

Policy Brief

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Quality Assurance Systems in selected Universities of Europe – Lessons For RUFORUM



RUFORUM POLICY BRIEF

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Background

The Regional Universities Forum for Capacity Building in Agriculture (RUFORUM) is a consortium of universities involved in Agricultural Education, Training and Research in Eastern, Central and Southern Africa (ECSA). Fundamental components of RUFORUM's Strategic and Operational Plans are to develop competitive high quality regional MSc and PhD programmes for ECSA. These programmes are now being implemented. They draw resources from regional and global centres of knowledge through partnerships brokered and maintained by RUFORUM. Programme implementation requires a quality assurance mechanism that fosters high standards within the spirit of learning and co-sharing of knowledge. This brief draws on a Scoping Study commissioned by the RUFORUM Secretariat among selected Universities in Europe to draw lessons for a regional quality assurance and credit accumulation transfer system.

A RUFORUM workshop on Quality Assurance raised the following issues:

- The new RUFORUM supported PhD programmes need to be developed using knowledge from other experienced systems.
- The RUFORUM regional PhD and MSc programmes are hosted by universities with different quality assurance systems at various levels of sophistication. These need to be cross-referenced for regional learning.

Regional efforts for developing accreditation and credit transfer systems are being trialled at undergraduate level amongst universities of member East African Community States (Burundi, Kenya, Rwanda, Tanzania and Uganda). These systems could be adapted to provide further quality assurance to the new postgraduate degrees being introduced by RUFORUM networked universities. This can take into account inter-national experience such as the well developed process used in Europe (the "Bologna process") to incorporate MSc training into a system that is comparable across the continent.

The RUFORUM scoping study had two major objectives:

- To undertake institutional analysis of the quality assurance systems in the University of Helsinki, the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences, the University of Copenhagen, and Wageningen Agricultural University and Research Centre (the Netherlands), and,
- To explore possible avenues for collaborative activities to support the development of quality assurance systems within the RUFORUM network.

The study showed that an important strength of the European comprehensive external review process was to build trust and accountability within the system. Quality assurance is an integral part of regular university operations, funded directly by the university, and the results openly published. The quality assurance systems specifically measure the performance of staff, departments, and faculties against international standards in training and re-search.

Proposed Quality Assurance System for RUFORUM

African efforts to develop and strengthen quality assurance systems include those under development by the African Union and Association of African Universities (AfriQAN), Inter-University Council of East Africa (IUCEA Road map to Quality assurance AfriQUnits) and Higher Education Quality Management Initiative for Southern Africa (HEQMISA). These are targeted at undergraduate training, and only give a modest score to excellence in research. RUFORUM aims to complement these efforts with a harmonised Regional Quality Assurance (QA) and Credit Accumulation Transfer (CAT) system for post-graduate training in the Eastern, Central and Southern Africa (ECSA) region. It specifically targets agricultural sciences but the framework is adaptable to other disciplines.

The Inter University Council for East Africa (IUCEA) has developed a model for judging teaching and learning quality based on the criteria below:

1. Programme - scope and content of the academic programme, and student assessment processes.
2. Inputs - qualifications and knowledge of teaching staff and support staff involved in the training, profile of students, student advisory services, and facilities and infrastructure.
3. Outputs - student evaluation processes, overall curriculum design for relevance, staff development to improve impact, and benchmarking for lesson learning.

The European scoping study provided additional material to improve the IUCEA model through using a combination of self evaluation and periodic external overall programme review. In the proposed RUFORUM QA model, there will be the following arrangements in place:

- Self-evaluation systems. These assessments should be done every 3-4 years and will include course assessments, including grading and management of courses, processes used to deliver and conduct research and training, the inputs used, and the quality of outputs.

Fundamental components of RUFORUM's Strategic and Operational Plans are to develop competitive high quality regional MSc and PhD programmes for ECSA.

