Harmonization of Higher Education for Sustainable Development: Southern Africa Development Community Experiences

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ABSTRACT

The world-over, higher education remains a key determinant for scientific and technological development. Hence, Southern Africa Development Community (SADC)'s higher education institutions are considered crucial social organizations in spreading knowledge, and innovation for sustainable development. This study called for inclusion of the qualitative content analysis in an attempt to explore higher education collaboration or partnerships within SADC. Using the AJOL, Scopus, DHTE, DOAJ, Web of Science, and Google Scholar, 60 articles were purposively selected for this review. These available literature sources are accessible on issues around higher education harmonization for sustainable development in SADC for scrutiny. From the content analysis, harmonization was conceptualized as the collaboration, integration or partnership within regional higher education institutions. The rationale for these collaborations or partnerships was to enhance adherence to the agreed-upon higher education conditions and instruments. These created the framework of standards, to facilitate credit transfer and evaluation within SADC's higher education institutions. From this content analysis, it can be concluded that the harmonization of higher education systems for sustainable development is seen as a spontaneous process subtle to various intricacies, as it permits individual institutions to enjoy the fruits of regional integration. It is in this context, that the researchers recommend the enunciation of SADC's higher education harmonization for sustainable development guiding procedures vis-a-vis internationalisation. Therefore, this discussion adds voice to the existing argument on the need for higher education institutions in SADC member states to move towards an integrated higher education system.

Keywords: Experiences, Harmonization, Higher Education, Southern Africa Development Community, Sustainable Development

INTRODUCTION

Southern Africa Development Community – SADC comprises fifteen (15) countries in Eastern and Southern Africa. These are Angola, Botswana, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Lesotho, Madagascar, Malawi, Mauritius, Mozambique, Namibia, Seychelles, South Africa, Swaziland, Tanzania, Zambia, and Zimbabwe, which were previously colonized by countries such as Britain, Portugal, Germany, etc.[1] It is significant to note that in these countries at independence, the level of development in higher education was not that desirable.[2]

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[1] Marko Kwaramba, "Internationalisation of Higher Education in Southern Africa with South Africa as a Major Exporter.," *Journal of International Education and Leadership* 2, no. 1 (2012): n1.
[2] G D Kamper, "Higher Education in the Southern African Development Community-a Vision," *South African Journal of Higher Education* 16, no. 1 (2002): 53–59.

Therefore, SADC in its vision anchored on common values, principles, and historical and cultural affinities articulates the need for the regional community to ensure the advancement of higher education to the expected levels.[3] The world over, the higher education system is regarded as the mainstay of socio-economic and political transformation.[4] In this context, SADC acknowledges the harmonization of higher education for sustainable development as a crucial component of the programme of action in promoting its regional integration agenda.[5]

All this was under the guidance of Article 8 of the SADC protocol on education with an emphasis on higher education covering areas of promoting admission of students from other countries; harmonization and standardization of admission requirements; devising mechanisms of credit transfer; facilitating movement of staff and from the region for study, research, teaching-learning, etc.[6] Hence, these were meant to take the form of an exchange of knowledge, skills, and experiences to achieve the harmonization of regional higher education.[7] In this regard, SADC is seen as having an initiative targeted at advancing the ideals of harmonizing higher education for sustainable development.[8]

Higher education harmonization for sustainable development can be a dilemma when the following questions a brought forward: What can harmonization mean for a higher education programme, with students from member states with limited interaction?.[9] This disseminates the need for a multi-dimensional approach to higher education through convergence, comparability, and consistency.[10] Most higher education institutions in SADC tend to give extra attention to human resource capacity building, at the expense of other practices, like internationalisation though these are some of the ingredients for promoting quality assurance.[11] Hence, producing sustainable outcomes through higher education harmonization proved difficult to achieve.[12] However, not much has been researched with respect to the harmonization of higher education in SADC.[13] Thus, there is a dearth of literature that explores issues concerning the harmonization of higher education for sustainable development in SADC. Hence, the need for this paper to interrogate this gap with the use of content analysis with the view to contribute to the limited sources articulating the identified themes. In this case, the discussion is grounded in the following themes: conceptualisation of harmonization of higher education for sustainable development, the rationale for the harmonization of higher education for sustainable development, and dimensions propelling the harmonization of higher education for sustainable development.

METHODOLOGY

This paper conducts a qualitative content analysis to interrogate the harmonization of higher education in SADC.[14]This gives the possibility of understanding the dormant content of the diverse accounts of the social realities in higher education harmonization for sustainable development. [15]Hence, this threefold literature search strategy was used to identify studies on the conceptualization of higher education harmonization for sustainable development in SADC, and conditions and instruments enabling higher education harmonization in SADC. The

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[3] S. Bashir, *Trends in International Trade in Higher Education: Implications and Options for Developing Countries* (Washington DC: World Bank, 2007).

