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Qualification Harmonization for Regional Integration: The WAEC Model

Oni E. O.

Senior Lecturer, Department of Continuing Education & Extension Services,
University of Maiduguri, Maiduguri, Borno State, Nigeria

Charity Chiyenlu Okide

Senior Lecturer, Department of Adult Education, University of Nigeria,
Nsukka, Enugu State, Nigeria

Abstract:

Education which is crucial to knowledge generation is a powerful tool for the harvesting of human and natural resources for purposes of better living and general development. Discovery of resources, technological advancement, multilateral relationship among world sovereign nation and continuous need for collaboration have brought the world under one umbrella, often referred to as 'global world. Such knowledge driven world pivoted on education calls for collective standardization of all parameters that will promote smooth interaction. With its compartmentalization feature, it is important to have minimum bench made for all the academic undertakings so as to ensure quantity and quality control. Also, is accessibility to higher education without barriers. This will in turn forestall at least reduce imbalance of input among member states. This work pays close attention to the issues raised above; and in addition, it spells out possible steps to actualize the desires and offers means of sustaining the multilateral collaboration toward achieving set goals looking at qualification, harmonization and regional integration --the WAEC model.

1. Introduction

Education as a human right was included in the universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948. Today, the societies globally are knowledge driven. This has made it very important to expand access to education. Education has become a major vehicle for ensuring economic well- being, political participation, employment and social justice for all peoples and nations.

Many nations have come to accept that widening access to education is a necessity for individual improvement, community and national development. In Nigeria for instance, the emphasis placed on the principles of "Education for all" is a reminder that access to education is equally reinforcing social justice and a fight against inequality, marginalization and pauperization. Access to education and education for all entails globalization of higher education across borders. If this is to be done, there is the need for uniformity and uniformity of qualifications and entry qualification. That is to say, the issue of uniformity in region A and another in region B becomes non – negotiable and how do we ensure such acceptability? This brings us to the issue of qualification harmonization for regional integration for basic requirement of entrance into the higher institutions; basically, in Nigeria, and some African countries, it is the West African Examination Council (WAEC) that determines the requirement.

2. The West African Examination Council (WAEC)

WAEC is the pace setter as well as the largest examination, examining body responsible for secondary schools in the West African sub-region. It has the mandate to set questions, conduct the examination and to award certificates in the public interest of its member countries. This certificate is trusted and a requirement for admission into tertiary institutions. It is an old examining body established in 1952. Originally, WAEC membership covers five-member countries namely: Nigeria, Ghana, Sierra Leone, Gambia, and Liberia. Currently, there is agitation to conduct the examination in Togo, Cote D'voire and Cameroon. There is likelihood of more agitation of more African countries joining. As at now, WAEC headquarters is in Accra, Ghana. Thus, WAEC has the unique role of determining standards in educational achievement in English speaking West African sub-region.

3. Harmonization

Harmonization as a term has been used differently in different contexts to describe issues like partnership or collaboration, alignment, cooperation and the like. It has also been used in policy documents especially in relation to educational integration. A case study of this is its usage in the Sorbonne Declaration of June 1999 as architecture of reform of European higher education system (Erikson, 2003). In the African region, there was also a development of a framework to harmonize the higher educational system; the process policy (of policy) document was referred to as harmonization (Okeke, 2012).

The concept of harmonization emerged during the industrial revolution in Europe in the quest for creating a common economic and market area for free flow of capital and labour in particular regions. Although the theory refers to it as convergence and not directly as harmonization, it has the same concept and describes both the objectives and process of harmonization of different processes including

higher education. Another similarity between convergence and harmonization is the fact that it is associated with harmonization processes in higher education as it involving a 'narrowing of variance' in structural factors, qualification frameworks, quality standards, degree cycles and credits. Thus, according to Okeke (2012), harmonization is synonymous with convergence that coordinates different systems through the elimination of major differences and creating minimum requirements, the purpose of harmonization is to converge on common element to enrich and promote local achievements.

Harmonization as applied to education refers to the coordination of educational programmes with agreements to minimum academic standards and ensuring equivalence and comparability of qualifications between and within countries. For example, harmonization as it applied to the African higher education according to AAU/2007 is intended to promote the comparability of degree programmes and the recognition of their equivalencies across the continent, thus facilitating the promotion of quality and mobility of both staff and students in the continent while in the European countries, harmonization in higher education reforms are now influenced by the proposition of the Bologna process. Thus, higher education and reforms in the region makes it difficult for national higher education systems to operate in isolation outside the context of the region. Harmonization can therefore be understood to be the process of establishing benchmarks for qualifications, programme delivery and certifications. This may include synchronizing of credit systems, quality assurance mechanism, accreditation, recognition of diplomas, management of quality and language teaching for regional integration.

4. Integration Process

Integration in this respect (regional) is the process of members of a region harmonizing in educational policy, that is, intra-regional collaboration among knowledge communities, the adoption of common platform of standards to converge academic mobility networks and collaborative activities than ever of educational achievement.

