

## 13. Challenges facing higher education in the Southern African Development Community

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### Abstract

*In many African countries, general and higher education had witnessed a long period of relative neglect and stagnation, which resulted in a gross decline in the quality of the education. As a consequence, the South African Development Community (SADC),<sup>1</sup> higher education community and other stakeholders sought new mechanisms to improve the quality of education in the region, to counter the perceived decline and the variances in the quality of the higher education sectors. An analysis of data mapping out the higher education landscape of the SADC region identifies that the availability of qualified teachers at all levels of the system is one of the key factors enabling and challenging the potential of the higher educational sector, both in terms of development of the sector itself and the role that higher education can play in the regional development.*

*The higher education practitioners in the SADC region realise that assuring quality education is the key to achieve policy goals such as student and staff mobility and the portability of qualifications, to regulate private provision, to assure qualification equivalence frameworks and to increase co-operative teaching and learning. Up to date SADC has done the groundwork in the establishment of the current practices to propose a strategy to assure the quality for the provision in the region, but much needs still to be done to address the different challenges facing the sector, to ensure sufficient numbers of qualified pedagogical staff, to improve quality assurance practices, to address the capacity needs and to develop the national systems in such a way that it could be comparable.*

### Key words

Higher Education, Quality of Education, Quality of Provision, Shortage of Qualified Staff, Challenges, SADC

### 13.1 Introduction

The intended aims of higher education in developing countries are to provide for individual aspirations and needs for self-development, to supply high-level skills for the labour market, to generate useful knowledge that is of social and economic benefit and to develop critical citizens. However, when reviewing higher education and specific quality assurance systems in such countries, it is evident that no education system can escape certain global developments that change the perceived requirements for quality education. The following seem to be some of the most important global drivers with a specific application in developing countries in Africa:<sup>2</sup>

1. growth in the sector (tertiary education in some form or another has now become a mass phenomenon in many countries);
2. increasing diversity (the increasing volume and diversity of the student population, including international students, have led many institutions to review and diversify not only their programme offerings, but also the internal organisation);
3. demand for greater transparency and accountability (in line with international trends, institutions have moved to strengthen their reporting and accountability procedures);

4. enhancement of academic quality (establishment of quality assurance systems and structures to assure the quality of qualifications);
5. the impact of technology (major developments in information technology have led to changes in study requirements, teaching and learning arrangements, etc.);
6. changes in academic employment (there has been a strong trend towards reducing the balance of tenured academic posts, while increasing the number of short-term academic and administrative posts on contract, with career implications); and
7. new providers and new structures (the advent of non-traditional providers of higher education, for example the emergence of virtual universities, the growth of private institutions, the growth of multi-campus and transnational institutions and franchising) (Fourie, Van der Westhuizen and Strydom, 2002: 185–6).

The growth of the above-mentioned global demands on higher education is having a profound effect on SADC institutions and may sustain the pressure for more distorted practices (GUNI, 2009: 184–5) – a situation mainly influenced by the local context of the region and the individual countries, as discussed below.

### 13.2 SADC contents

Unfortunately, for many African countries during the previous four decades, general as well as higher education has witnessed a period of relative neglect and stagnation resulting in a gross decline in the quality of the education. According to information provided by the Association for African Universities (AAU), this decline in higher education originated at a time when institutions were experiencing escalating enrolments, declining resources and academic brain-drain, among other factors. The fiscal constraints faced by many countries in Africa, coupled with the expansion in demand, have led to overcrowding, deteriorating infrastructure, lack of resources for non-salary expenditures and a decline in the quality of teaching and research activities in many countries (AAU, 2009: 1). Furthermore, some countries began to face problems with educational quality during the 1990s, stemming from the rapid growth of private higher education institutions, unlicensed institutions, unqualified academic staff, sub-standard curricula and lack of essential facilities. This led to calls for a higher quality of graduates from employers, together with governments' recognition of the need to be internationally competitive and to meet the demands of knowledge societies (Materu, 2007: 17).

As a consequence, different African higher education communities and other stakeholders sought new mechanisms to improve education quality in order to counter the perceived decline. Most departments and ministries of education in the SADC countries had been given – or assumed – greater power over education, making them the major force behind the establishment of different levels of quality assurance structures. These decisions were increasingly driven by politics, rather than knowledge needs or the national capacity to support education institutions (Materu, 2007: 17).

### 13.3 Levels of higher education quality assurance development in SADC

According to research by the Southern African Regional University Association (SARUA) there are 66 public universities, 119 publicly funded polytechnics or colleges and 178 private universities or colleges in the 15 SADC countries (MacGregor, 2009: 1).

