

**Towards harmonising quality assurance for postgraduate training and research in RUFORUM member universities**

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**Abstract**

Quality assurance is key to RUFORUM's training and research initiatives. In the East African region the IUCEA, jointly with National Commissions have developed Quality Assurance Mechanisms and Credit Accumulation Transfer frameworks largely targeting undergraduate training. There are plans to advance these efforts to postgraduate training, especially in Agricultural Sciences. In Southern Africa, the Higher Education Quality Management Initiative for Southern Africa has a similar approach. Currently the RUFORUM universities are jointly running six demand-driven regional PhD programmes, hosted by selected RUFORUM member universities. The design, requirements, style of delivery and expected quality of graduates require putting in place a robust quality assurance and credit accumulation and transfer System. This paper gives a summary of approach and progress by RUFORUM and specific partners to put in place a harmonized quality assurance mechanism, with initial support from the first EU-EDULINK programme.

Under the project, RUFORUM and partners developed a handbook on Quality Assurance Mechanisms and Credit Accumulation and Transfer System. The draft handbook was informed by extensive reviews of the African continental quality assurance initiatives such the African Quality Assurance Network of the Association of African Universities, the European Bologna process, European Credit Transfer System, University mobility in Asia and the Pacific Transfer Scheme and others. The next plans involve operationalization of the proposed quality assurance mechanisms in the Eastern, Central and Southern Africa region.

Key words: Academic mobility, credit transfer, high performing graduates, regional programmes

## **Résumé**

L'assurance-qualité est la clé des initiatives de formation et de recherche du RUFORUM. Dans la région de l'Est de l'Afrique, l'IUCEA et les commissions nationales ont développé conjointement des mécanismes d'assurance-qualité et des cadres de transfert d'accumulation de crédits ciblant largement la formation de premier cycle. Il y a des plans pour faire progresser ces efforts à la formation post-universitaire, en particulier dans les sciences agricoles. En Afrique Australe, l'initiative de gestion de la qualité de l'enseignement supérieur pour l'Afrique australe a une approche similaire. Actuellement, les universités du RUFORUM gèrent conjointement six programmes régionaux de doctorat axés sur la demande, organisés par des universités sélectionnées membres du RUFORUM. La conception, les exigences, le style de la livraison et la qualité attendue des diplômés ont besoin de mettre en place une assurance-qualité robuste et un système d'accumulation et de transfert de crédits. Le présent document donne un aperçu de l'approche et du progrès réalisés par RUFORUM et les partenaires spécifiques pour mettre en place un mécanisme d'assurance-qualité harmonisé, avec le soutien initial du premier programme UE-EDULINK.

Dans le cadre du projet, RUFORUM et les partenaires ont élaboré un manuel sur les mécanismes d'assurance-qualité et le système d'accumulation et de transfert de crédits. Le manuel en projet a été informé par des examens approfondis des initiatives continentales africaines d'assurance-qualité telles que le Réseau Africain d'Assurance Qualité de l'Association des Universités Africaines, le processus Européen de Bologne, le Système Européen de Transfert de Crédit, la mobilité universitaire en Asie et le Régime de Transfert du Pacifique et d'autres. Les prochains projets impliquent l'opérationnalisation des mécanismes proposés d'assurance-qualité dans les régions d'Afrique orientale, centrale et australe.

Mots clés: Mobilité académique, transfert de crédits, diplômés de grande performance, programmes régionaux

## **Background**

The quality and relevance of university education in Africa is becoming increasingly important in the continent's development agenda. The non-prioritization given especially to higher education in sub-Saharan Africa over the last two decades, has not only resulted into low quality education, but also dilapidated and out dated infrastructure. Consequently, the African Union has identified quality assurance as one of the key focus areas

in its Plan of Action for the Second Decade of Education in Africa (2006-2015).

In the East African region, the Inter-University Council for East Africa (IUCEA) jointly with the National Commissions of the member states have developed Quality Assurance Mechanisms (QAMs) and Credit Accumulation Transfer (CAT) frameworks. These efforts have largely targeted undergraduate training, with pilot programmes in ICT and Business Management. The IUCEA is keen to advance these efforts to postgraduate training, especially in Agricultural Sciences, because of the significance of Agriculture sector to the livelihoods of the majority of the population and overall economic development. In Southern Africa, the Higher Education Quality Management Initiative for Southern Africa (HEQMISA) has a similar approach.

