



Africa-EHEA Dialogue on recognition and quality assurance

Successes, challenges and perspectives for cooperation

18-19 January, 2024 – Barcelona, Spain

A 'Conversation' of the Africa-Sub Group of the Coordination Group on Global Policy Dialogue (CG on GPD) of the BFUG, with support of the HAQAA Initiative and IN-GLOBAL project

Venue: Barcelona, hosted by OBREAL in cooperation with the University of Barcelona



CONTEXT

In line with the 2020 Rome Ministerial Communiqué¹, the **Coordination Group (CG) on Global Policy Dialogue** under the EHEA is committed to develop continuous dialogue and consolidate contacts with other macro-regions, countries and organisations on matters of common concern and relevance for higher education. The work of the CG is supported by three regional sub-groups, respectively on Africa, Asia and the Americas².

In this context, the sub-group on Africa of the CG on Global Policy Dialogue, with the support of the IN-GLOBAL project, has hosted, throughout 2023, a series of *Online EHEA-Africa Conversations on Recognition in Higher Education*³, involving institutional and academic experts from Europe and Africa.

The aim of the *Conversations* series has been:

- *to raise awareness of the importance of recognition for higher education in the EHEA and in Africa, and to disseminate information on recognition instruments and practices;*
- *to provide EHEA and African administrations, institutions, students and stakeholders an informal, interactive space to exchange views on opportunities, challenges and good practice on recognition in both regions;*
- *to promote and facilitate the development and implementation of good policy and practice in the field of recognition;*
- *to embrace and exploit synergies between different initiatives and dialogues and reach out to new actors and countries.*

In parallel, an important EU funded initiative to support harmonisation in African higher education – “HAQAA” – also has a policy dialogue mandate, complementary to that of the CG GPD.

The HAQAA3 Initiative (Harmonisation, Quality Assurance and Accreditation in African Higher Education 3)⁴, which continues and expands the work done under HAQAA1 (2015-18) and HAQAA2 (2019-2022), is an ambitious response to African and international development objectives, framed within the context of the EU’s growing investment in African partnership.

Amongst its specific objectives are promoting quality assurance (QA) culture and quality enhancement in higher education institutions and capacities of quality assurance agencies and national/regional authorities are strengthened to develop, implement and use transparency tools such as the African Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance (ASG-QA) and the African Credit Transfer System (ACTS). It also builds capacity for evidence-based policy making

¹ https://www.ehea.info/Upload/Rome_Ministerial_Communique.pdf

² <https://ehea.info/page-Coordination-Group>

³ <https://www.in-global.eu/>

⁴ <https://haqaa3.obreal.org/>

and strengthening regional and continental integration, linked to the African Union's Continental Education Strategy for Africa (CESA) 2016-2025⁵.

The event **Africa-EHEA dialogue on recognition and quality assurance: Successes, challenges and perspectives for cooperation** was as a joint endeavour of HAQAA and the CG GPD, targeting African and EHEA stakeholders and members of the BFUG. It was intended as a means to prepare the Global Policy Forum in the Tirana Ministerial Conference of the EHEA, planned for May 2024, but also to further explore topical issues related to recognition and quality assurance that HAQAA has been advancing with diverse African stakeholder organisations in the higher education sector.

Hosted on 18-19 January, 2024 at the University of Barcelona with the support of OBREAL⁶, the hybrid event gathered, physically, approximately 70 representatives of governments, organisations, student bodies and higher education institutions from Africa and the EHEA. The objectives of the dialogue were:

- *Continue to explore the topic of recognition and quality assurance in and Africa-EHEA context, particularly by digging deeper into certain key themes of the Conversation series*
- *Recognition policies and frameworks and how they relate to institutional cooperation and mobility*
- *Recognition for life-long learning*
- *Recognition and the role of quality assurance systems and agencies*
- *Review outcomes and plans of Erasmus+ projects working on these themes in Africa and further afield*
- *Provide a space for consultation on the draft statement of the Bologna Policy Forum of the EHEA Ministerial Conference 2024 in Tirana*
- *Outline priorities for future Africa-EHEA dialogue*

The following report summarises the main discussions, take-aways and areas for further exploration.