Currently, varying levels of quality assurance development exist in higher education sectors of SADC. It is generally accepted in SADC that the South African quality assurance system is more advanced and elaborate than other quality assurance systems in the region. Countries such as Namibia and Botswana have already made progress with the finalisation and implementation of certain quality mechanisms, such as higher education governing acts, qualification frameworks and institutional policies, although with variable success. In Malawi, Lesotho, Zimbabwe and Zambia, specific individual activities are in place in order to manage the quality of the institutional core functions, as well as the

creation of higher education authorities to manage and co-ordinate these processes. The limited human resources and available financial capacities within these countries force them to start small and build the quality assurance system over time, using a stepwise approach (HEQMISA, 2009: 3–4). However, the two Portuguese-speaking countries in the region, Angola and Mozambique, are both associated with the Southern African Development Regional Quality Assurance Network and are being helped by this network to revitalise and develop the leadership of the institutions and to modernise their education and training systems (Okebuko, 2009).

At national levels, more than half of the SADC countries have already established, or are in the process of establishing, a quality assurance framework. There is also a vision for a regional qualifications framework, but the progress toward its adoption is slow. This is a result of a lack of understanding of different systems currently in use in SADC and no consensus on shared terminology (Manyukwe, 2009: 3–4). The success of such a regional qualifications framework will depend on the extent of development of quality systems within each of the SADC member states (SARUA, 2008: 110).

At the institutional level, 76 per cent of the institutions have already established some kind of quality system or mechanism. However, much needs to be done to improve quality assurance practices while developing implementation capacity and raising national systems to a comparable standard (Manyukwe, 2009: 4; MacGregor 2009: 3); issues that complicate the movement of staff between different institutions and countries of the region.

### 13.4 Quality assurance initiatives

Regional co-operation to strengthen and develop the concept of quality in higher education in the SADC region had already commenced by the end of 2002. Since its establishment, HEQMISA has organised a series of conferences and workshops in the region in line with the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and the SADC Protocol on Higher Education. HEQMISA's aims are to promote the enhancement of capacity in higher education institutions to develop, manage and implement high quality and innovative curricula as well as programmes and service management through regional networking and co-operation, mainly funded by German technical co-operation (HEQMISA, 2003: 6; 2007: 9–10).

Assuring quality is the key to achieving national and institutional policy goals such as student and staff mobility and qualification portability, qualification equivalence frameworks, regulating private provision and increased co-operative teaching. SADC is already engaged in this process and has done the groundwork to develop and establish practices and to propose a strategy for the region. Therefore, qualification comparability is an important objective of SADC and necessary to achieve mobility, credit transfer and student access. This has led to a vision for a regional qualifications initiative. Progress towards such an adoption has been slow, impeded by the lack of strong national quality assurance systems. Piyushi Kotecha, Chief Executive Officer of the Southern African Regional University Association (SAURA), explains the reason for the slow pace of development, arguing that:

Experience has however taught us that the silos that come with territorial boundaries and national and political agendas are notoriously difficult to break down... It is likely these dynamics would characterise all regional harmonisation efforts (MacGregor, 2010: 2).

This harmonisation of higher education is seen by some academics and institutional managers as a way to counter the negative impact of student and staff mobility and a regional integration arising out of a lack of mutual recognition of the various forms of certification (Dell, 2010: 2). The proposed regional framework would have to be a single framework, but could also be a meta-frame enabling national frameworks to relate to the needs of the different countries. Co-ordination between regional frameworks will become

increasingly important; for example the impact of the European Bologna system has influenced some SADC countries towards adopting it (MacGregor, 2009: 3). Although there is some co-ordination, there is a lack of understanding of different systems used in SADC as well as a lack of consensus on shared terminology.

Other regional initiatives try to address these SADC problems. For example, in 2005, governments, teacher unions and private sector employer representatives from 13 SADC countries and Nigeria met in Pretoria, South Africa, under the auspices of a programme initiated by the International Labour Organization (ILO) on teacher shortages and the Education for All goals. The *Pretoria Declaration on Teachers*, accepted during this meeting, identifies factors surrounding teacher provision as key. Conclusions and recommendations included:

- Teachers make the difference in quality education for all. Sufficient numbers of well-qualified, adequately remunerated, highly motivated and professional teachers are key to realising quality education for all.
- Teacher shortages are a threat to educational goals.
- The educational systems, structures, context and cultures of each country are different and the solutions to shortages of qualified teachers must accommodate national conditions.
- The supply and demand of teachers differs by country. Shortages exist in some countries as a result of demographic and political pressures, environmental and health factors such as HIV & AIDS. In other countries, a surplus of teachers exists.
- Recruitment and retention of qualified teachers for positions in rural, remote and geographically-challenged areas are becoming increasingly difficult, particularly within certain chronic shortage subjects, such as mathematics and sciences.
- Adopting and applying solutions to these and other challenges in the higher education area requires a strong partnership among the different countries involved.

