Harmonisation, Quality Assurance and Accreditation in Africa
HAQAA3

Global Gateway

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Focus Group Report on advancing regional higher education data systems in SADC

Organized by the HAQAA3 African Higher Education Data Team (AHEDT)

Under the auspices of the HAQAA3 Initiative Implementing Team (Obreal, AAU, DAAD, and ENQA) with the support of strategic partners, SADC and SARUA

OBREAL

ASSOCIATION OF AFRICAN UNIVERSITIES
ASSOCIATION DES UNIVERSITES AFRICAINES
اتحاد الجامعات الأفريقية

DAAD Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst
German Academic Exchange Service

enqa.
European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education

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1. Executive summary

The Hybrid SADC Technical meeting on EMIS system (7-8 August, 2024) in Mauritius followed up on the SADC FG held on 5 October 2023 in Johannesburg, South Africa. The SADC secretariat organized the EMIS Technical Committee Meeting with the support of HAQAA3. The meeting convened stakeholders from government ministries, higher education institutions (HEIs), quality assurance agencies, and regional bodies to examine current practices and challenges in higher education data management. Participants critically evaluated fragmented data systems, varied data collection methodologies, and capacity constraints across SADC. Key discussions highlighted the urgency of developing a robust, interoperable Higher Education Management Information System (HEMIS) that aligns with regional strategic frameworks. Policy recommendations include establishing standardized data definitions, piloting digital data platforms, reinforcing capacity-building initiatives, and ensuring sustainable funding through multi-stakeholder partnerships. These measures are essential for evidence-based policy planning and achieving regional integration in the era of rapid technological change.

The focus group discussion has yielded the following specific outcomes:

Emphasis on harmonization and data comparability: A key outcome was the reinforcement of the need for harmonizing higher education data collection and management across Africa, particularly within the SADC region. This involves establishing common data definitions, standards, and methodologies to ensure data comparability across regions.

Plans for system modernization: A significant outcome was the discussion and planning for transitioning from manual data collection processes to modernized, electronic systems. This includes developing integrated platforms, open data portals, and data warehouses to improve data accessibility, transparency, and decision-making.

Framework for regional database development: The meeting addressed the development of a framework for a higher education database in the SADC region, with a detailed process and timeline. This framework includes

developing common data definitions, data manuals, and phased data collection approaches.

Country-specific insights and actions: Representatives from countries like Mauritius, Namibia, South Africa, and Eswatini shared their experiences, challenges, and initiatives. This sharing of information helps tailor strategies and solutions to specific regional and national contexts.

Capacity building: The importance of training and support for data collectors and users was highlighted to improve data management skills.

Regional collaboration: Collaboration among countries and regional organizations is essential for harmonizing data and sharing best practices.

Policy and strategy: Strong leadership and clear, long-term vision are needed to guide EMIS implementation and effective policies

2. Introduction

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 Objectives of the discussion

In 2019, in Namibia, Ministers endorsed that a comprehensive Profile and Database of Higher Education for the SADC Region should be developed by the Southern African Regional Universities Association (SARUA). The database should include the public and private education sectors and should be developed in consultation with all key stakeholders in the Region. SARUA and the SADC Secretariat have finalized the list of indicators to be compiled as well as worked on their corresponding definitions. As a way forward, and in line with the Ministers directive, Secretariat and SARUA have agreed to proceed in a phased manner with data being collected for a few selected Member States in the first instance. Such a collection phase is expected to happen once the data definitions and nomenclatures have been approved and endorsed by Member States.

It is with the above background that SADC secretariat, with the support of HAQAA3, organized the EMIS Technical Committee Meeting with a focus on EMIS and how it could be strengthened so that it could deliver on its role and to promote sharing of best practices. The meeting took stock of the underlying issues inhibiting the flow of data for better policy prescriptions. Participants also discussed the recommended data and their related definitions which are being proposed to be included in the Higher Education Regional Database, as well as the roll-out of the database in a phased-approach depending on data system maturity of SADC countries. The meeting also served as an opportunity to align the regional data initiative with the work plan for HAQAA3 data work area.

3. Methodology

Representatives were selected from national ministries, HEIs, quality assurance agencies, and regional bodies, ensuring a mix of policy and technical expertise. The session, held in a hybrid format, was structured around thematic areas—data governance, technological integration, capacity building, and policy alignment—with presentations drawn from recent SADC and HAQAA initiatives. Draft indicators, contextualized for the region's needs, along with a proposed definition; draft data collection tools as well as data sources were presented for discussion and reflection by participants. The discussion will be followed up with country feedback that will contribute to the finalization of the development of the definitions and data collection tools. Member states have also shared the state of play of the national HE data collection in their respective countries.

