Discussion Report on Harmonizing Higher Education Data in East Africa

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1. Executive Summary

The discussion convened stakeholders from HE institutions, national ministries, quality assurance agencies, and regional bodies to address the fragmentation in data governance across East African higher education systems. Key findings reveal pervasive challenges—including disparate data collection practices, weak legal frameworks, and inadequate technical capacity—impeding evidence-based policymaking. The discussions underscored the necessity of harmonizing data collection methodologies, establishing a centralized HE Management Information System (HEMIS), and reinforcing capacity building initiatives. This report offers concrete policy recommendations designed to foster sustainable improvements in data quality, inclusiveness, and accountability.

2. Introduction and Background

2.1 CONTEXT AND RATIONALE

The Harmonisation, Quality Assurance, and Accreditation of African Higher Education (HAQAA) Initiative is one of the flagship initiatives of the Global Gateway package of the EU in partnership with the European Commission and the African Union Commission. The HAQAA3 Initiative is now in its third phase. HAQAA3 is a continuation and expansion of the work done under HAQAA1 (2015-18) and HAQAA2 (2019-2022) and is an ambitious response to African and international development objectives, framed within the context of the EU's growing investment in African partnership. The 'HAQAA3 Implementing Team', is comprised of OBREAL (lead), AAU, DAAD and ENQA, and is supported by 9 strategic partners, and key stakeholders who also form a Steering Committee and are integrated into the implementation structure.

The third phase of the HAQAA initiative was launched in July 2023. The work area on HE Data Capacity of the HAQAA3 initiative is designed to implement the Road Map developed under HAQAA2. HAQAA3 has set up an African Higher Education Data Team (AHEDT) which will lead

the work area on data for policy analysis. The AHEDT is a regionally and linguistically representative operational team and is familiar with the PDU Development Team mapping report and roadmap. The AHDET is constituted of representatives from regional and continental strategic partners, including AAU, IUCEA, SARUA, AUF, and CAMES and a representative from Northern Africa as well as representatives from relevant international and continental bodies like UNESCO/UIS, the Association for the Development of Education in Africa (ADEA), the Ubuntunet Alliance for Education and Research, and IPED (AU's continental educational statistics repository and policy analysis).

Building on the foundational work of HAQAA2—which mapped existing HE data sources and identified capacity gaps—the focus group was organized to deepen regional understanding and catalyse a coordinated response to improve data collection and management systems.

2.2 OBJECTIVE

Robust and harmonized data collection is essential for effective policy formulation, resource allocation, and regional integration in higher education. Recent initiatives by IUCEA and HAQAA2 and HAQAA3 have highlighted the critical need to standardize HE data across the East African region to support evidence-based decision-making and to enhance the sector's global competitiveness. The planned HAQAA3 focus group in the EAC region was designed to be held alongside the 'stakeholder forum on HE data collection tools and management practices in East Africa', organized from 14th to 16th of October 2024 in Nairobi, Kenya. This was aimed at creating complementarity between the different initiatives being implemented in the region.

The forum discussed the state of HE data collection in the region and concrete steps being taken towards the development of a regional HEMIS. The HAQAA3 data work area intentions for the region were presented and a call was made to align the IUCEA plan for a regional HEMIS with that of the work plan under HAQAA3. The HAQAA3 Data Work Area discussion in the forum aimed at stressing the need for active implementation measures and ownership of the initiative by the relevant strategic partner in the region to realize complimentarily between these different initiatives.

3. Methodology

The discussion forum adopted a multi-method approach combining qualitative discussions, thematic analysis, and stakeholder consultations. Participants were selected to represent a cross-section of HE institutions, government bodies, and quality assurance agencies from across East Africa. This set up enabled inclusive dialogue and real-time feedback. The approach followed is to compliment the data collection exercise for IUCEA's another data initiative – the DAF EAC phase II project, which will enhance data-driven decision-making to support the region's educational and developmental goals. The HAQAA2 Initiative data work area out comes and the HAQAA3 work plan and activities in the data area were presented to initiate joint planning, create synergy and maximize impact.

4. Key Findings and Thematic Analysis

4.1 CHALLENGES IN DATA GOVERNANCE

Fragmentation and Inconsistency: Participants reported that HE data are collected through isolated systems lacking standardization. Inconsistent definitions and methodologies across institutions lead to unreliable data for regional benchmarking. This fragmentation undermines policy formulation and impedes the creation of a unified higher education database.

Weak Legal and Regulatory Frameworks: Although several countries have enacted Data Protection Acts, enforcement remains inconsistent. The lack of dedicated compliance officers and regular audits further exacerbates these weaknesses, resulting in suboptimal data integrity and limited cross-border data sharing.

Capacity Constraints: A significant challenge is the limited technical capacity within institutions. Many HEIs rely on outdated or paper-based systems, and there is a notable deficit in trained personnel capable of managing digital data systems effectively.

