Bologna Follow-up Group

Coordination Group on Global Policy Dialogue - Sub-Group "Africa"

How do we do academic recognition?

A Conversation on Instruments, tools and practices at regional and national level in Europe and Africa

In the *Rome Ministerial Communiqué* [i] of 19 December 2020, the Ministers responsible for higher education in the countries of the *European Higher Education Area (EHEA)* [ii] asked the Bologna Follow-up Group (BFUG)[iii] to develop and strengthen Global Dialogue. In line with this request, the '*Africa'* sub-group of the *Coordination Group on Global Policy Dialogue* of the BFUG organised an online *Conversation* among representatives from the responsible authorities from the EHEA and Africa about opportunities and challenges linked to the recognition of academic qualifications in and between the two continents.

The *Conversation* took place on 12 December 2022. It included experts *Mirriam Chiyaba*[iv] **(Zambia)**; *Anjusha Durbarry*[v] **(Mauritius)** and *Berto Bosscha*[vi] (**the Netherlands**) and was moderated by *Nathalie Nilsson Thiello*[vii] **(France)**. It was enriched by input from the on-line audience, including representatives of the *Réseau Africain Francophone des Agences Nationales d'Assurance Qualité* (RAFANAQ)[viii], the *African Qualification Verification Network* (AQVN) [ix] , the *South African Qualifications Authority* (SAQA)[x], and the *European Training Foundation (ETF)*[xi].

The discussion revealed a strong convergence of objectives between Europe and Africa on making academic recognition work. It highlighted that mutual trust, transparency and fairness are essential requirements for effective recognition both in Europe and in Africa. Commitment at political level, an operational toolbox and peer learning are also essential, while dialogue and exchanges going beyond the traditional North/South narrative provide valuable inspiration and cross-fertilisation.
The following article provides a summary of the *Conversation*.

This Conversation was the first in a series of three that aim at supporting the dialogue between the European Higher Education Area and Africa on issues of common concern in the field of higher education.

Importance of academic recognition for Europe and Africa

Student mobility between Europe and Africa – in both directions - is on the rise, and the recognition of academic qualifications plays an important role in this trend. Brain circulation, stimulated by international learning mobility, enhances an individual's skills and contributes to personal development. Higher education students, coming back from a mobility in another continent with new competences, bring added value to their home countries.

Mobility also offers higher education systems unprecedented opportunities: on an institutional and structural level, mobility can strengthen capacities and improve the quality and relevance of study programmes. However, mobility between Europe and Africa also confronts higher education institutions with challenging transformations.

The three main instruments governing academic recognition in Europe and in Africa are the '*Global Convention on higher education'* [xii]– ratified by 13 European and 3 African states, that has entered into force on 5th March 2023, and, respectively, the 'Lisbon Convention'[xiii], ratified by more than 50 European states, and the *'Addis Convention '*[xiv], ratified by 14 African states. By catalysing structural reforms and promoting the development of recognition and quality assurance tools, these instruments can boost student

and faculty mobility as well as the internationalisation and labour market relevance of higher education programmes. It is important that more African countries ratify the relevant conventions to demonstrate their formal commitment to international academic recognition.

A matter of trust, and a toolbox

The main pre-requisite for academic recognition to work is mutual *trust* between different education systems. Trust is dependent on local factors as much as on global interactions and dynamics. While European and African education systems are embedded in national and/or regional contexts, *good* recognition practices presuppose dialogue among the different partners. Other relevant factors extend beyond recognition practices, hence a strong need for mutual learning and for seeking complementarities. For instance, in a country like South Africa education is regarded as a means to social transformation, much more so than in certain European countries. This perspective, which assigns education an ambitious role in society and regards learners as agents of change, could inspire European countries.

Instruments such as credit and diploma mobility schemes can facilitate recognition. Quality Assurance and other practical tools also need to come into play, to facilitate the understanding of study programmes (credits, duration) and their comparability. In Europe, ENIC-NARIC networks[xv] provide considerable information on regional recognition perspectives. In Africa, information centres set up following the Addis Convention, serve a similar function and can facilitate access to details on qualifications and recognition in the EU in the context of diploma mobility.

Tools: do they work?

Recognition tools generally work well, but in Africa the availability and accessibility to information about educational systems, that enables institutions and students to take timely decisions in support to mobility, needs to be further developed. For example, foreign students coming to Zambia do not have information readily available to have their credit transferred in real time. Also, the creation of National Information Structures will be a welcome step towards UN Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4, which aims for more scholarships for developing countries[xvi].

In the European Union, *European Universities Alliances* [xvii] attempt to develop "European" study programmes together. They also cooperate, both physically and virtually, with African institutions, including through micro-credentials. Students travel around the partner countries which is positive, also for African students, who also participate partially.

Physical mobility between Africa and Europe works well, but it's important to realise that 'recognition' does not imply *accessibility* and is not a synonym for *admission*, which remains a prerogative of higher education institutions. It's also important to take care of the well-being of mobile students (e.g. in the Netherlands, in some programmes 60-80% of the total number of students come from foreign countries), to reflect on how the students' development can be supported, and to address issues such as connectivity.

New demands

New demands, stemming for example from the digital transformation and from micro-credentials, should be seen as opportunities to enhance the recognition toolbox, bearing in mind that adapting to new environments takes time. The impact of Covid also needs to be evaluated. Before the pandemic, information was not shared, or was only to a limited extent. The pandemic forced countries to think out of the box and to figure out what could be done differently. Now, more and more information can be found online, which is positive. But there is room for further improvement regarding the digitalisation of key information.