4. Key findings and thematic analysis

The discussion offered an opportunity to assess the state of play of higher education data collection in SADC member countries. The presentations from the national systems present at the meeting is summarized in the table below.

COUNTRY	DATA COLLECTION RESPONSIBILITY	DATA COLLECTION METHOD	DATA ELEMENTS COLLECTED	SYSTEM FEATURES/CHALLENGES
ESWATINI	Eswatini Higher Education Council (ESHEC)	Manual	Institutional Information, Student data (enrollment, graduation), Program & Course data, Staff Information, Infrastructure,	Database not yet digitalized. Aims to automate and interface with key entities. Challenges include: Data accuracy, lengthy manual processes, integration with

			Financial data, Governance, Research and Development	existing systems, and data security.
MADAGASCAR	Directorate in charge of the Statistics, Information and Planning System (DSSIP) with support from INSTAT	Email for data collection in collaboration with INSTAT	Data on public and private universities and higher technology institutes, student databases and management of scholarships. Data available for public institutions and partially available for private departments. Produced a booklet giving data on higher education for the period 2017 to 2022.	Digital platform (EDUTIC) set up for managing student databases and scholarships at public universities. Institutions have 30 days to respond, with follow-up emails. INSTAT clarifies methodological approaches and defines metadata to facilitate data collection.
MALAWI	National Council for Higher Education	Not specified in detail	Not specified in detail	Limited MIS adoption, lack of centralized MIS, absence of minimum data standards, limited integration with national systems, poor data utilization, inconsistent data collection processes, outdated or incompatible systems, and limited access to real-time data. Two portals for data access: public and registered users.
MAURITIUS	Higher Education Commission (HEC)	Soft copies entered into Excel spreadsheets	Enrollment statistics, Programs of study, Output statistics, Staff statistics, Research publications. Data collected annually,	Aims to develop an electronic data capture system. Data available per institution, program, mode of study, year of study, and gender. Higher Education data is published

			with a time lag for national data availability.	in reports by the Higher Education Commission.
NAMIBIA	National Council for Higher Education (NCHE)	Microsoft Excel, SPSS for processing	Student enrollment (by various factors), Examination results, Staff member details, Research output data	System being revised for user-friendly portal and dashboards and to accommodate applications for registration of private institutions and program accreditation. HEMIS redevelopment to avail data in an electronic system at the national level. The data is used to propose the budget to public HEIs. Metadata is available and submitted to the national body.
SEYCHELLES	Institutional Data Management (IDM) Section, Ministry of Education	Manual using Excel templates	Student data, Staff data, School Census, and data related to dedicated funds, breakfast and lunch programs. Includes data from both public and private institutions.	Lacks a proper EMIS, which limits data accessibility, reduces transparency, impacts decision-making. Faces challenges in integrating data from various sources due to incompatible systems and formats. Many institutions lack the necessary technological infrastructure.
SOUTH AFRICA	Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) ,Council on Higher Education (CHE)	Not specified in detail	Enrollment data, staffing, graduate, program (and qualification) by Field of Study. HEMIS and HEQCIS data	HEMIS (for public HEIs), HEQCIS (for private HEIs). Linking of currently fragmented systems. Public HEIs data has a two-year lag. CESMs and HEMIS Data determine the offerings of an

				institution and are reported by field of study.
TANZANIA	Tanzania Commission for Universities (TCU)	Online system called Universities Information Management System (UIMS)	Students' admission, enrollment, dropouts, postponement and graduates, level of study, nationality, program/field of study, institutional ownership, gender, disability, nationality etc.. Staff data: Highest level of qualification, area of specialization, academic rank, year of birth (age), gender, nationality, employment status etc.	Online systems: Universities Information Management System (UIMS), Programme Management System (PMS), Foreign Awards Assessment System (FASS), No Objection Certificate System (NOCS). Data stored mainly in the UIMS. Statistics issued in different publications. incomplete data.
ZAMBIA	Directorate of Universities and the Directorate of Planning and Information	Manual		No information for Universities and Colleges. EMIS development underway, completion is 31st December 2025, funded by the World Bank.

4.1 CHALLENGES IN DATA GOVERNANCE

Fragmentation of data systems: Stakeholders highlighted that current data collection in the SADC region remains highly fragmented. National systems vary considerably in terms of methods and timeliness, with some countries using advanced digital systems while others rely on manual processes. This fragmentation undermines data comparability and regional planning.

