

**REGIONAL CONVENTION ON RECOGNITION
OF STUDIES AND DEGREES
OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN AFRICA**

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I. INTRODUCTION

Since 1947, UNESCO carried out several activities intended to promote international academic mobility. These activities led to the adoption between 1974 and 1981, of five regional conventions on recognition of studies and degrees of the higher education: in Latin America and in the Caribbean (1974), in the Arab States (1978), in Europe (1979), in Africa (1981) and in Asia and the Pacific (1983)

An International Convention on recognition of studies and degrees of the higher education in the Arab States and the European Countries around the Mediterranean sea was adopted in 1976 and a Recommendation on recognition of studies and degrees of the higher education was adopted by the 27th UNESCO General Conference in 1993.

In 1997, a convention known under the name of "Lisbon Convention on recognition of higher education qualifications Europe " was adopted under the auspices of the Council of Europe and UNESCO. This convention has at least two major objectives, namely to:

- facilitate the implementation of the Bologna process relating to the reform of higher education in Europe
- adapt legal instruments and practices of recognition in force to the rapid expansion of higher education in Europe, characterized by an increased diversification of the higher education systems.

The adoption of African regional convention on December 5, 1981 in Arusha, Tanzania, was intended to contribute to UNESCO's efforts towards promotion of the international academic mobility and to facilitate implementation of some provisions of the charter of the Organization of African Unity in particular those relating to regional co-operation, training of human resources in order to promote the creation and application of the knowledge, to improve quality of the higher education and to contribute more effectively to the process of sustainable human development.

Already at that time, it was recognized that academic mobility was one of the major strategies required to promote mutual understanding and solidarity, to reinforce cultural identity and to achieve a fruitful regional co-operation in the higher education. Taking into account the diversity of the academic programs offered in the various countries and the complexity of the systems used at that time for analyzing equivalence of degrees and in order to improve opportunities for lifelong learning, it had become necessary to replace the principle of equivalence by that more flexible of recognition and to take into account not only degrees obtained, but also prior learning and experiences.

The Arusha convention is a legal framework which gives general guidelines intended to facilitate the implementation of regional co-operation as regards recognition of studies and degrees through national, bilateral, sub-regional and regional mechanisms already in place or created for this purpose.

The Convention is conceived as a dynamic tool which must be adjusted regularly to the development of higher education both at the African and international levels. It is from this point of view that the 7th session of the African regional committee held in November 2001 in Dakar recommended to revise the convention and the current practices of recognition, in order to take account of the new forms and systems of the higher education and to promote

transparency, coherence and reliability of the procedures and criteria used in the evaluation and the recognition of studies and degrees.

As for the other regional conventions, the Arusha convention relates to the academic recognition for the continuation of studies and professional recognition. The academic recognition covers three types of qualifications:

- qualifications giving access to higher education
- recognition of the partial studies
- complete stages of higher studies

This document analyses the context which underlies the adoption of the Arusha convention in 1981, the objectives of convention, commitments of contracting States and mechanisms of the implementation of convention.

On the basis of the provisions of convention and the new challenges facing higher education, in particular those relating to academic mobility, accreditation of the programs and recognition of studies and degrees, this document proposes a series of strategies required in order to improve implementation of the convention and effectiveness of the African regional committee.

II. OBJECTIVES OF THE CONVENTION

The major objectives of the Convention are:

- to contribute to the reinforcement of African solidarity, suppress constraints of the colonial past, and to promote the cultural identity of Africa;
- to improve resource utilisation in member States in the domain of higher education especially through support for the academic mobility of students and teachers; coordination of admission to higher education; and the institutionalization of systems and dynamic methods of assessment that assure a comparability of programmes of studies, diplomas and ranks used in contracting States; and
- to promote a continuous overhaul of study programmes in contracting States in order to address more efficiently, their developmental needs

In accordance with the provisions of the convention, these objectives should be achieved through activities implemented by national and sub-regional bodies and meetings of the African regional committee.

