An Investigation into the Challenges with the South African Qualifications Authority for Students with Qualifications from Universities outside South Africa: Case of Limkokwing University of Creative Technology Graduates

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ABSTRACT

Students from universities across the SADC region and beyond who did not attain degrees from South African universities are required to go through the South Africa Qualifications Authority (SAQA) evaluation in order to enroll for further studies in South African universities. The challenge is that they cannot attain outright admission without the SAQA certification despite having attained undergraduate qualifications at university level. This study therefore seeks to establish how universities in the SADC region can standardize qualifications in order to harmonize university degree weighting and grading for the students to proceed to South African universities for further studies. The study will use document analysis and in depth interviews in order to glean requisite information from stakeholders.

KEYWORDS: *South Africa Qualifications Authority, certification, undergraduate, harmonize, SADC*

INTRODUCTION

Students who would like to study in South African institutions after attaining first degrees elsewhere will have to have their degrees evaluated and graded by the South Africa Qualifications Authority (SAQA). The SAQA, "is a statutory body established through an Act of Parliament" (SAQA, (nd)). It was established in 1995 through the "SAQA Act" which was subsequently replaced by the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) Act in 2008 (SAQA, (nd)). The SAQA unequivocally ensures that standards are maintained within higher education (HE) in South Africa higher education.

"SAQA's main areas of responsibility include the registration of qualifications and professional designations on the NQF, the recognition of professional bodies, the management of information of the education and training system in respect of qualifications and learner achievements, the development of a national career development and advice service (a

Higher Education and Training Ministerial flagship project), as well as the evaluation of foreign qualifications", (SAQA, (nd)).

"SAQA is based on partnerships with local, regional and international stakeholders", (SAQA, (nd)). "SAQA's partners have included amongst others: the establishment of standards of generating bodies responsible to develop new qualifications, which were made up of expert stakeholders from the various sectors; a joint initiative with the Department of Higher Education and Training to establish a national career advice centre; working with support from the European Union to establish SAQA; joint implementation projects with several Sector Education and Training Authorities (SETAs) to develop workplace qualifications; the establishment of the National Learners' Records Database (NLRD) with support from the Canadian International Development Agency; long- term research between SAQA

and leading universities in South Africa; as well as working with OECD, the Commonwealth Secretariat, the SADC secretariat, and UNESCO on a variety of projects", (SAQA, (nd)).

Background of study

Limkokwing University of Creative Technology (LUCT) was established in Lesotho in 2008. This university came as a direct benefit of Lesotho's membership of and participation and consultation in the Smart Partnership Movement which was initiated by Commonwealth Partnership for Technology Management (CPTM). The existence of this university came after rigorous dialogue between Lesotho and Malaysia, it is an industry-led institution with an objective to link industry and government to the university as channels for students to work on actual industry or government related projects.

The LUCT is a private institution and originates from Malaysia, having been established in 1991. The university's programmes focus on design, creativity and innovation, and acts as an incubator to harness talent and skill development (LUCT website). According to the LUCT website, the university pioneered industry and university programme which allows students to work on projects commissioned by the institution's partners and students collaborate with industry to create original work. The university offers courses in fashion, architecture, business, media, design, Information Technology, music, games and animation. The university has got campuses in Asia, Africa and Europe.

The content for the curriculum was originally from Malaysia for the first two years of its establishment in Lesotho, this has since changed as the local academics have been granted the leeway to inculcate relevant content to Lesotho and align the curriculum to local demands and expectations. It is the LUCT roots in the Asian approach and grading system rather than the regional (African) and sub regional (SADC) that provides challenges when LUCT graduates submit their certificates to the SAQA for evaluation. This study therefore seeks to establish where exactly the Lesotho "Council on Higher Education" (CHE) and the SAQA have got problems with the LUCT grading system and how this can be solved so that there is harmonization of these qualifications for the benefit of LUCT graduates who would wish to pursue further studies with South African universities.

Statement of problem

Students with qualifications from LUCT struggle to be admitted into South African universities for further studies after graduation. This is because of disharmony in rating especially of the LUCT's Associate Degree.

Aims of study

The study seeks to establish efforts by the LUCT and the Lesotho Council on Higher Education on harmonization of programmes and qualifications for tertiary institutions in the SADC region so that there is easy of passage by students from Lesotho into South African universities for higher degrees.

Research questions

a. To what extent does the CHE Lesotho collaborate with the CHE South Africa and SAQA on accreditation of courses in Lesotho tertiary institutions?
b. What progress has been made by the LUCT in meeting CHE recommendations on curriculum development in

order for the institution to have all its programmes accredited by the CHE?
c. What should the LUCT do in order for its graduates to have ease of passage into South African universities for higher degrees after attaining an Associate Degree?