The Regional Universities Forum for Capacity Building in Agriculture (RUFORUM), a consortium of 29 African Universities, is undertaking several human capacity strengthening processes in support of the Comprehensive African Agricultural Development Programme (CAADP), one of them being strengthening quality and relevance of postgraduate training so that Africa has adequate capacity to drive its own innovations. Currently the RUFORUM universities are jointly running six (6) demand-driven regional PhD programmes. These programmes were developed after wide stakeholder consultations and are implemented at a regional level by selected RUFORUM member universities. The programmes currently running are;

- i. Plant Breeding and Biotechnology at Makerere University, in Kampala Uganda,
- ii. Dry Land Resource Management at University of Nairobi, Kenya,
- iii. Aquaculture and Fisheries Science at Lilongwe University of Agriculture and Natural Resource management,
- iv. Agricultural and Resource Economics at Lilongwe University of Agriculture and Natural Resource management,
- v. Soil and Water Management at Sokoine University of Agriculture, Tanzania, and
- vi. Agricultural Rural Innovations at Makerere University, Egerton University and Sokoine University of Agriculture.

One other regional PhD Programme (Food Science and Technology) will be launched probably during the 2012/13 academic period. In addition to the PhD programmes, RUFORUM has also developed and is currently implementing since 2008 three Regional MSc Programmes, namely:

- i. MSc Plant Breeding and Seed Systems at Makerere University, Uganda, and at the University of Zambia, Zambia,
- ii. MSc in Agricultural Information and Communication Management at Egerton University and University of Nairobi in Kenya, and at Haramaya University in Ethiopia, and
- iii. MSc in Research Methods at Jomo Kenyatta University of Agriculture and Technology in Kenya.

The nature of these programmes i.e. the design, requirements, style of delivery and expected quality of graduates require putting in place robust quality assurance and credit accumulation and transfer Systems.

This paper gives a summary of approach and progress by RUFORUM and specific partners to put in place a harmonized quality assurance mechanism, with initial support from the EU-EDULINK programme, Grant I.D. 9-ACP-RPR-12#33 titled *Strengthening capacity of universities in eastern, central and southern Africa to offer quality graduate programmes*. This was a three year grant that ran from 2008 to 2011. The implementing partners included RUFORUM Secretariat, Makerere University in Uganda, Egerton University in Kenya, Jomo Kenyatta University of Agriculture and Technology, Kenya, University of Malawi in Malawi, University of Zambia in Zambia and Montpellier Sup Agro in France.

## **Approaches and Methods**

As part of the process to develop a quality assurance handbook, RUFORUM consulted widely to lesson learn from best practices in other parts of the world. RUFORUM also conducted scoping studies in the Eastern, Central and Southern Africa (ECSA) region to identify current status of quality assurance processes in the region. Internationally, the process drew lessons from successful on-going joint training programmes by European Universities to provide quality PhD training, research and crosscutting perspectives for PhD students and young (new) lecturers in the Nordic and Balkan States. This is of significant importance for RUFORUM quality assurance system which aims to promote cross-border mobility of students and staff within the ECSA sub-region and beyond.

**Progress Achieved by  
end of 2011**

The proposed quality assurance system is expected to complement the existing quality assurance and quality management systems established by the various quality assurance directorates of RUFORUM member universities, National Commissions for Higher Education and Regional Quality Assurance institutions like the IUCEA and HEQMISA.

The EU-EDULINK project under which the work on harmonized quality assurance systems was initiated ended in November 2011. By the end of the project, RUFORUM and partners had developed a handbook on Quality Assurance Mechanisms and Credit Accumulation and Transfer System. The draft handbook was informed by extensive reviews of the African continental quality assurance initiatives such the African Quality Assurance Network of the Association of African Universities, the European Bologna process, European Credit Transfer System, University mobility in Asia and the Pacific Transfer Scheme and others.

Key elements of quality assurance for training and research in the draft handbook include the following:

- i. Components of quality assurance and quality assurance management system
- ii. Purpose for quality assurance management system
- iii. Concepts of compliance vs. conformance
- iv. Institutional management of quality assurance management systems
- v. Operationalization of quality assurance in higher education
- vi. Quality assurance policy areas
- vii. Quality assurance for postgraduate training and research
- viii. Monitoring and Evaluation of quality assurance
- ix. Credit accumulation and transfer
- x. Strategies for implementing a harmonized system of quality assurance

The proposed draft mechanisms have been piloted in three regional postgraduate programmes and the feedback used to further refine the current version of the handbook.

**Next Steps towards  
Adoption**

The next major step is the operationalization of the draft quality assurance handbook. Under this process, a number of key steps are foreseen. These include;

- i. Intensive sensitization and engagement with universities and key stakeholders
- ii. Internal and external expert peer review of the existing draft QAMs and CATS with the aim of further refinement through wider stakeholder involvement
- iii. Detailed case studies on piloting the recommended quality assurance mechanisms in order to identify the key issues and requirements in implementing the systems.
- iv. Precipitation of policy messages for tertiary agricultural training and research based on experiences from the case studies
- v. Training a regional pool of quality assurance experts and trainers.

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For more information on the handbook and other RUFORUM initiatives please visit [www.ruforum.org](http://www.ruforum.org).

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