[4] Kayode Asaju, "The University System, Social Change and Sustainable Development in Nigeria," *African Social Science and Humanities Journal* 4, no. 2 (2023).

[5] Andrea M Herrmann et al., "'We Don't Need No (Higher) Education'-How the Gig Economy Challenges the Education-Income Paradigm," *Technological Forecasting and Social Change* 186 (2023): 122136.

[6] Raphael Jingura and Reckson Kamusoko, "A Framework for Enhancing Regulatory Cooperation in External Quality Assurance in Southern Africa," *Quality in Higher Education* 24, no. 2 (2018): 154–67; Southern Africa Development Community, *Protocol on Education and Training* (Gaborone: SADC Secretariat, 1997)..

[7] K. Hahn and D. Teferra, " Tuning as an Instrument of Systematic Higher Education Reform and Quality Enhancement: The African Experience," *Tuning Journal for Higher Education* 1 (2017): 127-163.

[8] Emnet Tadesse Woldegiorgis, "The Dynamics of Globalisation and Internationalisation Processes Shaping the Policies for African Higher Education," in *Higher Education in Sub-Saharan Africa in the 21st Century: Pedagogy, Research and Community-Engagement* (Springer, 2023), 87–105.

[9] R.S. Jones, "Education Reform in Korea," Economics Department Working Paper, 2013, https://oecd.org/eco/surveys/Korea.

[10] Jane Knight and Emnet Tadesse Woldegiorgis, "Regionalization of African Higher Education: Progress and Prospects," 2017.

[11] Dickson Okoree Mireku and Brandford Bervell, "A Decade of Quality Assurance in Higher Education (QAiHE) within Sub-Saharan Africa: A Literature Review Based on a Systematic Search Approach," *Higher Education*, 2023, 1–46.

[12] Lars Hartvigson and Almas Heshmati, "Sustainability of Cooperation in the International Development of African Higher Education," *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research* 67, no. 3 (2023): 489–503.

[13] Garwe E.C. and Thondhlana J., "Harmonisation of Higher Education: Internationalisation Focus," https://events.aau.org/corevip/wpcontent/uploads/sites/7/2019/07/HARMONISATION-OF-HIGHER-EDUCATION.-INTERNATIONALISATION-FOCUS.pdf, 2019.

[14] Higgins JPT and Green S., "Cochrane Handbook for Systematic Reviews of Interventions Version 5.1.0," *Www.Handbook.Cochrane.Org.* (The Cochrane Collaboration, March 2011).

[15] Ailin Sheydayi and Hashem Dadashpoor, "Conducting Qualitative Content Analysis in Urban Planning Research and Urban Studies," *Habitat International* 139 (2023): 102878.

review summed up sixty (60) articles extracted from Elsevier, Scopus, Google Scholar, Web of Science, DHTE, DOAJ, and AJOL databases for peer-reviewed articles studies on harmonization in higher education published between 2004 and 2023 using single and combined search terms.[16] These were chosen because the sources allowed the researchers to analyse and make literature expansively comprehend the issue under investigation.[17] This was meant to ensure coverage of all relevant literature.[18] The retrieved reference list was examined for potentially relevant articles based on titles and abstracts. The identified papers were perused several times using a set eligibility criterion with the view to assess whether they could be included or excluded. Generated data were analyzed through comparing sources and concepts.[19] In this regard, data was conceptualized under the recurrent themes presented in the findings.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

SADC member states are endlessly reforming, and fine-tuning their higher education systems with the view to promote intercultural awareness, engagement, and competition.[20] Hence, this transformation requires their maximum cooperation and collaboration such that they can revamp their higher education to give it a 'harmonized position.'[21] It is against this background that this section interrogates this issue guided by the themes below.

Conceptualisation of higher education harmonization for sustainable development

In this discussion, the term 'harmonization' is used to refer to contexts that highlight issues to do with regional higher education integration, cooperation, or partnership.[22] Hence, the harmonization of higher education came with the need for a tactful offensive among regional blocs such as the SADC.[23] Inter-academic cooperation amongst higher education institutions, students, or staff is perceived as one of the mechanisms that could benefit SADC.[24] This created the need for the promulgation of the harmonization protocols with the view to facilitate higher education reforms and initiatives within SADC.[25] Hence, there is a need for this section to conceptualize higher education harmonization. This provides a theoretical basis for the impending discourse. Higher education harmonization has evolved and developed in the differentiated landscape in SADC and beyond due to social, political, and economic influences.[26] Thus, higher education harmonization in SADC cannot be divorced from the broader discussion and identification of socio-political and economic regional formation.[27] It is for this reason that this section focuses its attention on higher education harmonization as a concept. There is no consensus on the exact meaning of higher education harmonization.[28]

[16] Purnima Rao et al., "A Systematic Literature Review on SME Financing: Trends and Future Directions," *Journal of Small Business Management* 61, no. 3 (2023): 1247–77.