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study is harmonization of higher education. Woldegiorgis (2013) postulates that the "term harmonization has been used in different contexts sometimes to describe phenomena like integration, cooperation, partnership or collaboration, community, coherence, partnership, alignment". The "concept emerged during the industrial revolution in Europe referring the process of creating common economic and market area for free flow of capital and labour in a particular region", (Woldegiorgis, 2013). Harmonization best informs this study because "this concept is associated with harmonization processes in higher education since it involves 'narrowing of variance' in structural factors, processes, qualification frameworks, quality standards, degree cycles, and credits", (Woldegiorgis, 2013).

Literature Review

Knight (2013) writes about the importance of harmonization in H.E noting an evolution in the internationalization of H.E which calls for regional level collaboration and reform initiatives. Knight (2013) observes this as a result of the "growing number of regional based university networks, regional student mobility programmes, and pan- regional higher education associations". This, according to Knight (2013) calls for "development of regional level frameworks for academic credit systems, quality assurance, and qualifications frameworks as these reforms are based on a closer alignment of systems and policies".

Hahn and Teferra (2013) postulate that; "African higher education is undergoing major transformation driven by the 'massification' of the system" and as a result, the imperative of quality enhancement has become paramount. The "African Union Commission" has therefore declared, at continental level, the revitalization "of higher education and its quality enhancement as one of its priority areas for the future development and the regional integration of Africa", (Hahn and Teferra, 2013). Hahn and Teferra (2013) go on to write that the "outcome of these new policies have been instrumental in spawning numerous sub- regional, regional and international higher education initiatives, including the harmonization and tuning of higher education in Africa". Harmonization (Hahn and Teferra, 2013) expound, is "a multidimensional and multi- actor process taking place at different system levels that promotes the integration of the higher education space in the region". This can "be achieved by collaborating across borders, sub- regionally and regionally, in curriculum development, educational standards and quality assurance, joint structural convergence, consistency of systems as well as compatibility, recognition and transferability of degrees to facilitate mobility", (Hahn and Teferra, 2013).

Oyewole (2013) writes that the "intention of the Strategy to Harmonise Higher Education Programmes in Africa was good: the countries of Africa should work together in close collaboration to ensure quality higher education for their people. The Strategy was embedded in the African Union Commission's Plan of Action for the Second Decade of

Education for Africa (2006- 2015) as a measure to ensure that academic certificates and diplomas gained in one country in Africa can be used or recognized in another", (Oyewole, 2013). Oyewole, (2013) goes on to explain that the "rationale was based on the belief that such an initiative would help foster cooperation in information exchange, harmonization of procedures and policies, attainment of comparability among qualifications and possibly the standardization of curricula, so as to facilitate mobility for both professional employment and further study".

Yavaprabhas (2009) views the issue of harmonization of higher education from a political economy perspective, arguing that in the "contemporary liberal economic environment, higher education has been perceived by many developed countries not as a 'public good' but as one of the key 'economic resources' of the 21st century". Yavaprabhas (2009) continues to say that, "this is partly because of two important factors: the transformation of the globalised world to the so- called 'knowledge- based' society and the response to the instutionalised trade and services agreements or GATS. These two predominant factors have been the major drives that quicken the process of commercialization of higher education, education liberalization and higher education massification around the globe", (Yavaprabhas, 2009). Yavaprabhas (2009) continues to say that, "globalization has somewhat re- shaped the nature of higher education and forced national governments and inter- governmental bodies to share some common values and development agendas". Higher Education Institutions, according to Yavaprahas (2009), "around the world are required to actively adjust themselves to the shifted dynamics of global education which move towards the trends of open access for public scrutiny, especially with respect to their quality, efficiency and effectiveness in delivering 'higher education products'".

Still approaching the issue of harmonization from a political economy perspective, the Asia Development Bank (ADB) (2012) documents that, "regional cooperation and cross-border collaboration in higher education constitute big business. Increasing numbers of countries, particularly in Asia, are initiating and participating in regional and cross-border collaborations as a strategy for strengthening their higher education systems", (ADB, 2012). ADB (2012) goes on to establish that, "colleges and universities in one country generally enter into partnerships with those in other countries to increase revenue, enhance instructional quality, expand curricular offerings, raise institutional prestige", or some combination of these. The ADB (2012) cites Sakamoto and Chapman 2010 saying that the, "opportunities for collaboration are made increasingly easier by the growing economic and social integration among countries and by the widespread availability of inexpensive, high- speed communications- forces that are prominent components of globalization".

Methodology
A qualitative approach was used to collect data. This qualitative approach gave in- depth data that assisted to answer the research questions. Case study design was adopted.