HIGHER EDUCATION AREAS AND SPACES IN AFRICA: REGIONAL AND CONTINENTAL DYNAMICS

The dialogue was another opportunity to frame regional and continental integration dynamics, and the role that higher education plays both in Europe and in Africa. Opening presentations and subsequent discussions can be summarised with the following important observations:

1. *The Bologna Process has been a structured, voluntary, inter-governmental-stakeholder process for two and a half decades. Some of its main achievements are the way in which governments voluntarily cooperate, and trust and collaborate with stakeholder organisations representing the sector (such as in the*

⁵ https://au.int/sites/default/files/documents/29958-doc-cesa_-_english-v9.pdf

⁶ <https://obreal.org/>

- development and implementation of the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the EHEA (ESG), which ministers tasked to the 'E4' group of stakeholder organisations⁷).
2. Another notable attribute of its success has been the relationship of the Process to the EU and the participation of the European Commission, which plays an important role in ensuring synergies, as well as funding collaborative projects and mobility for the HE sector, and promoting the implementation of recognition and mobility tools. Finally, the fact that the EHEA has a consistent monitoring procedure, in the form of the Bologna Process Implementation Report⁸, in addition to regular monitoring reports at the level of stakeholders, creates transparency, a culture of data for policy development, possibilities for benchmarking and 'soft power' influence when it comes to reform.
 3. The Bologna Process is indeed a process, and the EHEA is not a static outcome. While recognition tools like ECTS are largely transcribed into national education laws and implemented in mobility programmes, recognition problems still exist in practice, at multiple levels.
 4. Hence, dialogue between the EHEA and other regions - like the African continent, which has its own regional integration dynamics - must be designed to be both diagnostic and forthright about the challenges the EHEA has faced. Different legal mandates of regional and continental bodies in Africa, and the different African sub-regional 'spaces' for higher education must be understood before 'continental' quality assurance and recognition tools can be appropriately designed and implemented. Such tools may be in the image of what the EHEA has developed, but, in most cases, are distinct, locally relevant adaptations.
 5. This has been the case with the African Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance (ASG-QA)⁹, for example, developed by an African Union endorsed task force, in the context of the HAQAA2 initiative in 2017/18. While they take inspiration from the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG), many elements are distinct, and reflect realities and priorities across different African regions: the importance of quality standards for infrastructure and basic connectivity in African campuses, the heightened relevance of quality in open and distance learning, and the relevance of teaching, learning and research to local development challenges are all distinguishable features of the ASG-QA.
 6. Respecting multi-speed processes for development is a shared characteristic of the European and African continents: While there are many examples of highly consolidated quality assurance (QA) systems and national QA agencies in Africa, many other systems and agencies are emergent. Across the continent, there is a massive demand for QA training at the level of HEIs, as well as a need for an enhanced and resourced data and reporting culture. There is a strong political push to establish a national QA agency in most African countries (where this does

⁷ The European University Association, the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education, the European Students' Union and the European Association of Institutions in Higher Education (EURASHE)

⁸ <https://eurydice.eacea.ec.europa.eu/publications/european-higher-education-area-2020-bologna-process-implementation-report>

⁹ <https://haqaa3.obreal.org/african-standards-and-guidelines-for-quality-assurance-in-higher-education-asg-qa/>

not already exist) and regional, continental and international standards play a role in providing impetus for this. The HAQAA initiative and the EU, for example, in addition to important investments from UNESCO, the DAAD, the Agence Universitaire de la Francophonie (AUF) and the World Bank, were all noted for having contributed funds and political support to the quality assurance agenda across Africa. These actors have partnered with emergent networks, like RAFANAQ (a network of QA agencies in francophone Africa) to promote common standards, like the ASG-QA, and capacity development.

7. Cooperation spaces within Africa have naturally developed according to historic, linguistic and post-colonial lines. Regional economic communities (REC), like the Southern African Development Community (SADC) and the East African Community (EAC), overlap, and certain countries leverage different spaces for different purposes. The East African Community is the only REC to have launched a formal higher education 'space', implemented through the Inter-University Council for East Africa (IUCEA), though other regions have developed integrative frameworks and tools for the HE sector, even if they lack take-up from countries and HEI on the ground (the credit accumulation and transfer system – CATs - in SADC, as well as the SADC qualifications framework, as examples).
8. The African Union offers the Agenda 2063 and the Continental Education Strategy for Africa (CESA 2025) to guide pan-African higher education integration as part of 'the Africa We Want', as well as the 'PAQAF' – Pan-African Quality Assurance and Accreditation Framework - under which tools like the ASG-QA lay. But there is no Bologna Process of Africa in a politically structured sense, and the PAQAF action lines and tools have largely been brought forward through the work of important regional associations and networks, in concertation with external partners and funders (the EU, as regards HAQAA).
9. It was once again stressed that few African countries have ratified the Addis Recognition Convention so that it may enter into force¹⁰. When asked why, interesting testimonials were offered from IUCEA in East Africa and from ANAQ-Sup, the national QA agency in Senegal: There is a large communication gap between the urgency felt in the higher education sector for this Convention, and certain political incomprehension and/or scepticism. A case has to be made for what ratifying this Convention could bring tangibly: The possibility to attract other African students, a pathway towards attracting and retaining high skilled labour in areas of economic shortage, a potentially tangible economic benefit etc. A plea was made to lobby more and better for the ratification of the Addis Convention across Africa, and for a more nuanced and effective argumentation about its importance.

