continues to evolve in the region, as well as the networking set up in quality assurance now emerging in the region. Sustainability is also based on technical expertise being developed through institutional, national and regional capacity building initiatives, and sensitisation for institutionalisation of funding of quality assurance activities.

### **Implications of the EAC Common Higher Education Area**

There are five parameters that constitute the major implications of EAC operating as a Common Higher Education Area, namely:

- (a) EAC partner states harmonising their national higher education systems by aligning them (but not necessarily making them identical) to the regional framework, including alignment of the national qualifications frameworks to the East African Qualifications Framework for Higher Education.
- (b) EAC establishing a regional accreditation system based on the regional higher education harmonisation framework now operational in the EAC, hence strengthening the current system of mutual recognition of accreditation decisions by individual partner states. This will provide formal legitimacy to the current regional accreditation system in the EAC through mutual recognition of accreditation decisions in each individual partner state.
- (c) EAC through IUCEA laying ground for operationalisation of the East African Qualifications Framework for Higher Education in all aspects indicated in the Framework document.
- (d) EAC strengthening the administrative arrangements for coordination and monitoring and evaluation of the attainment of operational milestones.
- (e) Universities harmonising their operational systems by aligning them to the EAC framework, including their internal quality assurance and credit systems, curriculum benchmarks, qualifications descriptors, and research operational frameworks, for them to support cross-border engagements within the context of the EAC Common Higher Education Area.

### **Research/Doctoral Training in the Context of EAC Common Higher Education Area.**

Research is a natural component of higher education systems, as universities are required to continuously generate new knowledge through research activities and subsequently disseminate

the same through teaching. (Nakayiwa *et al.*, 2016) As such, research, which is also an integral part of postgraduate training particularly at the doctoral level, requires to be based on similar national and regional quality standards and guidelines applicable to the Common Higher Education Area. At the same time, university researchers, including doctoral students, while being required to expand the frontiers of knowledge, they also have a paramount responsibility of solving societal challenges and facilitating socio-economic development through their research endeavours. In this way, university researchers would also be contributing towards the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Currently however, most of the research undertaken in universities in East Africa can be described as that which does not adequately involve multi-, inter-, and trans-disciplinarity. Indeed, integrated research approach involving multi-, inter-, and trans-disciplinarity would normally be expected to lead to innovations and commercialization of the research results. It would also be useful in providing policy guidance, and to contribute towards the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Furthermore, it can also be said that most of the research undertaken in the region does not have linkage to institutional and national research and innovation agenda, and neither is it based on academia/industry linkages that would promote demand for innovations. Unfortunately, even that research which has potential to bringing about innovations is conceived and carried out following the linear research and development model depicted in Figure 1, which is no longer applied in industrially developed countries.

For research to contribute to socio-economic development and provide for the achievement of SDGs, it is imperative that researchers form integrated partnerships with other players in both public and private sector institutions/enterprises, through a model similar to that shown in Figure 2 (UNESCO, 2016). The model sets the players aspiring for innovation through research in integrated and coherent partnerships, usually focused on a common research agenda. Therefore,

under such an integrated research approach, more emphasis in financing research would also be focused on developing research networks at the institutional, national and regional levels, than on mono-disciplinary research projects that do not focus on specific problem areas requiring urgent solutions, and that cannot wait until generic research capacity is built. However, mono-disciplinary research also needs to be embraced for the purpose of expanding frontiers of knowledge. This is the general philosophy of the centres of excellence initiative in the EAC, as exemplified by some of the on-going research and postgraduate training facilitation initiatives. These include the postgraduate training support in East Africa provided by the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) in existing higher education institutions at the Masters and PhD levels, each focusing on specific emphasis problem area (s), for which admitted students receive full scholarships from DAAD. The other initiative is the one being implemented under the Eastern and Southern Africa Higher Education Centres of Excellence (ACE II) Project of the World Bank, coordinated by IUCEA as the

Regional Facilitation Unit (<http://ace2.iucea.org/>). The objective of the ACE II project is to establish and strengthen specialisation and collaboration among networks of higher education institutions in the Eastern and Southern Africa region to deliver relevant and quality education and applied research to address key development challenges facing the region (<http://ace2.iucea.org/>).