[17] M Achieng, "A FRAMEWORK FOR ASSESSING THE ROLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION PEDAGOGIES IN ACHIEVING SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS IN AFRICA," in *EDULEARN23 Proceedings* (IATED, 2023), 4584–93.

[18] Helen Aveyard, "Doing a Literature Review in Health and Social Care: A Practical Guide 5e," 2023.

[19] Caleb Debrah, Amos Darko, and Albert Ping Chuen Chan, "A Bibliometric-Qualitative Literature Review of Green Finance Gap and Future Research Directions," *Climate and Development* 15, no. 5 (2023): 432–55.

[20] Milton Gwakwa, "Tertiary Education Curricula Internationalisation in Southern Africa: Its Impact on Global Employment Opportunities.," *Journal of Education and Practice* 7, no. 13 (2016): 78–86.

[21] Benedetto Lepori et al., "The European Tertiary Education Register, the Reference Dataset on European Higher Education Institutions," *Scientific Data* 10, no. 1 (2023): 438.

[22] Blessing Moyo and Jeffrey Kurebwa, "Implications for Harmonization of Higher Education Minimum Bodies of Knowledge in the SADC Region: The Case of Zimbabwe and South Africa," in *Global Perspectives on the Internationalization of Higher Education* (IGI Global, 2023), 199–215.

[23] Tia Loukkola and Thérèse Zhang, *Examining Quality Culture: Part 1-Quality Assurance Processes in Higher Education Institutions* (European University Association Brussels, 2010).

[24] Hamidou Nacuzon Sall and Baye Daraw Ndjaye, "Higher Education in Africa: Between Perspectives Opened by the Bologna Process and the Commodification of Education," *European Education* 39, no. 4 (2007): 43–57.

[25] Chinedu I O Okeke, "A Neglected Impediment to True Africanisation of African Higher Education Curricula: Same Agenda, Differential Fee Regimes," *Journal of Higher Education in Africa/Revue de l'enseignement Supérieur En Afrique* 8, no. 2 (2010): 39–52.

[26] M.K. Hu and Kee. D.M.H., "Harmonising Global Higher Education: Optimise Learning in the New Normal," in *Shaping a Humane World through Global Higher Education: Pre-Challenges and Post-Opportunities during a Pandemic*, ed. E. J. Valeau, R. L. Raby, and U. Gaulee (STAR Scholars., 2022), 131–40.

[27] Christiane Dienel, *Globalizing Higher Education and Strengthening the European Spirit: How the Bologna Reform Has Changed Our World* (Taylor & Francis, 2023).

[28] Paul Tiyambe Zeleza, "Internationalization in Higher Education: Opportunities and Challenges for the Knowledge Project in the Global South," 2012, https://api.semanticscholar.org/CorpusID:159368492.

However, this concept can be described as a process of integrating a regional, and intercultural dimension into the purpose, functions, or delivery of higher education.[29] In support, De Wit articulates it as an intentional process of integrating a regional dimension into higher education to improve the quality of teaching, research, community service, innovation, and industrialization.[30] Thus, this creates a platform for the students and lecturers to make a significant contribution to the scientifically and technologically charged society. Therefore, higher education harmonization can be considered as a means to achieve quality and promote public good, rather than as an end.[31] There is a need to acknowledge that though higher education harmonization promotes active and willing movement of national boundaries, it respects the idea of nationalities and sovereignty of SADC member states.[32]

According to Mhlanga, harmonization denotes the grouping of higher education systems of member states within a specified geographical location (i.e., SADC) to strengthen cooperation and sharing as a strategy for achieving development.[33] Thus, it's an intentional process comprised of interrelated approaches that focus on practical activities; frameworks, and structures that oversee intra-regional initiatives; and declarations of intent, protocols, agreements, etc.[34] In this context, for SADC higher education harmonization enhances graduate employability as well as local and international recognition of qualifications to promote mobility.[35] Hence, higher education harmonization is grounded in the principles of pedagogical pluralism; implying the awareness of the firm and weak points of each of the educational approaches; that assumes that the combination of approaches will vary at each stage of the student's development; and field overlap.[36]