The forum agreed that the participating countries should advance efforts to design and implement a mutually beneficial teacher mobility framework for qualification recognition, licensing, recruitment and migration of teachers across borders. Furthermore, education authorities need to assess more carefully the scope and impact of teacher mobility on education and adopt policy solutions to maximise benefits and minimise negative impacts. Such solutions should respect the needs and interests of all countries and individual teachers and should be developed using the Commonwealth Teacher Recruitment Protocol as a model (ILO, 2005: 1–5).

To date, there is limited evidence to validate and sustain the claim that the movement of academics can serve as a measure for building the capacity of higher education institutions in the developing country context. In the SADC higher educational sector, where there is a great need for additional academic resources, academic mobility could address the region-wide lack of suitably qualified higher education staff. In reality, this is a daunting task for SADC higher education institutions to address and manage in an environment with major financial constraints and increasing global competitiveness.

### **13.5 Staff capacity as a factor influencing the potential of higher education**

Through data mapping the higher education landscape in the SADC region, we can identify that the availability of qualified teachers, at all levels of the system, is key to enabling and challenging the higher education sector, in terms of both sectoral and regional development.

There is a critical shortage of qualified staff throughout the SADC. Although it currently seems that there is a lack of verified general statistics on academics in higher education here, Nganga (2011: 1) indicates that there are some 32,500 academic and research staff

in the SADC region. The main reasons for staff shortages are a lack of resourcing, poor working conditions and a lack of facilities for research. This is exacerbated by 'brain drain' and the impact of external factors such as HIV & AIDS. Of those academics available within the region, only 26 per cent have PhDs and the overall staffing component has great gender imbalances. Some governments admit the challenge and acknowledge that the 'quality of learning in some universities has been declining. There is a shortage of doctoral level lecturers as a result of rapid expansion and brain drain' (National Strategy for University Education, quoted in Nganga, 2011: 1). Attracting and retaining highly qualified and experienced staff is a priority, but it is unlikely to occur in the absence of resources. The various institutions involved in the region apply different mechanisms to attract and retain qualified staff. These could be enhanced through development initiatives, exchanges, qualifications upgrading schemes and regional mechanisms for staff mobility (MacGregor, 2009: 2).

At the national level, the ministries of education have recognised these factors as challenges to improving the numbers of academic and other staff numbers and capacity. Critical staff shortages have already been identified in various areas and disciplines, but a lack of resources prevents institutions from attracting experienced and well-qualified academics to the higher education sector. As mentioned earlier, the two main subfactors impacting on staff numbers and capacity within the sector are brain drain and HIV & AIDS (SAURA, 2008: 120). The highest brain drain is migrants moving from Zimbabwe to South Africa (of which 40 per cent are professionals, mainly teachers and health workers) and Malawi (primarily as lecturers and private secondary school teachers). Other migrants include Kenyans (who prefer to study and work in universities to the south that guarantee quality learning and are prestigious, or who move to Mozambique to work as electricians, engineers, architects and teachers) (UN Women, 2010: 1; Landau and Kabwe-Segatti, 2009: 28; Nganga, 2011: 1; FMSP, 2009: 58).

Staff and student mobility is seen within the SADC region as key to achieving many of the goals of regional higher education. One of the major challenges is developing a community of scholars, through staff exchanges and visits, that could provide support for staff in areas and fields where capacity is low as well as helping to maximise the use of expertise where it is most needed. Mobility might help to share capacity, reduce duplication, develop a regional identity and promote cultural understanding. As shown by the European Community Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students (ERASMUS) in Europe, mobility can act as a quality improvement mechanism. Constraints include visa and immigration formalities; difficulties in travelling, including its cost; and the lack of qualification comparability and of agreed quality assurance systems. To be able to monitor these movements, there is a need for more data on the actual mobility of staff and students in the region.