QUALITY ASSURANCE ARTICULATION AND EMERGING/CONSOLIDATING QA AGENCIES IN AFRICA

¹⁰ <https://en.unesco.org/about-us/legal-affairs/revised-convention-recognition-studies-certificates-diplomas-degrees-and>

The dialogue also looked closely at current developments in Africa regarding national QA systems and agencies. Once again, the multi-speed approach to development was noted: More consolidated systems and agencies are currently adapting to new challenges and regulatory needs: Building quality culture at the level of HEIs, internal and external review that is improvement-oriented; facing emergent trends like the need for quality doctoral education and research capacity; quality-assured online learning; student access and social inclusion challenges; and ensuring economically and socially relevant skills and competencies of graduates. In other systems, the culture of accreditation is still very young, managed through a department of the ministry, and/or outsourced according to the possibilities of institutions to pay for external accreditation at what is often a programmatic level.

Within this landscape, the HAQAA initiative has supported the development of a **methodology for the external review of QA agencies and/or ministries against the ASG-QA**, which has been piloted in 15 countries since 2018. This has largely had a developmental purpose, but in the context of PAQAF, there is a movement towards the establishment of a **'Pan-African Quality Assurance and Accreditation Agency (PAQAA)'**, a political commitment of the African Union. A guardian body and promoter of the ASG-QA, the PAQAA would eventually manage external reviews of QA agencies, judgments of compliance and establish a 'registrar', similar to what exists in Europe in the form of the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR)¹¹. Its establishment is fraught with challenges, including the different speeds at which QA systems and accreditation processes are developing across Africa and the need for national political buy-in. However, Olusola Oyewole, Secretary General of the Association of African Universities (AAU), laid out the arguments for the PAQAA as an articulating body with a capacity building function, that would not overstep but rather support national and regional systems and procedures, and promote convergence. HAQAA has supported a feasibility study and extensive stakeholder consultations on the need of such an overarching body and its potential functions.

In the context of the dialogue, Anna Gover, Director of ENQA (European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education), offered a reflection on how ENQA had developed as an association of QA agencies in the EHEA, its role in external review of QA agencies, and the establishment and governance of EQAR, which is a separate body established through the Bologna Process. This example provides important lessons for Africa, and also certain difficult questions: What would be the governance structure of the PAQAA and how would it organise external reviews of existing African QA agencies, while also nurturing countries and systems that are still establishing agencies? There was general consensus that a PAQAA would indeed be needed and desirable (also from a European perspective in terms of partnering with Africa), and that while it may be a long journey to establishment, the journey would allow for continued trust to be built between the national agencies, authorities and HE stakeholders that would ultimately need to own it.

THE ROLE OF CAPACITY BUILDING PROJECTS

The dialogue offered a space to reflect on the important role of capacity building projects and mobility when it comes to advancing recognition and quality assurance in the African continent.

¹¹ <https://www.eqar.eu/>

Adrian Veale, of the Directorate General of Education and Culture of the European Commission, chaired a panel that not only examined the different EU funding instruments, now framed under the Youth Mobility Flagship of the Global Gateway package¹², but also invited reflections from other organisations supporting capacity building in this field in Africa (DAAD, AUF). Several ‘structural’ projects of the Erasmus+ Capacity Building for Higher Education programme (which has seen a ten-fold increase in budget in the 2021-2027 programming period) were highlighted. The need for more synergies, and policy dialogue that both draws from and promotes such projects, was discussed.