In this context, the discussion about higher education harmonization is all about transnational cooperation between qualification systems. This is all done with the view to enhance transparency, comparability, portability, and quality of qualifications and skills between the regional members.[37] This formalized cooperation and partnerships should build trust between different higher education systems within SADC.[38] In other words, higher education harmonization can be realized in the following direction: development of abilities that adapt new information to the regional environment; accumulation of new knowledge; and well-qualified training of specialists across diverse fields. From this higher education harmonization in SADC can be acknowledged as a broad concept that incorporates facets inclusive of credit accumulation and transfer systems; minimum bodies of knowledge for study programmes; frameworks for staff grading and promotion; quality assurance standards concerning qualifications, examinations, research, governance, etc.[39]

Rationale for higher education harmonization for sustainable development

In this 21st century, higher education is expected to be viable and self-motivated in its quest to contribute towards local and international sustainable development. This requires the concerned institutions to inculcate in the students with relevant knowledge, skills and attitudes. In addition, courses, programmes and modules need to respond to the demands of the global village. In this context, harmonization is considered a tactical approach that can be considered for integrating higher education with the view to achieving regional integration.[40] Therefore, higher education harmonization in SADC is seen as a deliberate process targeted at building on what already exists within the member states.[41] This is against the background that regional cooperation and

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[29] J. Knight, " Toward African Higher Education Regionalisation and Harmonisation: Functional, Organisational, and Political Approaches. Volume 21 of International Perspectives on Education and Society. ," in *The Development of Higher Education in Africa: Prospects and Challenges* , ed. A. W. Wiseman and C. C. Wolhuter (London: Emerald Group, 2013), 347–73.

[30] Hans De Wit, "Reconsidering the Concept of Internationalization," *International Higher Education*, no. 70 (2013): 6–7.

[31] De Wit, "Reconsidering the Concept of Internationalization."

[32] N. Jooste and P. Naude, *Internationalisation of Higher Education. A Policy Framework.*, vol. 4, 2004.

[33] Ephraim Mhlanga, "Regionalisation and Its Impact on Quality Assurance in Higher Education," *Creative Education* 3, no. 06 (2012): 1079.

[34] Knight, " Toward African Higher Education Regionalisation and Harmonisation: Functional, Organisational, and Political Approaches. Volume 21 of International Perspectives on Education and Society. ."

[35] African Union Commission, *African Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in Higher Education* (Addis Ababa: African Union Commission, 2018).

[36] Ekaterina V Zvereva, Nataliya M Belenkova, and Irina I Kruse, "From the Economic Union to the Harmonisation of Higher Education in the BRICS Countries: The Experience of RUDN University," *Space and Culture, India* 7, no. 5 (2020): 60–69.

[37] Evelyn Chiyevo Garwe, "Harmonisation of Higher Education Tensions: Does One Size Fit All?," *Academia Letters*, April 11, 2021, https://doi.org/10.20935/AL785.

[38] De Wit, "Reconsidering the Concept of Internationalization."

[39] Foluke N Bolu-Steve, Bola O Makinde, and Joshua A Omotosho, "University of Ilorin Academic Staffs' Perception of the Harmonisation of Academic Programmes and Qualifications," *Makerere Journal of Higher Education* 7, no. 1 (2015): 31–43.

[40] Jane Knight, "Regionalization of Higher Education in Asia: Functional, Organizational, and Political Approaches," *The Palgrave Handbook of Asia Pacific Higher Education*, 2016, 113–27.

[41] Ulrich Teichler, "Internationalisation of Higher Education:European Experiences,"*Asia Pacific Education Review* 10 (2009):93–106.

alignment of higher education systems are increasingly becoming important as a way to foster international relations.[42]

It is in this context, that section interrogates the rationale for higher education harmonization in SADC based on the internationalisation theory. In the higher education context, it advocates for the shift in patterns of education and training in higher education institutions within SADC.[43] Thus, due to globalization, higher education institutions have been forced to transform knowledge and skills into products and services that can be traded on open regional and international markets.

This created the platform for SADC to create knowledge and skills networks through harmonization of higher education. This is expected to be possible through the harmonization of human capital development systems.[44] This has cultivated the spirit of cooperation and collaboration between diverse academics and students, in the context of benchmarked standards and competencies.[45] Thus, this is critical in enabling member states to be competitive and attract students within Africa and beyond.[46] In this case, harmonization is viewed from a transformational perspective, a move crucial for decolonizing curricula.