4.2 HARMONIZATION AND STANDARDIZATION OF DATA COLLECTION

Standardized Indicators: The focus group underscored the importance of developing a regional data handbook that defines clear, internationally benchmarked indicators. These would enable consistent measurement of key metrics such as enrollment rates, graduation statistics, research outputs, and faculty qualifications. Standardization is crucial not only for internal monitoring but also for enhancing the region's competitiveness on the global stage.

Benchmarking Best Practices: Participants highlighted successful models—such as South Africa's integrated data systems—as benchmarks. However, adapting these models requires addressing unique regional challenges, including infrastructural disparities and diverse institutional capacities.

4.3 TECHNOLOGICAL INTEGRATION AND THE HEMIS INITIATIVE

Centralized Data Platform: There is broad consensus on the need for a centralized, interoperable HE Management Information System. Such a platform would consolidate academic, financial, and research data across institutions, thus mitigating fragmentation. The proposed system should leverage open-source solutions to ensure cost efficiency and adaptability to diverse contexts.

Integration via APIs: To bridge the gap between legacy systems and the new platform, the development of Application Programming Interfaces (APIs) is recommended. This approach allows for seamless data transfer without necessitating complete overhauls of existing systems.

4.4 CAPACITY BUILDING AND SUSTAINABLE FUNDING

Targeted Training Programs: The discussions revealed a critical need for capacity building through initiatives such as "Data Fellows" programs and integration of data literacy modules into university curricula and Capacity building trainings for staff of HEIs and national authorities in charge of HE data collection and management. Continuous professional development and the establishment of a regional helpdesk are essential to support sustained data management improvements.

Sustainable Financial Models: Relying on donor funding is unsustainable. Participants proposed the creation of a levy-based fund and public–private partnerships (PPPs) as more reliable funding mechanisms. These approaches would ensure predictable and long-term investment in the data infrastructure.

4.5 STAKEHOLDER ROLES, GOVERNANCE, AND INCLUSIVENESS

Equitable Governance Structures: Effective implementation of the proposed HEMIS requires inclusive governance. A rotating steering committee, inclusive of representatives from both large and small HEIs, ensures balanced decision-making. Establishing quotas for underrepresented groups further promotes equity.

Data Inclusion: The discussion forum stressed that current data systems often overlook marginalized groups. Incorporating disaggregated data by gender, disability, and socioeconomic status is vital for ensuring that policies address the needs of all segments of the population.

5. Discussion and Interpretation

The focus group discussions reveal that the challenges of HE data governance in East Africa are multifaceted and deeply interconnected. Fragmented data systems and inconsistent practices compromise data reliability, while weak legal frameworks and capacity constraints further hinder progress. The participants' collective insights point to the need for a transformative approach that integrates technological innovation with robust policy and governance reforms.

Adopting a centralized, interoperable HEMIS is seen as a critical step forward. However, its success depends on concurrent improvements in legal enforcement, capacity building, and sustainable funding. Furthermore, the discussion forum's emphasis on inclusive data collection highlights the imperative to design systems that are both representative and equitable. These measures will not only improve the quality of HE data but also enable evidence-based policymaking that can drive regional development. By aligning with international best practices and adapting them to the unique East African context, the proposed recommendations offer a comprehensive roadmap for advancing HE data governance. The synergistic implementation of technical, legal, and institutional reforms is crucial for establishing a resilient data ecosystem capable of supporting long-term policy objectives.

6. Complementarity of the HAQAA3 Work Plan

With this as a backdrop the forum discussed the outcomes and recommendations of the HAQAA2 Data Work Area; the regional approach towards creating regional Policy Data Units; the HAQAA3 Work Plan to for the establishment of regional data units, harmonization of regionally relevant HE indicators; plans to develop a capacity building exercise that targets institutional and national level capacity building trainings to enhance HE data collection, and plans for regional pilot exercises. Cognizant of the fact that the HAQAA3 Work Plan identified the challenges in the region and proposed tailored solutions to address the challenges, the discussion generated consensus that there is a need for synergetic implementation of the region's data initiatives. particularly, consensus was reached to resort to joint planning of future activities between the different data initiatives in the region.

7. Recommendations

Policy Recommendations: Based on the discussions and analysis, the actionable recommendations pertaining to the following focus areas are proposed:

Establish a Centralized, Interoperable HE Data Platform;

- Enforce Standardized Data Collection.
- Strengthen Legal and Regulatory Frameworks
- Enhance Capacity Building and Institutional Support
- Secure Sustainable Funding Mechanisms
- Promote Equitable and Inclusive Governance
- Monitor and Evaluate Progress

8. Conclusion

The harmonization of higher education data in East Africa is both a critical challenge and a significant opportunity. The discussion has underscored the need for an integrated, multi-pronged approach that combines technological innovation with robust legal, institutional, and

capacity-building reforms. Implementing the recommendations outlined in this report will pave the way for a more reliable, inclusive, and effective HE data ecosystem—one that can drive evidence-based policy and foster regional integration in higher education. It is, therefore, imperative that