Inconsistent data definitions: Differences in data definitions and reporting standards, particularly in key indicators such as enrolment ratios and graduation rates, were noted. For instance, discrepancies in the application of

UNESCO's ISCED classifications create barriers to meaningful cross-country comparisons. With this in mind, a preliminary list of data elements to be included in the data manual was presented, including institutional-level data (public or private institution, year of establishment, offering mode, governance, classification), student enrolment and graduate data (modes of delivery, undergraduate and postgraduate students per qualification types, major fields of study), and academic staff profile (permanent and temporary staff, qualifications, international staff per nationality, staff per rank). There was a discussion as to what level of disaggregation of data to include in the manual – for example how to reflect micro-credentialing and modular approaches into data collection in completion and graduation statistics. The consensus was, however, though this is a possibility in the future as the system matures, the intention now should be focusing on core indicators that can be piloted in the different countries.

Capacity constraints: A persistent theme was the limited capacity—both in human resources and IT infrastructure. Many institutions lack proper systems, which limits accessibility, reduces transparency, and impacts decision-making. Limited training and outdated systems hinder the effective implementation of standardized data practices. Data management sections often have a limited number of staff, who spend excessive time verifying data instead of analysing trends. It was highlighted that many small institutions experience staff turnover, and newly appointed staff may lack proper training, this in turn requires regular inductions and support due to staff turnover. However, there is a lack of specific training programs, especially locally, to develop the capacity of staff in EMIS.

4.2 Harmonization and Standardization

Participants agreed on the urgent need for a comprehensive data manual that clearly defines indicators, classification systems, and data collection protocols. Such a manual would facilitate uniform reporting across institutions and promote interoperability within a regional HEMIS.

4.3 Capacity Building

Training and technical support: Enhancing technical capacity emerged as a critical requirement. Capacity building trainings, regional workshops, and continuous professional development schemes to build competencies in digital data management.

5. Discussion and interpretation

The focus group discussions reveal that the fragmentation of data systems and inconsistent definitions undermine the reliability of current datasets and limit the effectiveness of policy interventions. Moreover, capacity constraints and funding uncertainties further complicate efforts to establish an integrated HEMIS.

A critical insight from the discussions is that technological solutions alone cannot resolve these issues. Instead, a multi-pronged strategy that simultaneously addresses legal, institutional, and technical dimensions is required. For example, while a centralized HEMIS can serve as the backbone for data integration, its success depends on concurrent capacity-building initiatives and the establishment of robust governance mechanisms that ensure accountability and inclusiveness.

The emphasis on standardizing data definitions—especially through a comprehensive data manual—emerges as a key factor in achieving reliable and comparable datasets. Furthermore, aligning national policies with regional frameworks will not only streamline data collection but also enhance the credibility of the overall system.

6. Policy recommendations

- **Actionable recommendations:**
    - **Standardize HEMIS practices:** Develop and implement common data definitions, classifications, and indicators across the SADC region. This includes adopting UNESCO/OECD indicators with contextual adaptations to account for informal sector linkages.
    - **Align national systems:** Ensure that national HEMIS architectures align with regional database requirements. This involves developing regionally compatible HEMIS platforms to integrate national databases.

    - **Invest in capacity building:** Provide training and support for data collection, management, and utilization at national and institutional levels.

- **Prioritization:** Prioritize the establishment of regional data unit/HEMIS and the standardization of HEMIS practices, as these are foundational for the success of the SADC Higher Education Database. Additionally, prioritize quick-win projects, such as digital HEMIS pilot programs.
- **Implementation considerations:** Potential barriers include differing national contexts, limited resources, and challenges in data integration. Resources required include financial support, technical expertise, and stakeholder engagement.
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7. Follow-up actions

- The SADC Secretariat and SARUA have made a call for national contact points for the regional HEMIS to all SADC countries.
- Developing and refining data templates for data collection, aligning with international standards and regional needs.
- Conducting gap analyses to understand current data collection processes and identify areas for improvement.
- Identifying and engaging focal points within each country's government to facilitate data collection and collaboration.
- Establishing a clear timeline for the development of a regional database, with phased data collection and continuous refinement
- HAQAA3, in support of this, will be designing a hybrid capacity building programme to which authorities and universities will be invited to nominate participants in the second half of 2025.

8. Conclusion

The focus group discussions underscore the critical need for a harmonized, regionally integrated approach to higher education data management in SADC. Establishing a centralized HEMIS, underpinned by standardized data protocols, and sustained capacity-building efforts, will enable evidence-based policymaking and drive regional integration. The success of these initiatives depends on collaborative governance, innovative funding models, and ongoing stakeholder engagement. By addressing both technical and institutional challenges, SADC can transform its higher education data ecosystem into a strategic asset for regional development.