Dimensions propelling higher education harmonization process for sustainable development

It is significant to acknowledge that worldwide regional corporations have been viewed in the context of proximity and patterns of exchange.[47] Hence, these have been conceptualized and actualized taking into consideration the prevailing norms of time and space. In this context, higher education harmonization is expected to transform relations between SADC member states. However, these relations are at times characterized by tensions between each state's sovereignty in the higher education sector and the move towards its harmonization by SADC through the establishment of an education protocol.[48] Despite, the existence of this threat, SADC member states have made efforts to achieve the protocol on higher education's goals through the establishment of national regulatory agencies and quality assurance systems. It is a truism that higher education within the SADC states is grounded in various forms of regulation, for example, South Africa – the Council for Higher Education and the Higher Education Quality Council; Mozambique – National Commission for Quality Assurance; Namibia and Zimbabwe – National Councils of Higher Education; and Botswana – Tertiary Education Council.[49]

Hence, these regulatory agencies and quality assurance systems are responsible for coordination and coherence through integration into regional higher education structures and functions.[50] In this regard, these regulatory actions are considered crucial in the development of more a robust and tangible higher education harmonization platform. Hence, the a need for the respective regulatory agencies to shift focus from the regulatory function to one of delivery. In this context, these agencies feed into a SADC higher education frame that has well-articulated structures.[51] These structures are developed in such a way that they operate for the promotion of the contemporary functions of higher education. It's important to acknowledge that these structures operate with an explicit integrated purpose of meeting SADC's higher education demands and expectations (i.e.,

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[42] Henok Asmelash and T E Kassahun, "Higher Education in the Framework of African Continental and Regional Integration," *Materials on African Regional and Continental Integration in Higher Education*, 2022, 65; Robert Wagenaar, "The Myth of Power: Governing Reform in the Bologna Process of Higher Education," in *From Actors to Reforms in European Higher Education: A Festschrift for Pavel Zgaga* (Springer, 2022), 45–63.

[43] Ibrahim Albidewi and Radi Tulb, "PROMISE AND CHALLENGE OF E-LEARNING--LITERATURE REVIEW," *European Scientific Journal* 10, no. 1 (2014).

[44] N. Dorasamy, "Rationale for Internationalisation of Higher Education and Associated Challenges. ," in *Perspectives on Comprehensive Internationalisation of Higher Education*, ed. N. Dorasamy and G. Mugano (Cape Town: AOSIS Books, 2022), 51–72.

[45] Fred K Weigel et al., "Diffusion of Innovations and the Theory of Planned Behavior in Information Systems Research: A Metaanalysis," *Communications of the Association for Information Systems* 34, no. 1 (2014): 31.

[46] Evelyn Chiyevo Garwe and Juliet Thondhlana, "Higher Education in Zimbabwe," in *Chronicles on African Philosophy of Higher Education,* (Brill, 2023), 107–34.

[47] Alice Cohen and James McCarthy, "Reviewing Rescaling: Strengthening the Case for Environmental Considerations," *Progress in Human Geography* 39, no. 1 (2015): 3–25.

[48] Woldegiorgis, "The Dynamics of Globalisation and Internationalisation Processes Shaping the Policies for African Higher Education."

[49] O. Oyewole, "Harmonization of Degree Structures and Regional Qualification Frameworks in the African Higher Education Space. ," *University of Agriculture, Nigeria*, 2011.

[50] Hadiza Kere Abdulrahman et al., "Conclusion: The State of Internationalization of Higher Education in Sub-Saharan Africa," in *In The Bloomsbury Handbook of the Internationalization of Higher Education in the Global South* (Bloomsbury, 2020), 585–95.

[51] Agnes M Banda and Daniel L Mpolomoka, "A Critique of the Southern African Development Community's Protocol on Education and Training," in *Sustaining Higher Education Through Resource Allocation, Learning Design Models, and Academic Development* (IGI Global, 2023), 203–27.