"explores a real-life, contemporary bounded system (a case) or multiple bounded systems (cases) over time, through detailed, in - depth data collection involving multiple sources

of information... and reports a case description and case themes" (Creswell, 2013, p. 97). Case studies allow, "The exploration and understanding of complex issues. It can be considered a robust research method particularly when a holistic, in-depth investigation is required. Recognised as a tool in many social science studies, the role of case study method in research becomes more prominent when issues with regard to education (Gulsecen & Kubat, 2006), sociology (Grassel & Schirmer, 2006) and community-based problems (Johnson, 2006), such as poverty, unemployment, drug addiction, illiteracy, etc. were raised".

Researchers used purposive sampling to select the population. This method of sampling was used because of the researchers' familiarity with the population and the purpose of the study and the characteristics being looked for, in this study. This sampling involved the researchers, "selecting potential participants who represented the group to be studied with the aim of talking to a reasonable cross-section of people". It was most relevant for this study because of its ability for "identification and selection of information-rich cases related to the phenomenon of interest", Patton (2002) and Cresswell and Plano Clark (2011).

Face to face interviews were carried out. This was due to the possibility of detailed information provided by this method of interviews. The researchers also preferred face to face interviews because they allowed for probing for more information when clarification was needed on issues that were raised during interviews. "These were carried out one to one with interviewer and interviewees. Individual interviews are often described as a continuum, from structured to semi-structured to unstructured", Nelson (2009).

In implementing the methodology, face to face interviews carried out with each respondent were audio recorded and data transcribed. Some interviewees responded through email. Data was analyzed using themes that the researchers generated. All themes generated from the transcribed data aided in answering the research questions.

Limitations
The researchers encountered challenges with data collection in the form of some institutions inadequately providing answers to questions seeking information on harmonization efforts. The result is that the findings and results are inconclusive.

Results
Responses from LUCT alumni
The study interviewed LUCT alumni. It was established that LUCT alumni who have applied for SAQA certification indicate that the LUCT BA Honours degree is rated at level 7. This means the SAQA rates this LUCT Honours Degree as an ordinary Bachelor's Degree or Advanced Diploma. The Associate Degree is rated at level 6. This means the Associate Degree is graded at the level of a Diploma or Advanced Certificate. What also emerged from interviews with LUCT alumni is that they are not well informed, if at all, about the mere fact that if they want to go to South Africa HEIs they have to apply for the evaluation of their certificates by the SAQA. Most respondents would enquire from the interview what the SAQA is all about and how they possibly could apply for the evaluation of their certificates. For those who

applied, they raised the concern that the process is expensive as the SAQA does not carry out the evaluation process free of charge.

Responses from LUCT Management

LUCT responded to interview questions that the institution is 90% in line with the said CHE Frameworks although there are still challenges with the nomenclature which is Australia based and basically not used regionally, for example Associate Degree.

They went on to say that engagement with CHE has helped the institution to benchmark in Republic of South Africa (RSA) and this has helped to share what LUCT offers with some institutions in RSA which has made other institutions to appreciate and recognize the programmes in LUCT. For instance, the LUCT has benchmarked with "University of Pretoria (UP), Central University of Technology (CUT), and Tshwane University of Technology (TUT)" as well as visiting with several faculties at different times and desktop benchmarking with RSA universities for those who could not be reached on time. This has brought better understanding to visited institutions about LUCT's programmes which makes it easy for former LUCT students to upgrade with some RSA institutions.

The LUCT management said that the two qualifications (Associate Degree and Honours) have been classified as per local standards not how the institution presented them. By Australian standards, the Associate Degree is rated higher than a Diploma but is classified as a Diploma in Lesotho and the same applies to the Honours degree which has been classified as a First Degree in Lesotho.

The LUCT management went on to say that the CHE is expecting the LUCT to conform and transform from its original commercial Asian approach to university education to a state where it is to become a conventional University: it must have a Vice Chancellor, Deans, Senior lecturers, Professors, etc or have a direct equivalent university organogram.

Information about application to the SAQA by LUCT graduates for certification is communicated to students by lecturers and it is evident from the number of requests from SAQA to confirm graduates' qualifications. There are also two departments; Registry and Marketing which also advise students on the matter.

Responses from CHE
Efforts regarding harmonization:
Locally: The CHE responded that minimum programme accreditation standards for Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in Lesotho pursue harmonization in that at least minimum operation and provisions within the HEIs are assessed with one tool.

Regionally: The Standards for programmes and tuition providers are revised in line with the LQF which is also based on the SADC qualification framework which in turn is not alienated from international qualifications per se.

The CHE also said that there have been efforts to harmonize programme design through workshops as a way to address credits, credit loading and credit transfer. The manual was developed with all concerned stakeholders and dissemination has already been done.

Workshops have already been carried out regarding accrediting; registering the LQF aligned Higher Education programmes in the country. A draft programme design manual is already in existence. The LQF is currently going through the necessary approval stages.

