

Association of African Universities  
Accra, Ghana

Experts meeting on Quality Rating mechanism for Higher Education in Africa  
(7 – 8 May, 2007)

**Welcome Remarks**

by  
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It gives me great pleasure to welcome you all to this experts meeting on Quality Rating Mechanism for Higher Education in Africa. Firstly, I want to thank the African Union Commission for this initiative, which is being undertaken as part of efforts at ensuring that the quality of education received by students is of the highest level. I have noted that the African Union Commission expect that the process will involve establishing quality criteria and developing an institutional rating system for Africa.

I wish to recall that in March, 2007, a similar meeting was called by the African Union Commission to consider the development of strategies for the harmonization of higher education programmes in Africa. It is my understanding, that the current meeting on the development of criteria for rating is not unconnected with the process of harmonization. This is because a critical part of the process of harmonization is to be able to compare performances of universities against common, agreed criteria. Neil Butcher, the AUC Consultant had earlier noted in his report that the process of comparing performances could be done at two levels. Firstly, by implementing a continental compendium of institutions and accompanying ranking system, which allows for comparison of the

performance of universities on the continent against criteria defined by and for the African higher education system. Such a system could be useful for many purposes, for example, allowing students to compare institutions across the continent with one another when making choices about where to study or supporting implementation of the AU's scholarship scheme by establishing quickly and easily which institutions should qualify for participation in the scheme. Secondly, the continental system could be used to facilitate more effective participation of African higher education institutions in global systems such as the Academic Ranking of World Universities. A continental system would surely prepare the way for institutions to participate more actively in global schemes, as well as establishing the necessary institutional systems to be able to submit data to global systems. Having established a continental system, it could also be possible for more active participation by African higher education to influence the way in which global systems operate, so that they take more account of the unique strengths of African universities.

Dear Colleagues, 'ranking' which is the system of comparative performance assessments and 'rating' which is differentiation according to a given scale are becoming popular in World educational systems. Today, international ranking such as those published by the Shanghai Jiao Tong University and the Times Higher Education Supplement are shaping domestic and international perceptions of the quality of universities. According to the

2006 Academic Ranking of World Universities, of the top 500 universities in the world, only five were from Africa, four of which were universities in South Africa.<sup>1</sup>

There have been criticisms against these ranking, especially the quantitative nature of rankings, their bias in favor of science and technology-related subjects, focus on the production of scholarly articles, bias in favor of English-speaking scholars who are more likely to be published in major research publications, among others. Various questions have also been raised against ranking. These include : How sound are the methods used?; How reliable are the data available to groups that do rankings?; Do rankings reflect institutional quality or an aspect(s) of it adequately?, etc.

It needs to be recognized by all, that there are other issues to quality of education beyond the figures that ranking generate. This notwithstanding, ranking is still useful as a tool for promoting quality and excellence in the educational system. It will provide a benchmark upon which institutions can relate with.

It has been noted that many of the criteria employed in these other ranking systems do not take into consideration the peculiar situation in Africa. It therefore falls on us as on Africans to develop appropriate criteria for the ranking of its institutions, using level ground criteria that are peculiar to the African systems. This will surely shield African institutions from the bias that favor other non-African cultures. It is for this reason that the Association of African Universities welcomes all the experts who have been invited

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<sup>1</sup> Academic Ranking of World Universities 2006 – Top 500 Universities (2006) Retrieved December 5, 2006 from Institute of Higher Education, Shanghai Jiao Tong University website: [http://ed.sjtu.edu.cn/rank/2006/ARWU2006FULLLIST-BY%20RANK%20\(PDF\).pdf](http://ed.sjtu.edu.cn/rank/2006/ARWU2006FULLLIST-BY%20RANK%20(PDF).pdf)

to this meeting. It is our hope that this meeting will formulate appropriate criteria and mechanisms for the rating of African institutions. .

Our organization, the Association of African Universities is the apex organization and forum for consultation, exchange of information and co-operation among institutions of higher education in Africa. It represents the voice of higher education in Africa on regional and international bodies and supports networking by institutions of higher education in teaching, research, information exchange and dissemination.

It was founded in Rabat, Morocco on November 12, 1967, following recommendations made at an earlier conference organized by the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in Antananarivo, Madagascar in September 1962 for the formation of such an apex organization. The Antananarivo recommendations were taken up by a preparatory Committee of the heads of African institutions of higher education, which met in Khartoum in September 1963 and drafted the founding constitution of the Association.

With an initial membership of 34, the Association now has 199 members drawn from 45 African countries, cutting across the language and other divides. In its 38 years of existence, the Association has provided a platform for research, reflection, consultation, debates, co-operation and collaboration on issues pertaining to higher education. It has provided a range of services to its members and served African higher education in a variety of ways. It has established and increased its role in the five sub-regions of Africa and is thus able, at reasonable notice, to assemble teams of experts in relevant fields from the sub-regions.

We are proud to be associated with the current efforts of the African Union Commission at the revitalization of education in Africa. We appreciate the opportunity to make very important contributions to the development of the agenda for the second decade of education in Africa.

I need to mention that on the occasion of this expert meeting, the African Union Commission and the Association of African Universities will be entering into a formal agreement, whereby the AAU will serve as the representing body of African higher education in the execution of programmes of the second education in Africa. It is my hope that the outcome of this meeting will further enhance our joint efforts to upgrade the quality of life in Africa through higher education.

Thank you.