public-private sector research, innovation, and production). Thus, this section centres on articulating dimensions that interact in a thrust to enable higher education harmonization for sustainable development in SADC.
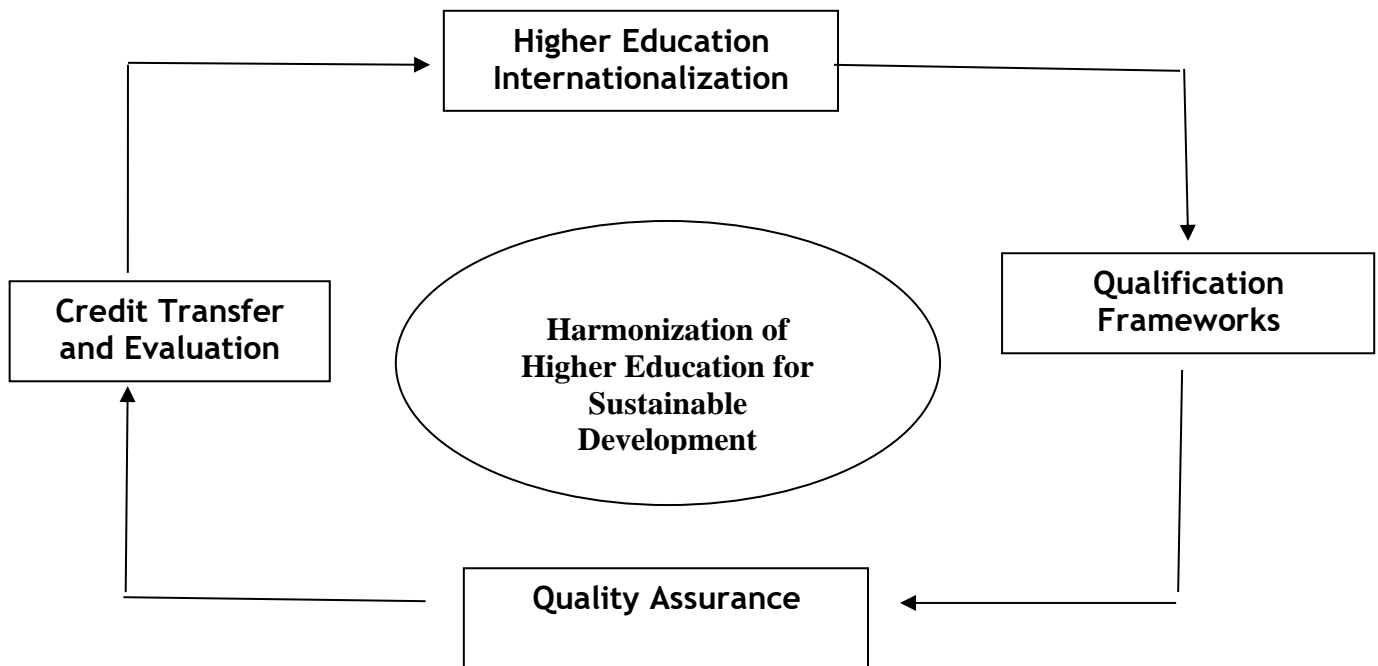

Figure 1: Dimensions of higher education harmonization process for sustainable development

The above figure is a pictorial representation of the interaction of various dimensionsin the integration of different national qualifications frameworks into a harmonized SADC framework.[52] This higher education mantra ensures transparency, partnership, and compatibility, of higher education within SADC,[53] based on the following dimensions:

a. *Higher education internationalization*

In SADC, higher education internationalization as a concept and strategy has been driven by multi-faceted and dynamic factors.[54] These include the policies and procedures undertaken by systems and institutions to cope with the regional and global academic standards.[55] Hence, the promulgation of ingenuities such as branch campuses, and cross-border collaborative arrangements, within SADC and even beyond to ensure quality preparation of human capital that is functional within their countries and even beyond the borders. Therefore, higher education internationalization integrates intercultural dimensions into teaching, community service, research, innovation and industrialization functions of the institution. Thus, this denotes the process of embedding intercultural dimension into policies, and procedures such that the international dimension remains at the core of the institutions' operations and is sustainable.

b. *Qualification framework*

This is a framework presenting the system of qualifications for SADC's higher education for sustainable development.[56] Thus, it is linked to the strategies of higher education management towards qualifications at the regional level. In other words, it has a detailed method for developing higher education curriculums. In SADC's

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[52] Garwe, "Harmonisation of Higher Education Tensions: Does One Size Fit All?"

[53] Hahn and Teferra, " Tuning as an Instrument of Systematic Higher Education Reform and Quality Enhancement: The African Experience."

[54] Hans de Wit, "Internationalization in Higher Education, a Critical Review," *SFU Educational Review* 12, no. 3 (2019): 9–17.

[55] Philip G. Altbach and Jane Knight, "The Internationalization of Higher Education: Motivations and Realities," *Journal of Studies in International Education* 11, no. 3–4 (September 18, 2007): 290–305, https://doi.org/10.1177/1028315307303542.

[56] Thamasan Suwanroj et al., "Qualifications Framework of Essential Learning Outcomes for Computer Innovation and Digital Industry Professionals," *International Journal of Information and Education Technology* 13, no. 2 (2023).

context, qualification frameworks aim to contribute towards increasing the transparency between the compared national qualification systems within the region and beyond based on trust and transparency.[57] In addition, these include articulated scope, underpinning principles, governance arrangements, a set of level descriptors, and referencing criteria.[58] In other words, these have specified linkages to quality assurance regimes and guidelines for the recognition of prior learning, etc.[59] However, challenges can be encountered when using these qualification frameworks for regional standardization, as there might be different levels of abstraction at national and transnational levels, and a need to consider levels' progression.[60] Hence, the a need for benchmarking the level of a given qualification.