UNDERSTANDING RECOGNITION IN PRACTICE, AND THROUGH THE STUDENT EXPERIENCE

One guiding theme of the dialogue was “Making academic recognition work: Tools, frameworks and communication”. This sought to share illustrative case studies of how recognition frameworks, like the Lisbon Recognition Convention, are brought into practice at the country and university level, through policies, projects, staff training and support structures. The Director of CIMEA, Italy (Chiara Finochietti) highlighted the important interplay between HEI cooperation, synergetic EU funded projects (like those supporting ‘automatic recognition¹³’ in conception and practice) and the work of the BFUG ‘Thematic Peer Group’ on recognition¹⁴. The Secretary General of ANAP-Sup Senegal (Lamine Gueye) reiterated the importance of recognition tools and frameworks to both the relevance and internationality of studies in Senegal, and the attainment of SDG4. Senegal has defined a credit transfer and accumulation system, and stressed the need for scalability in the ‘CAMES’ space of francophone countries, as well as continentally through initiatives like HAQAA¹⁵. Credits systems, national QA agencies, the Addis Recognition Convention, the African Continental Qualifications Framework (ACQF) and the important cooperation between QA and recognition networks and organisations (CAMES, AUF, RAFANAQ) were all deemed important ingredients for the future integration of Africa and its global articulation from a higher education perspective.

The dialogue also offered student perspectives regarding the role of students both in recognition processes and procedures, and formally in quality assurance. The All-Africa Students Union (AASU) currently partners with the European Students’ Union (ESU) in an initiative to **train African student representatives to participate in quality assurance panels**, for example, which is a new development across the continent. When it comes to recognition, it was commented by the President of OBREAL, Ramon Torrent, that HAQAA is trying to examine **specific cases and examples of student mobility and recognition**, to understand better from a student perspective where blockages occur.

¹² https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/stronger-europe-world/global-gateway_en

¹³ <https://www.enic-naric.net/page-automatic-recognition>

¹⁴ <https://ehea.info/page-peer-group-B-LRC>

¹⁵ Over the course of 2023-2027, HAQAA3 will pilot the African Credit Transfer System in 10 African countries, in addition to providing training on recognition and credit systems and public policy debate.

CONCRETE TAKE-AWAYS AND FOLLOW-UP

The event offered a few concrete takeaways and areas for further exploration:

Complementary and synergetic spaces for policy dialogue: There are many policy dialogue initiatives that interact on different levels, engaging both Africa and Europe bi-laterally but also from global and inter-regional perspectives. UNESCO, for example, continues to offer important forums for advancing recognition and promoting the Global Recognition Convention, in conjunction with partners across the globe; OBREAL, coordinating the HAQAA3 initiative for the EU, promotes inter-regional policy dialogue on regional integration from a strongly global South perspective. The HAQAA initiative has a policy strand that will continue to foster intra-African dialogue and also interface with the EHEA, as it relates to African regional integration in HE. And the CG GPD will continue its work towards the Tirana Ministerial Conference of the EHEA, where the Global Policy Forum will be held with invited ministries and stakeholders from outside the EHEA, including national and regional representatives from Africa.

These dialogue spaces are all valuable. It is important to continue to map them, both in terms of their objectives, relative timing and outcomes, but also in terms of their target audiences and impacts. Linking policy dialogue to important project work on the ground and to evidence and monitoring must continue to be a transversal area of effort and investment.

Learning from African examples: While many African countries are still constructing their QA systems, and recognition frameworks still need to gain political traction, there are a number of important examples in the African continent from which European countries, institutions and governments can learn. African and European regional integration dynamics are different in nature, structure and velocity, and are both still in motion. In this sense, dialogue must always be reciprocal, and learning designed for mutual benefit.

African dialogue respecting African diversity and multi-lingualism: The conversation offered French-English translation, however it was commented that care must be taken not to exclude Lusophone and Arabophone Africa. Appreciation was offered to the HAQAA initiative and the IN-GLOBAL project for financing interpretation, and for the will of the CG GPD Africa Sub-Group and the Implementing Team of HAQAA3 to find practical solutions in the future to ensure that diverse languages can be respected in dialogue, and dialogues rendered more inclusive and representative of the diversity of the African continent.

Growing the student voice in recognition and QA: HAQAA, though its policy component, is currently supporting the All-Africa Students Union to collect student experiences and testimonials as it pertains to mobility within Africa and also to Europe. HAQAA offers a platform for further European governmental actors and stakeholders, such as ENIC-NARICs, to join in this effort, and expand the pool of student experiences that trace concrete successes and failures when it comes to recognition. This material is invaluable in terms of understanding how recognition works in practice among universities in the absence of harmonised national legislations, and making it work for the ultimate beneficiaries.