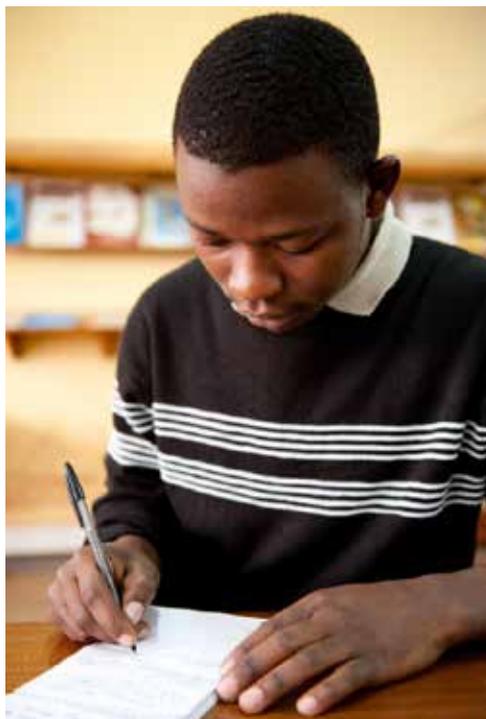
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- **External evaluation systems of teaching commissioned by RUFORUM and participating universities.**

These assessments will be done at wider intervals (perhaps every 6-7 years to allow for more than one intake of students). Performance assessment will include number of students training and completed, course evaluations, staff productivity (factors to measure this can be the numbers of graduates per staff member, quality and frequency of publication of results, and up-take of results by target groups). This evaluation must include a qualitative review by the evaluators which includes a



review of random selections of course materials and should also take account of the feedback from stake-holders within the country and also from any external universities that have accepted students. Other materials to assist the evaluators would include a review of the examinations set, external examiner reports and possibly of a small random sample of actual examination scripts.

- **External evaluation systems of graduate research commissioned by RUFORUM and participating universities.** This particularly draws from the Dutch experience which is based on an output financing system – output criteria are established as an integral component of the graduate research evaluation and departments and scientists are graded according to these criteria. Funding is then channelled to the highest rated scientists. Minimum criteria include research relevance to problems based on demand, innovation of the methodologies and processes followed, uptake of research findings, and contribution to international knowledge in the subject area. Additional criteria can be added as appropriate. These evaluations could be done together with the external teaching evaluation.



Implementation

- Successful quality assurance needs the ‘buy in’ of all key stakeholders so that the process is properly institutionalised and supported. The RUFORUM efforts in quality assurance development will take into account other initiatives, such as those started by African Higher Education Institutions which are already piloting regional quality assurance systems for ECSA.
- The host institutions of ongoing RUFORUM regional higher degree programmes will be re-viewed through a needs assessment, leading to the development of quality assessment implementation structures. Six pilot sites (University of Malawi, Makerere University, University of Nairobi, Egerton University, University of Zambia and Jomo Kenyatta University of Agriculture and Technology) have been identified. The needs assessment will be led by senior independent regional higher education professionals, together with a European collaborator familiar with both the ECSA region and quality assessment in European universities. There will be wide consultation amongst stakeholders.



Elements of Proposed QAM

- Self-evaluation systems
- External evaluation systems of teaching programmes
- External evaluation systems of graduate research

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Necessary actions

- **Funding:** adequate funding should be in place to follow up on recommendations for implementation.
- **Establishment and Strengthening of National Regulatory bodies:** in a number of Southern African countries there are no regulatory bodies. HEQMISA and RUFORUM will need to intensify efforts to sensitize the national governments and universities about the need to put in place independent Commissions of Higher Education to provide regulatory services for Higher Education, building on the experience of East Africa. These bodies will need to be well funded, well staffed, and operate independently.
- **Establishment of Quality Assurance Units in all Universities:** these units will be supported by institutional policies on quality assurance and operate in close collaboration with national regulatory bodies, and draw in global best practices to support their operations. Their activities will cover quality evaluation in both training and research issues.
- **Bench marking:** Higher Education is now a global public good. As such, stakeholders look for the best universities that meet their demands. Universities in ECSA will be bench marked with leading institutions in their fields, both internationally and within ECSA. Individual departments will

be matched against other departments and units within their home institution.

- **Infrastructure support:** to support quality improvements in university teaching, research and outreach, national governments and their universities will need to invest in needed infrastructure in fixed facilities such as laboratories, libraries, and accommodation (including student housing and staff offices and laboratories). ICT infrastructure is essential to connect students and staff to international science.



- **Introduce output based reward systems:** universities in the ECSA region will put in systems that recognize achievement at department, programme and individual team level. Outstanding programmes will receive recognition (and access to future resources) for their efforts so as to continuously improve.



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