III. COMMITMENTS OF CONTRACTING STATES

The contracting States are those which signed and ratified the convention. Currently, Africa counts 20 contracting States and the Holy See. These states have committed themselves to fulfill the following obligations relating to recognition of studies and degrees.

3.1. Academic recognition

First of all, it is worth recalling that a prerequisite to the recognition of a foreign degree is that this degree is recognized in the country where it was obtained.

According to Article 4 of the Arusha convention, the Contracting States agree to take all necessary steps at the national level with a view to

(a) accepting, for the purpose of the pursuit of studies and access to the subsequent stages of training in higher education institutions situated in their respective territories and under conditions applicable locally, recognized qualifications obtained in a higher education institution situated in the territory of another Contracting State, which denote that a full course of studies at the higher level has been completed, unless a substantial difference can be shown between the general requirements for access in the Contracting State in which the qualification was obtained and in the Contracting State in which the recognition of the qualification is sought;

(b) defining the procedures applicable to the recognition, for the purpose of the pursuit of studies, of the partial studies pursued in higher education institutions situated in the other Contracting States.

3.2. Professional recognition

The Contracting States agree to take the necessary steps to ensure that certificates, diplomas, degrees and other qualifications issued by the competent authorities of the other Contracting States are effectively recognized so far as possible for the purpose of practicing a profession. However, any person holding a foreign qualification should also comply with legal requirements or conditions for the practice of the profession concerned which may be laid down by the competent governmental or professional authorities in the Contracting State concerned.

At this stage, it is worth mentioning that the above commitments on recognition do not explicitly refer to the quality of the degree obtained. This situation partly explains why some countries have not ratified convention. Indeed ratification would have forced them at least in theory to automatically recognize the degrees delivered by the other contracting States which often operate in extremely difficult academic environments that could hardly guarantee any quality education.

3.4. The exchange of information

The contracting States have agreed to exchange information and documentation relating to higher education studies and degrees.

IV. MECHANISMS FOR IMPLEMENTATION OF THE CONVENTION

The implementation of the Arusha convention should be carried out at three different levels:

- ~~at~~ national level by national bodies
- ~~at~~ sub-Regional level by sub-regional and bilateral organizations.
- ~~at~~ regional level by the regional committee in charge of the application of convention

Unfortunately, it is noted that there is not a formal co-operation between the African regional Committee in charge of the implementation of the convention of Arusha and the various

national and sub-regional bodies involved in recognition of studies and degrees. This situation partly explains why convention is not well known in the African countries and consequently why several countries have not ratified it.

4.1. At national level

The nature of national bodies in charge of recognition differs according to linguistic zones'. In the French-speaking countries, this responsibility is entrusted to national commissions for recognition of studies and degrees. In general, these commissions are made up of Representatives of higher education institutions, the Ministry of higher education, Ministry for Foreign Affairs and Ministry of Labour.

The main mission of national commissions of recognition of the studies and degrees is to advise the Minister of higher education on the various issues relating to recognition.

In general, the process of assessment of requests for recognition is guided by criteria recommended by Arusha convention. Indeed, in the case of Burundi for example, the criteria used for recognition of degrees include the following (Nsabiyumva, 2001):

- entry requirements to a higher education institution
- various stages of the academic programme
- time allocated to each course/module
- curriculum content
- qualifications of the academic staff
- teaching and learning methods used in the institution
- qualification obtained

The national commissions achieved significant results in the field of recognition of studies and degrees. Thus for example, for the period from 1966 to 1999, the national commission of recognition of studies and degrees of Burundi granted recognition to more than 140 diplomas and degrees of the higher education delivered abroad. (Nsabiyumva, 2001)

In English-speaking countries, recognition of studies and degrees of higher education is entrusted to a higher education commission which also deals with accreditation higher education programs and quality assurance.

In Nigeria for example, the National Universities Commission which deals with recognition is also responsible for accreditation of all the university programs to make sure that the minimal academic standards are reached, maintained and even improved. This exercise of accreditation also aims at assuring the employers and the academic community that graduates of all academic programmes taught in Nigerian universities have attained an acceptable level of competency in their areas of specialization, thus making them suitable for employment and for further studies.