Furthermore, IUCEA and the East African Business Council (EABC) have been promoting the development of academia-public-private partnerships under the auspices of the EAC. The IUCEA/EABC collaboration is aimed at providing the point of connection between knowledge and human resources produced by higher education institutions on the one hand, and the dissemination of the same to the public and private sectors for their eventual diffusion into the productive, social, and service sectors on the other. Through this collaboration, every year IUCEA and EABC jointly organise academia-public-private partnership forum and exhibitions under the auspices of EAC.



Figure 1. Linear Research and Development Model

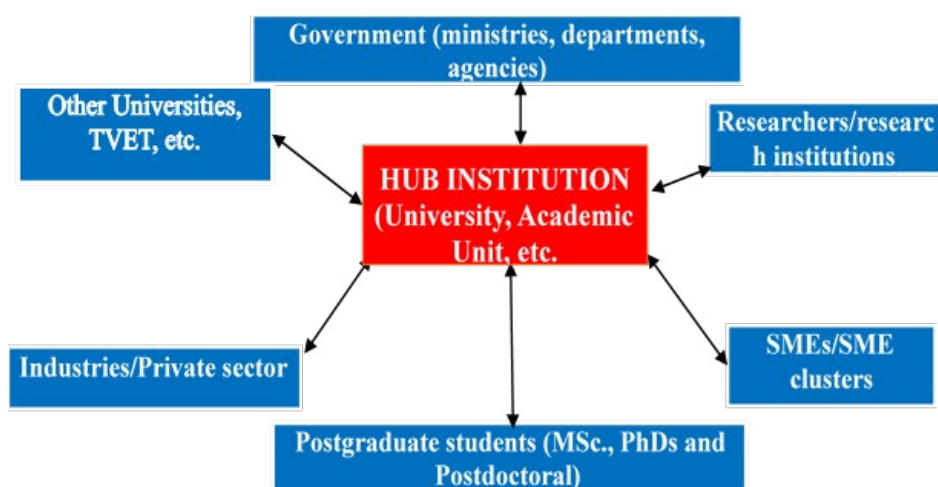


Figure 2. Integrated Research Model

The contribution of university research to the achievement of sustainable development goals

The forum and exhibitions bring together participants from the three entities (academia, and the public and private sectors) to dialogue and show case on issues of common interest to them, as a way of fostering academia-public-private partnerships in the region. The annual forums that were initiated in 2012 are seen as important catalysts to stimulate the development of academia-industry collaborations. Indeed, several such collaborations are emerging in the region, with one of them being the collaboration between Nelson Mandela African Institute of Science and Technology in Tanzania ([www.nm-aist.ac.tz](http://www.nm-aist.ac.tz)) and Mwanza City Council involving waste water treatment technology for the latter's abattoir.

## CONCLUSION

Transformation of EAC into a Common Higher Education Area is a continuous process guided by the declaration and commitment by the partner states, for which attainment of milestones needs to be continuously monitored, documented and disseminated. A Common Higher Education Area in itself does not exist without people, and certain people can act on behalf of a nation and the region as the Common Higher Education Area, and their collective efforts will influence policy development in the individual countries and up to the entire EAC region. Therefore, continuous dialogue, sensitisation and advocacy are essential for the success of this regional initiative of EAC.

Like in many transformational reforms, adoption of the Common Higher Education Area as a guiding principle for harmonisation of higher education in East Africa and the above stated research and doctoral training model in any institution in the region is bound to encounter resistance from researchers and from some other quarters of the university community. Therefore, in order to handle this situation, it is important for universities to institute transformative leadership strategies. In addition, there is need to reconsider the current research and doctoral funding approaches that are usually focused too much on building capabilities at the mono-disciplinary level rather than directing more funding to integrated research teams working on specific problem areas whose solutions cannot

wait until generic research capacity in single academic disciplines is built.

Furthermore, in order to provide appropriate footing for sustainability of the doctoral studies initiated at the University of Burundi, it is imperative that the University establishes sustainable sources of funding as well as research and doctoral training resources, including capable academic staff who would provide adequate supervision and mentorship of the doctoral students. In addition, on the outset, the University needs to establish appropriate safeguards against academic malpractices that are now prevalent in a number of universities in other African countries, by e.g. instituting appropriate regulatory policies and the corresponding sensitisation arrangements, together with punitive measures, for both staff and the doctoral students.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This article is derived from a presentation made during the launch of University of Burundi Doctoral School, 20-21 July 2017, Bujumbura, Burundi.

## STATEMENT OF NO CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest in this paper.

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