In 2013, the CHE undertook a review to determine the level of the Associate Degree Programmes offered by LUCT. This was done mainly to help the employer especially Public Service as the main employer in the country to determine the level where to place holders of the Associate Degree during recruitment. The degree was placed at the Diploma Level.

The CHE also responded that they are an independent body to SAQA. Currently CHE does not have mandate and capacity to assess any qualifications at local or international level pending approval of the LQF.

Benefits:
The CHE identifies the benefits of harmonization of programmes as follows
➢ increasing mobility of students across; locally, regionally and globally
➢ Widening access into higher education space
➢ Increasing academic collaboration
➢ research collaboration
➢ Easy exchange programmes
➢ Adopting best practices among the blocs

Challenges:
The CHE identifies the challenges to harmonization as follows:
➢ Agreeing on standards and ensuring that they are not enforced upon members of the blocs
➢ Diversity of respective countries challenges smooth integration towards harmonization

Responses from the SAQA
The SAQA responded that the criteria applied in the evaluation (that is, verification and comparison) of foreign qualifications are contained "in the Policy and Criteria for Evaluation Foreign Qualifications within the South African NQF (as amended)", 2017.

The SAQA went on to say that the Associate Degree is not a full degree and will be recognized at a lower level. Full first degrees are recognized in the same way as Lesotho first degrees.

Discussion
Universities should work towards harmonization of programmes for the benefit of their graduates. Saudagaran and Diga (1998) write that harmonization cuts costs for students as they do not have to pay, for example, for the evaluation of their qualifications by foreign bodies when they want to further their studies. Saudagaran and Diga (1998) also note that harmonization ensures the spread of quality standard education, sub regionally, regionally or globally.

Sirat, Aman and Abu Bakar (2014), on merits of harmonization, write that harmonization has got the advantage of "greater mobility, widening access and choices, academic and research collaborations, enhanced collaboration on human capital investment and the promotion", for instance in the case of Lesotho, of the SADC region within the fast changing global H.E landscape. Sirat et al (2014) continue saying that the "immediate advantage of such harmonization in higher education system is presented as easier exchange and mobility for students and academics between nations within the sub region apart from member countries availability to access systems, tools and best practices for quality improvement in higher education". Harmonization is ideal for Lesotho as this can be used as a platform to start keeping up with globalization.

However, harmonization comes with challenges. The CHE Lesotho identified some harmonization challenges above. These are substantiated by Sirat et al (2014) who cite issues like barriers in language and other territory related challenges. These have to be circumvented. "Students involved in mobility programme may be faced with adjustment problems, particularly with reference to instructional practices, curriculum incompatibility and cultural diversity", (Sirat et al, 2014). On the language related challenge, Sirat et al (2014) say that, "differences in languages post a greater barrier for inward and outward mobility of students at the macro level". Another challenge of note is related to territorial constraints; "whereby each country hopes to safeguard the uniqueness of their educational programmes, which in turn, may ultimately constrain the implementation of regional harmonization efforts". To overcome this, national qualification bodies and authorities should approach and iron out harmonization efforts as equal partners without any impositions or domineering attitudes by partners.

Harmonization of programmes is therefore the answer to the challenges faced by LUCT students because both the university and the CHE will be guided by one clear regional framework and it will effectively mean the jockeying for sovereignty between the university and the CHE will have been eradicated once and for all. From the LUCT management perspective, from the responses to their interview questions, the Associate Degree is more than a Diploma according to Australian standards but the CHE maintains it's a diploma. Students are disadvantaged because of that but harmonization of standards will effectively cure that.

Recommendations
The study recommends that the LUCT should make an effort to sensitize students and alumni of the SAQA certification process so that those who would wish to proceed to South African HEIs can do so with full knowledge of the evaluation process. The SAQA in collaboration with CHE Lesotho should also carry out outreach programmes to educate graduates from Lesotho universities on SAQA evaluation process so that they become knowledgeable about the evaluation process when they decide to go for further studies in South Africa.

In order for the institution's graduates to have easy passage into South African universities, the LUCT should work on the credits for the Associate Degree.

The study would strongly recommend that the CHE and the SAQA unreservedly champion the course for harmonization of programmes in the region for easier of passage into regional institutions for students looking for educational opportunities in other countries.

Conclusion
Students from LUCT encounter problems of their qualifications being graded and ranked lowly when they apply for SAQA certification. The LUCT Associate and Honours Degrees are set at the level of Australian degrees and not according to the LQF and therefore are regarded as Diploma and Advanced Diploma by the CHE and the SAQA by extension. Harmonization of programmes at sub regional, regional or global level will be an advantage to both students and academics as free movement will be easier and collaborations will be enhanced. The on harmonization efforts by institutions are not quite conclusive as some institutions did not adequately provide requisite information.

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