4.2. At the sub-regional level

The implementation of convention should be carried out by existing bilateral or sub-regional organizations or those especially created for this purpose. This is the case of CAMES (African and Malagasy Council for higher education) and of the SADC (Southern African Development Community) Technical Committee on Accreditation and Certification.

However, it is important to recall that currently there is no formal co-operation agreements between the African regional Committee and the above organizations.

As in the case of national bodies there is a major conceptual difference between the CAMES which operates in the French-speaking countries and the SADC technical committee which mainly covers English-speaking countries. Indeed, the CAMES programme on recognition of degrees and certificates established in 1972 deals only with recognition issues whereas the SADC technical committee covers also accreditation and quality assurance.

CAMES was established in 1968 in Niamey, Niger by the Heads of states of the Joint Organization for Africa and Madagascar (OCAM), in accordance with a provision of the charter of the Organization of African Unity relating to the coordination and the harmonization of the policies of co-operation in higher education and research. The criteria used by CAMES for recognition of degrees and certificates are more or less the same as those mentioned above in the case of Burundi. They therefore relates to the provisions of the Arusha convention.

In December 1997, CAMES had already organized 18 sub-regional workshopson recognition of degrees and certificates. The workshops are attended by higher education experts from States member and representatives of the international organizations such as UNESCO and The Francophone University Agency . These conferences made it possible to recognize 465 degrees and certificates out of 547 requests submitted to CAMES. (Ouiminga, 1998).

The SADC technical committee on accreditation and certification was established in 1997. It consists of two technical experts from each country who are involved in issues of accreditation and certification and those from examination councils and national accreditation authorities.

The major mission of the Committee is to develop and recommend policy guidelines, instruments, structures and procedures that would facilitate accreditation of programmes and recognition of studies and degrees. To achieve this mission the committee will implement the following objectives:

- ☞☞To facilitate the development and implementation of national qualifications frameworks
- ☞☞To develop a regional qualifications framework on the basis of the national qualifications frameworks
- ☞☞To strengthen national assessment and accreditation structures, systems and procedures

The committee meets twice a year and its work involves undertaking studies and analysis of issues of accreditation and recognition which provides basis for making recommendations that will lead to comparability of criteria of evaluations and recognition of degrees.

4.3. At the African regional level

The convention is implemented by the regional Committee, composed of representatives of all the Contracting states. The secretary of the regional committee is the Director General of UNESCO but for various reasons this responsibility has been entrusted to the Head of the higher education unit at the UNESCO Regional office for Education in Africa (BREDA)

In accordance with articles 9 and 10 of convention, the regional committee meets in ordinary session every two years. It implements its mission of promotion of convention mainly through the following strategies:

- ☞by examining the periodic reports submitted every two years by the contracting states on progress made and obstacles met in the implementation of convention as well as the studies carried out by the secretariat on convention
- ☞by providing recommendations to contracting States in order to improve the application of convention.

The regional committee is can set up a working group to reflect on various issues relating to the implementation of the convention. It is in this context that the 7th session of the regional committee held in 2001 in Dakar decided to convene an experts meeting on 11-13 June 2002 in Cape Town, South Africa to propose a suitable revision of the convention in order to take account of the new developments in higher education. The experts were also requested to evaluate the current mechanisms of implementation of convention and to make the appropriate recommendations likely to improve transparency, coherence and effectiveness of procedures and criteria currently used in recognition of studies and degrees.

In order to facilitate the implementation of convention, the regional committee is also encouraged to develop effective co-operation with national, sub-regional and international organizations involved in accreditation of programs, quality assurance and recognition of studies and degrees.

