

AFRICA: Slow progress towards harmonisation

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Adapting some of the lessons from Europe's Bologna process to the African context could help to speed up the sluggish pace of higher education harmonisation on the continent, according to the African Union Commission's Dr Yohannes Woldetensae.

He described the slow progress in attaining the objectives of the AU's higher education harmonisation strategy - set to achieve its goals in 2015 - as worrisome.

Speaking at the Association of African Universities (AAU) biennial conference, hosted by South Africa's Stellenbosch University from 30 May to 3 June, Woldetensae echoed the gathering's theme: "More needs to be done to establish the space of higher education in Africa."

Around the world, the need for harmonisation and regional collaboration is being increasingly recognised as a tool to facilitate the mobility of students, graduates and academic staff, to broaden access to quality higher education and support research.

The AU's higher education harmonisation strategy was endorsed by education ministers in 2007 in order to foster continental academic integration and to bridge the gap between the disparate systems produced by various experiences of colonialism.

A continental framework of higher educational qualifications is expected to be in place by 2015, but this goal is looking increasingly unlikely.

While supporting the harmonisation process in principle, some delegates at the conference doubted the ambitious implementation timeframe. Even at the national level, the introduction of qualification frameworks - already in place in South Africa, Mauritius and Tanzania - has proved to be a complex, lengthy and problematic process, according to one delegate.

Because most African education systems were modelled on European universities, Woldetensae argued that it could be useful to "learn from the Bologna process".

Bologna, which was named after the Bologna Declaration signed on 19 June 1999, is aimed among other things at creating a European Higher Education Area. It is intended to make degree and quality assurance standards more comparable and compatible throughout Europe.

The original declaration was signed in Bologna by ministers of higher education from 29 European countries, but today it involves 47 countries, all of which are party to the European Cultural Convention. Francophone African countries are implementing Bologna's standardised LMD system of a first degree in three years, masters in five and PhD in eight.

In a paper seeking to outline some "pragmatic approaches" to African higher education harmonisation, Woldetensae said that two mechanisms from the Bologna process could be useful for Africa's harmonisation process.

These included the credit transfer system known as the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS), which uses student workload as a common measure for the accumulation and transfer of academic credit, and the 'tuning' approach, which defines learning outcomes of the curriculum by subject area.

Woldetensae said the tuning approach, applied to Africa, could provide a common understanding of study programmes, described in terms of learning outcomes and competences, for promoting mutual recognition of qualifications.

However, to stimulate such an approach, he said it was vital to initiate a generic framework for developing African minimum academic standards that would include credit loads and learning outcomes.

Also critical, said Woldetensae, was the need to strengthen collaboration between African quality assurance bodies and to this end, the establishment of the African Quality Assurance Network (AfriQAN) was encouraging.

The network could also contribute to the implementation of the African Quality Rating Mechanism, which could further facilitate the development of agreed continental standards and harmonised quality assurance systems.

Importantly, he stressed, it was necessary to "address the issue of funding and resource mobilisation" as current resource commitments were inadequate for implementing the harmonisation strategy.

He also called for more emphasis on the dissemination of information about the [revised Arusha Convention](#), which could serve as a legal mechanism through which countries could fulfill their obligations to implement harmonisation of the sector.

Woldetensae further noted that the harmonisation of higher education was impossible without the political commitment of governments and the active engagement of institutions and regional university associations. News reports have highlighted some of the difficulties in achieving consensus at the level of states over issues relating to harmonisation.

According to a [recent report](#) by *University World News*, the harmonisation of higher education in East Africa has hit a snag because member states - Burundi, Kenya, Rwanda, Tanzania and Uganda - have differed over the duration of degrees and whether to adopt a single accreditation system.