In this case, benchmarking denotes the process of creating the level of a given qualification by comparing it with an identified benchmark, after an analysis or mapping of the qualification's content.[61] Thus, this process results in the establishment of a relationship between the levels of a regional meta-framework (like the SADC Qualifications Framework) and the national qualifications framework or system, making the regional framework a 'translation device' for qualifications.[62] The rationale behind this process lies in the variety in the design of the regional qualifications frameworks' building blocks, such as learning outcomes, levels, level descriptors, and credits, between countries and regions.[63] Therefore, these differences in design require an agreed, reliable, and transparent process to make the similarities and differences understandable for policymakers and the broader public.

c.   *Quality assurance*

From a SADC perspective, higher education harmonization for sustainable development can only be possible if member states have trust in each other's quality of qualifications systems and the qualifications they benchmark.[64] Therefore, institutions in SADC are expected to have a quality assurance doctrine committed to continuous improvement to meet the expectations of the competitive environment regionally and the world over.[65] In this context, quality assurance is at the centre of higher education operations with the view to enhance their qualifications' value and relevance. Higher education quality assurance creates the need for individual institutions to accept responsibility for their management holistically with the view to ensure the integrity of outcomes.[66] For example, the Council on Higher Education in South Africa has adopted a framework of qualification standards in higher education (Council on Higher Education, 2013). Thus, as higher education institutions seek to enhance their capacity to operate, quality assurance recognizes autonomy.[67] In this context, higher education institutions are responsible for assuring the quality of their products.

This forms the basis for SADC to acknowledge, quality assurance as a key principle for proper control, organization, and coordination of activities in higher education.[68] Hence, the call for national quality assurance systems to be aligned with the regional higher education protocol. In this regard quality assurance is expected to ensure that national qualifications are in tandem with the SADC's standards and that the bearers of the

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[57] Hu and Kee. D.M.H., "Harmonising Global Higher Education: Optimise Learning in the New Normal."

[58] Anastasia Atabekova, "ICT-Based Visualization for Language and Culture Mediation Skills Training: Addressing Societal Needs," *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences* 237 (2017): 209–15.

[59] Peter Materu and Petra Righetti, "Quality Assurance in Sub-Saharan Africa," *Research in Comparative and International Education* 5, no. 1 (2010): 3–17.

[60] F. Maringe and N. (eds) Foskett, *Globalization and Internationalization in Higher Education: Theoretical, Strategic and Management Perspectives* (London: Continuum International, 2010); Mohammad Moshtari and Alireza Safarpour, "Challenges and Strategies for the Internationalization of Higher Education in Low-Income East African Countries," *Higher Education*, 2023, 1–21.

[61] Ngepathimo Kadhila and Eugene Lizazi Libebe, "Policy Issues in the Harmonisation of Quality Assurance Systems for Higher Education in Africa," in *Routledge Handbook of Public Policy in Africa* (Routledge, 2021), 423–34.

[62] Juma Shabani and Peter Okebukola, "Qualification Recognition and Frameworks in Africa," in *Regionalization of African Higher Education* (Brill, 2017), 135–50.

[63] George N Shava et al., "Higher Education Institutions' Sustainable Development towards Agenda 2030: A Global Goals in Policy and Curriculum," *International Journal of Research and Innovation in Social Science* 7, no. 4 (2023): 1320–36.

[64] World Bank, *Higher Education Quality Assurance in Sub-Saharan Africa* (Washington DC: World Bank, 2009).

[65] Marina Godinho Antunes, Joaquín Texeira Quirós, and Maria do Rosário Fernandes Justino, "The Relationship between Innovation and Total Quality Management and the Innovation Effects on Organizational Performance," *International Journal of Quality & Reliability Management* 34, no. 9 (2017): 1474–92.

[66] Romina Ifeoma Asiyai, "Best Practices for Quality Assurance in Higher Education: Implications for Educational Administration," *International Journal of Leadership in Education* 25, no. 5 (2022): 843–54.

[67] Vitaliy Kobets and Nataliia V Osypova, "Identification Of Factors For Providing The Higher Education Quality Assurance For Students," *International Journal for Quality Research* 17, no. 1 (2023).