The council (WAEC) therefore, in partnership with other educational bodies such as the various Ministries of Educational Standards is harmonized in the member countries. This was once done in Ghana in 1993 when the University of Cambridge Local Examination Syndicate (UNCLES) evaluated Ghana's first Senior Secondary School Certificate Examinations (SSCE) question paper (Baku, 2008). Also in 2002, the Accra Research Department of WAEC undertook investigation to establish the content validity of the 1997-2000 SSCE question paper in five subjects: English Language, Mathematics, Chemistry, Economics, and Clothing & Textiles.

What this paper is asserting is the capability of WAEC as having the mandate to develop and maintain internationally acceptable procedures in examinations; as well as to provide qualitative and reliable educational assessment. This is to encourage academic and moral excellence among youths, promote mutual understanding and international cooperation.

An important process to the establishment of a continental framework for qualifications is the development of common minimum standards in identified qualifications. Agreeing on minimum standards in identified areas is regional integration. This will facilitate portability of credits. The knowledge that graduates of secondary schools from same region conform to the minimum standards can reliably allow admissions into the post-secondary institutions with the appropriate skills and competences in that area. To this effect, some criteria and factors should be employed in integration process.

5. Standardization

In the context of this study, standardization is about developing a typical statistical curriculum, a normative curriculum be aspired by the statistical training centres in Africa running programmes of similar philosophy, vision and mission, irrespective of the type of institution, (irrespective of the type of institution), irrespective of country, region and language zone of location. There is a minimum standard to be operated by any member of the centres for any specified programme, curriculum or qualification. It is not restricted to courses but it extends to standardization of examination process and grading system including unit system, method of computing results and degree award system.

In line with maintaining internationally acceptable procedures in examinations, WAEC is to develop the council's examinations and tests, develop and review the examination syllabuses to reflect national needs, recruit and train examiners, finalize marking schemes, organize standard- fixing and grade awards all in conjunction with international bodies for integration to take place.

6. Need for Harmonization for Regional Integration

Creating a mechanism for bench marking and comparison of qualifications will allow for mobility for employment and further study, developing widely accepted standards for quality will also facilitate creation of centres of excellence. Harmonization will benefit Africa since it allows for greater intra- regional mobility, thereby fostering increased sharing of information, intellectual resources, and research, as well as a growing ability to rely on African expertise.

The necessity of having regional assurance bodies for purposes of quality control comes with the advent of multilateral changes in social, political, and economic cooperation. The changes in co-operation spur beyond the region to the international community, hence, embracing the idea of globalization. At the regional level, there is mobility of people looking for work or education opportunities. Such helps may not be possible if the qualifications that they produce are incomparable to the ones that exist in the host countries.

There is also the need to ensure accountability and justification for investing in education and training such justification can be made if the qualifications that are offered are legitimized and accepted through some legally institutionalized entity such as National Qualification Framework (NQF) maximum use can be made of recognized qualifications whose assessment modes and attainment targets are clearly described, interpreted and understood. Qualifications frameworks have credibility when the bodies awarding the qualifications undergo quality assurance control.

7. Possible Challenges

Globalization is an international issue which cut across borders. The challenges of higher education are no longer confined to a particular nation since the world is inter connected because of liberalization of economy, free movement of labour and capital, and the advancement of communication technologies. One of the challenges of harmonization for regional integration is that from the onset, the theories created for this purpose are created in the context of Europe, and at times, it is difficult to find a clear line explanation to adopt them into African context. This is why it will be important to bring the ministers of education of various nations together.

Representatives of states at the consultation level need to consult widely in their countries and outside. As a result of government policies, often these representatives are changed from time to time. This does not make for continuity nor flow at the consultation level. At some meetings, new representatives need to be educated on previous matters again.

The financial burden of the body constituting the harmonization and integration committee may not be evenly borne, as it is expected that some member states may not be committed to spending time and money. This could pose challenge to the continued participation of members.

Another likely area of challenge is up-to-date skills especially in the African region. The inconsistency of statistical data and data management practices, due to lack of human resources experiences, skills and competencies to meet the statistical needs of regional and national development in Africa.

Mutual discrimination against foreign qualification arising from lack of adequate mutual respect, recognition and acceptance of qualifications particularly at the sub-degree level in matters of employment and admission for further studies across nations of Africa.

8. Conclusion

Qualification harmonization for regional integration implies the adoption of common platform of standards to converge national education structures through alignment of systems like quality assurance, academic credit system, recognition of qualification, is crucial to mobility, life-long learning, and ultimately access to a coherent higher education area. This process of converging objectives and aims together in education policies at regional level is termed as harmonization.

The focus of this paper is the need for quality education and training particularly in the areas of curriculum design, lesson delivery, assessment and certification, which is to be standardized in qualification frame works to meet all national qualification frame work at global level. All geared towards improvement of education and acceptability of such certificates globally. The ability of WAEC to coordinate five independent countries makes it a viable vehicle to promote mutual understanding and international cooperation. The world-wide recognition of WAEC certificates gives it the vision of becoming a world class examining body, however since qualification harmonization for regional integration is anticipated, WAEC cannot be an island unto its self but has to work jointly with international associations and examining bodies such as AIEA, AEAA and ACEAB.

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