Currently, the work of the regional committee is considered to be ineffective at least for the following reasons:

- ☞Between two biannual sessions, the regional committee does not carry out any activity; even not the follow-up to its decisions and recommendations;
- ☞Several countries do not take part in the ordinary sessions of the regional committee. In addition, country representatives change from one session to another, with the result that there is no continuity in the activities of the committee
- ☞The implementation of the convention should be carried out through national and sub-regional bodies. Unfortunately, as indicated earlier, there is no formal co-operation agreements between these bodies and the African regional committee.

i)The meetings of the regional committee

Since its establishment, the regional committee already held 8 ordinary sessions: Dakar (1985, 1987, 2001, 2003), Lagos (1989), Paris (1992,1998), Conakry (1995). The following recommendations were adopted by the regional committee on several occasions:

- need for improving the rate of ratification of the convention by the African States
- reinforcement of co-operation with the other regional committees and the national and sub-regional bodies involved in accreditation, quality assurance and recognition
- reinforcement of the co-operation between national dies in charge of recognition and the national information centers on the recognition
- Need for Contracting States to send to the secretariat adequate information on diplomas delivered each contracting State for dissemination in other states
- Need for capacity building of personnel of the national and sub-regional bodies involved in accreditation, quality assurance and recognition
- Need to carry out studies on procedures and criteria of evaluation and recognition of degrees
- publication of newsletters and guides on the implementation of convention

ii) *The secretariat of the regional committee*

The functions of Secretary of the regional committee have been entrusted to the Head of the higher education unit at BREDA

The assignments given to the secretariat include the following:

- to follow-up and implement the decisions and the recommendations of the regional committee
- to follow-up the decisions and recommendations of the joint meetings of the six regional Committees on recognition of studies and degrees.

In addition to these assignments, the secretariat provides to contracting states the information required in order to facilitate recognition of studies and degrees. Part of this information is circulated through the Newsletter on the Aqrusha Convention launched in September 1998.

The secretariat also plays a significant role in capacity building of the national bodies involved in recognition mainly through training workshops. Indeed, since 1997, the regional committee has requested the secretariat to organize capacity building training workshops on recognition of studies and degrees. The first two workshops were held in Lomé in Togo in 1997 and Nairobi, Kenya in 1999 respectively. Three sub-regional workshops were planned to take place in 2002-2003, in Kigali in Rwanda, Abuja in Nigeria and Tripoli in Libya respectively. Unfortunately, these activities were cancelled due to financial constraints

iii) *Recommendations of the Experts Meeting held in Town Cape*

The experts meeting made several recommendations on actions to be taken in order to reinforce the effectiveness of the convention. These recommendations include the following:

- reinforcement of co-operation with national and sub-regional bodies in charge of accreditation, quality assurance and recognition of studies and degrees,
- improvements in exchange of information,
- publication of newsletters and guides on recognition
- development and dissemination of case studies and good practice

These recommendations as well as those contained in the final report of the experts meeting were analyzed by the regional committee at its 8th ordinary session held in Dakar in June 2003 and were integrated in a revised version of the convention which was submitted to all the African countries for comments.

Contributions will be also requested from the division of the higher education at the UNESCO Headquarters in Paris, from regional committees of other conventions and from African regional and sub-regional organizations involved in the development of higher education like the Association of the African universities.

A second experts meeting will be convened this year to integrate the various contributions received and to prepare a second revised version of the convention which will be submitted to the Ministers for the higher education for adoption.

V NEW CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS FOR ACADEMIC MOBILITY AND RECOGNITION OF STUDIES AND DEGREES IN AFRICA

The world Declaration on the higher education for the 21st century adopted by the world conference on higher education held in 1998 in Paris identifies the major challenges related to the information society. These challenges call for improvement of mechanisms currently used for recognition of studies and degrees and reinforcement of academic mobility (UNESCO 1998).

Indeed, in this regard, the Declaration of the 1998 World Conference on Higher Education recommends that:

“Regional and international normative instruments for the recognition of studies should be ratified and implemented, including certification of the skills, competences and abilities of graduates, making it easier for students to change courses, in order to facilitate mobility within and between national systems”.

The regional committee is expected to play a crucial role in the implementation of this recommendation. The committee should make use of the various opportunities provided by the international higher education community, in particular the commitment made at the 1998 World conference on higher education that “faculty and student exchange programmes and institutional linkage to promote intellectual and scientific co-operation should be an integral part of all higher education systems.” and the support to higher education provided through the 2002 World Bank Policy paper.

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