Mercy Mpinganjira identifies in the SARUA Leadership Dialogue Series (SARUA, 2011: 34–6) certain issues that need to be managed in order to promote increased academic mobility in the SADC region, namely:

- *Funding*: Dedicated funding is a key factor in efforts aimed at promoting academic mobility (of both staff and students).
- *Recognition of qualifications*: The ability of staff to move to or of students to enrol in international institutions very much depends on the qualifications recognised as equivalent or comparable to the normal qualifications required of local staff and students.
- *Quality assurance*: Enhanced academic mobility very much depends on effective quality assurance structures that are properly harmonised in terms of agreed minimum standards as well as procedures for evaluating quality to enhance recognition of qualifications/credits, along with regional co-operation.
- *Immigration policy laws*: Promotion of academic mobility requires relaxation of migration laws and regulations by governments in order to enhance and facilitate freer movement of academics for research, teaching and study.

- *Improving direction of mobility flows:* The quality of education and research infrastructure offered in major hosting countries means that staff and student mobility is outward from SADC countries to South Africa or Western countries, mainly the United Kingdom, United States, France and Australia.
- *Mobility services:* There is an urgent need for higher education institutions to develop and monitor services aimed at supporting international academic mobility and experiences.
- *The academic calendar:* Differences in academic calendars of higher education institutions in the region make academic mobility, especially for short-term teaching and study mobility programmes, difficult to co-ordinate.

To overcome the academic shortages, many SADC countries are participating in regional co-operation and cross-border education on an ad hoc basis. The SADC Treaty, SADC Regional Indicative Strategic Development Plan (a focus on environmental education for sustainable development), a current initiative for the development of a Regional Qualifications Framework (by the SADC ministers responsible for education and training) and the SADC Protocol on Education and Training ask for co-operation across the region in areas of teacher education, professional development of educators, knowledge exchange and development and sharing of learning materials (SADC, 1997: 5–6; SADC, 2010: 1).

### 13.6 Challenges facing the SADC higher education institutions

An analysis of the data, selected literature and policy documents of the SADC countries gathered through the HEQMISA initiative identified a variety of problematic areas that are challenging SADC higher education institutions in assuring the quality of the core functions:

- *Vast differences in quality within the institutions:* Given that quality assurance is relatively new in the university sector in Africa, it is not uniformly implemented and vast differences in levels of quality exist within institutions.
- *A complex historical legacy:* Many of the institutions are located deep in rural areas, making it extremely difficult to attract well-qualified and experienced staff, impeding quality and activities.
- *Different interpretations of quality:* The divide between the more established institutions with a certain level of existing quality experience and those with a lack of quality assurance expertise and systems leads to challenges in negotiating a middle ground to satisfy the dual goals of accountability and improvement; a task that international experience has shown to be fraught with pitfalls.
- *African allegiance:* Although international comparability is important for institutions, it should also be stressed that the countries' 'Africanness' should not be forgotten.
- *Availability of qualified staff:* There is a challenge in attracting the experienced and well-qualified academics that are needed to improve academic and other staff numbers and capacity in the higher education sector, especially in certain disciplines.
- *Sustaining education:* Another challenge is in finding innovative and creative ways for sustaining education as an apex priority at national and regional levels in the midst of economic challenges.
- *Burgeoning bureaucracy:* Many academic administrators in these institutions are in only the early stages of familiarity with quality assurance principles, procedures and debates.

### 13.7 The way forward

Higher education practitioners in the SADC region realise that assuring quality education is key to achieving policy goals such as student and staff mobility and the portability of qualifications, the regulation of private provision, the assurance of qualification

equivalence frameworks and the increase of co-operative teaching and learning. To date, SADC has done sufficient groundwork in the establishment of the current practices to propose a strategy to assure quality provision in the region, but much still needs to be done to address the different challenges facing the sector, to ensure sufficient numbers of qualified pedagogical staff, to improve quality assurance practices, to address capacity needs and to develop national systems in such a way that they could be comparable with international benchmarks.

## Notes

- 1 SADC consists of the following member states: Angola, Botswana, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Lesotho, Madagascar, Malawi, Mauritius, Mozambique, Namibia, Seychelles, South Africa, Swaziland, Tanzania, Zambia and Zimbabwe.
- 2 During the last decade, the Higher Education Quality Management Initiative for Southern Africa (HEQMISA) enhanced the ability of higher education institutions in the SADC region to play a leading role in the development of the SADC countries. This has been done with specific activities to address the most pertinent and current development problems, while maintaining accountability to all stakeholders. Through this initiative, HEQMISA gathered specific sources of data (provided by participants of different higher education institutions and through commissioned case studies of the status of higher education in the SADC countries). This data, complemented by selected literature and policy documents of inter-country structures, formed the sources for the analysis of data mapping of the SADC higher education landscape.

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