Qualification Frameworks

Qualification frameworks (QFs) – both national and regional– are effective tools to facilitate student and graduate mobility, as they enable Institutions to appreciate credits, programmes and learning outcomes.

National qualification frameworks (NQFs) make qualifications from national and regional education systems easier to understand and compare.

As for *regional* frameworks, the Member States of the European Union plus 11 other countries are working on the basis of the *European Qualifications Framework*[xviii]. In Africa, some regions, such as the *SADC,* to which **Zambia** belongs, have established qualification frameworks that enhance appreciation and trust in the comparability of study programmes: countries can align to a framework, integrate with other countries and see how this relates to the regional system. The SADC QF[xix] has been in existence since 2011, and guidelines for an African *Credit Transfer and Accumulation System* have been recently adopted. **Mauritius** is currently creating a National system for Credit Transfer.

An *African Continental Qualifications Framework (ACQF)*[xx] is also being developed, to connect national frameworks and, ultimately, African education systems.

Although not all African countries have ratified the Addis Convention, they apply the very principles embedded in the convention to ask the question: is a diploma authentic and genuine? And even if not all countries have NQFs, every country has an education system. It helps to ask: what does the country need to facilitate recognition – including prior learning? For example: in what programmes do learning outcomes come in?

When developing QFs it is important to contemplate the rigidity of credit transfer systems and QFs, and to see how QFs respond to changes in their respective environments. Recognition in Africa is not a standard process, education systems are diverse and there is lack of neutral recognition, meaning that an institution may be recognised by a country but not by another. A roadmap of the *African Network of National Implementation Structures*[xxi] set up under the Addis Convention should facilitate access to information necessary for these recognition processes. In the African context, the development of online registers of credits would contribute to the transparency and resilience of QFs. How could this tool be better developed across the region? The network is supported by the *African Qualification Verification Network* (AQVN)[xxii] which addresses issues such as the accreditation of institutions, and constantly keeps the accreditation status of a country in mind.

Since 2017, the *European Training Foundation (ETF*), in cooperation with the European Commission, has been developing a project to compare the European Qualifications Framework [xxiii] to qualification frameworks in other parts of the world. In 2023, the comparison is moving to Africa: to Cape Verde and to the Southern African Development Community (SADC).

Interregional mobility

Examples of interregional credit mobility in Europe are initiatives for *Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL*) and the *iKUDU*[xxiv] project supported by the European Union, in which **the Netherlands** are partners. In this project, students work online together, combining local institutions and a global perspective, with the aim of helping students to become global citizens.

Within the regions, it is key to cover different aspects in a balanced way: how to cooperate on matters pertaining to academic recognition, how to share good practices on tools and methodologies, and on opportunities, and how to tackle common challenges. Concerning intra-regional diploma mobility, there is still room for improvement. Options such as university alliances and 'buddy' systems might be considered. These allow higher education institutions to team up and collaborate closely, learning from each other's approaches.

Looking to the future

The *Conversation* emphasised the need for closer cooperation and innovative thinking to make recognition work. It was also imbued with the understanding that mobility within and between Europe and Africa

extends far beyond recognition, as countries and regions in both continents have so much to learn from each other.

More specific aspects of recognition will be addressed in the following Conversations in this series.

i Rome_Ministerial_Communique.pdf (ehea.info)

ii European Higher Education Area and Bologna Process (ehea.info)

iii European Higher Education Area and Bologna Process (ehea.info)

iv CEO, Zambia Qualifications Authority; former Chair of African Qualifications Verifications Network;

v Higher Education Commission, Mauritius; Rapporteur, Bureau of the UNESCO Convention on the Recognition of Studies, Certificates, Diplomas, Degrees and Other Academic Qualifications in Higher Education in African States

vi Education & Science Attaché, Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, South Africa, former Bologna Follow-up Group member

vii Policy officer for cooperation with the African region at the French Ministry for Higher Education and Research ; Former Deputy Director of the French Enic-Naric Center

viii RAFANAQ | Réseau Africain Francophone des Agences Nationales d'Assurance Qualité

ix Networking with African Qualifications Verification Framework — ACQF

x Home | SAQA (South African Qualifications Authority)

xi Home | ETF (europa.eu)

xii Global Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education | UNESCO

xiii Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region, Full list - Treaty Office (coe.int); Full list - Treaty Office (coe.int)

xiv Revised Convention on the Recognition of Studies, Certificates, Diplomas, Degrees and Other Academic Qualifications in Higher Education in African States. | UNESCO

xv ENIC-NARIC - gateway to recognition of qualifications

xvi SDG4, Target 4.b : "By 2020, substantially expand globally the number of scholarships available to developing countries, in particular least developed countries, small island developing States and African countries, for enrolment in higher education ..."

xvii European Universities initiative | European Education Area (europa.eu)

xviii The European Qualifications Framework (EQF) | Europass

xix SADC — ACQF

xx acqf_infographic_en_2020_final.pdf (europa.eu)

xxi Committee of the Revised Convention on the Recognition of Studies, Certificates, Diplomas, Degrees and other Academic Qualifications in Higher Education in African States: roadmap - UNESCO Digital Library

xxii Networking with African Qualifications Verification Framework — ACQF

xxiii Network launched for the recognition of higher education qualifications in Africa | UNESCO

xxiv iKudu Home (ufs.ac.za)

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