[68] Bassey Asuquo Bassey, Valentine Joseph Owan, and Judith Nonye Agunwa, "Quality Assurance Practices and Students' Performance Evaluation in Universities of South-South Nigeria: A Structural Equation Modelling Approach," *British Journal of Psychological Research* 7, no. 3 (2019): 1–13.

qualifications have attained the expected learning outcomes.[69] Therefore, a SADC quality assurance system creates a platform for the harmonization of qualifications and awards to students.[70] It is against this background that regional quality assurance dimensions are crucial in supporting skills partnerships, thereby building trust in the qualifications attained. This can only be possible when a coordinated cross-national network quality assurance system is in existence.

d. Credit transfer and evaluation

It should be acknowledged that credit accumulation and transfer is another approach that SADC can consider when working towards higher education harmonization for sustainable development.[71] Consequently, the SADC qualifications framework emphasizes a credit system for technical-vocational education and training, and a credit transfer and accumulation system for higher education.[72] This approach intends to facilitate the transfer, recognition, and accumulation of assessed learning outcomes of individuals. Ncube, et al. postulated that higher education harmonization for sustainable development involves the coordination of programmes, courses, or modules using agreements based on minimum bodies of knowledge.[73] These are taken as a way of ensuring equivalency and comparability of qualifications between institutions within SADC.

Thus, this aims to improve transparency, transnational mobility, and competencies portability in a borderless lifelong learning area.[74] In addition, this intends to improve the mobility and portability of qualifications at the national level between various sectors of the economy and within the labour market.[75] However, its success heavily depends on the effectiveness of the quality assurance systems in place. Credential evaluation is regarded as the simplest way for skills recognition: a competent body evaluates the content of a foreign qualification and then (sometimes another agency) makes a decision to recognize it (partially or fully).[76] This process of comparing qualifications unearths differences and therefore has the potential to lead to harmonization in the medium term.[77] In this context, higher education harmonization for sustainable development in SADC should be grounded in trust and confidence backed by consensual agreement to enable the portability and transferability of qualifications.[78]

RECOMMENDATIONS

From the above discussion, the researchers made the following recommendations:

a. Stakeholders should view the harmonization of higher education for sustainable development as a continuum ranging from complete diversity to complete uniformity so as to correctly conceptualise it.

b. Stakeholders should use the harmonization of higher education in the post-colonial era to serve as a conduit for socioeconomic and political development purposes.

c. Stakeholders should propose policy guidelines, which can facilitate the creation of an environment that promotes the harmonization of higher education for sustainable development.

CONCLUSION

There has been an increase in the demand for instruments and approaches that facilitate knowledge and skills harmonization in higher education for sustainable development within SADC. This has inspired SADC to develop sustainable systems that serve as an integrated reference for higher education. Therefore, higher education harmonization for sustainable development in SADC is seen as a reflexive process sensitive to various complexities, as it permits individual institutions to enjoy the fruits of regional integration. In other words,

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[69] Clever Ndebele, "Bridging the Partition between Quality Assurance Units and Educational Development Centres at University: Leverage Points for Quality Development and Enhancement," *Journal of Social Sciences* 39, no. 3 (2014): 303–16.

[70] Trust Nyenya and Benson Gabi, "The Impact of the Quality Assurance Unit on Quality Improvement in Zimbabwe Open University," *International Journal of Humanities Social Sciences and Education* 3, no. 2 (2016): 88–96.

[71] P. Mihyo, "Quality Assurance and Accreditation in Higher Education in Tanzania. ," *Unpublished Paper.*, 2006.

[72] Olaide Agbaje, "Intra-Africa Student Mobility: Benefits for Africa and Factors Militating against It," *African Journal of Teacher Education* 12, no. 2 Special Issue (2023): 144–61.

[73] C M Ncube et al., "Implementing Quality Assurance in Higher Education to Enhance Sustainable Development: Challenges and Opportunities, Zimbabwean Perspectives," *Indiana Journal of Arts & Literature* 2, no.9(2021):8–13.

[74] César de Prado Yepes, "World Regionalization of Higher Education: Policy Proposals for International Organizations," *Higher Education Policy* 19 (2006): 111–28.

[75] Zaid Ahmed Al-Anber et al., "The Role of the National Qualifications Framework in the Jordan Education System," *International Journal of Advanced Science and Computer Applications* 2, no. 1 (2023): 41–48.

[76] Jingura and Kamusoko, "A Framework for Enhancing Regulatory Cooperation in External Quality Assurance in Southern Africa."

[77] David Porter and Kirk Perris, "Institutional Partnerships and Collaborations in Online Learning," *Handbook of Open, Distance and Digital Education*, 2023, 585.

[78] Hahn and Teferra, " Tuning as an Instrument of Systematic Higher Education Reform and Quality Enhancement: The African Experience."

knowledge and skills that are crafted for various programmes, courses or modules can be used to compare and map learning outcomes within the region and beyond. Thus, higher education harmonization in SADC nurtures platforms that augment the quality of knowledge, skills and lifelong learning systems in respective member states. In addition, it improves the portability of knowledge and skills within SADC and beyond.

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