Curriculum Harmonization in Ethiopian Public Universities: Is it a Step towards Harmonizing Higher Education System?

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Abstract: *The main argument of this paper emanates from understanding that harmonization of higher education is a systematic and collective effort of different internal and external stakeholders including public authorities, universities, employers, quality assurance agencies, international organizations, and institutions, including regional bodies like the African Union. This paper attempted to analyze the concept of harmonization in particular reference to higher education by looking at different regional experiences. This paper also examined the situation of Ethiopian harmonization of higher education which ought to be essentially a process that recognizes the significance of regional education cooperation and the importance of establishing higher education space in which activities and interactions in higher education, mobility, and employment opportunities can be easily facilitated and increased in the region. Finally, the paper finishes with some possible suggestions in the implementation of harmonization of the internal structure of the Ethiopian higher education as pre- condition for regional cooperation.*

Keywords: curriculum; harmonization; Ethiopian; higher education

1. Introduction

In globalization era the challenges of higher education are no more limited to a particular nation since the world is interconnected because of liberalization of economy, free movement of labor and capital, and the advancement of communication technologies which make distance more or less irrelevant (Emnet, 2013).Knowledge-based society becomes the driving force of economic growth and development in addition to physical capital. To improve the quality of higher education, its relevance and accessibility, to facilitate transferability and comparability of degrees among nations, to facilitate the mobility and employability of students, nations have been engaging in various cooperation schemes to face common challenges and attain greater excellence. This process of converging aims and

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objectives together in higher education polices at regional level is termed as harmonization. In this paper an attempt has been made to discuss the concept of harmonization, focusing on harmonization in higher education in different regions, briefly examining the harmonization process in Ethiopian higher education and to discuss the status of harmonization in Ethiopian higher education. The analysis was based on the following objectives:

1. To discuss the concept of harmonization particularly with reference to higher education;
2. To review the harmonization process in different regions;
3. examine the existence of harmonization in Ethiopian higher education;
4. To see the link of harmonization process with the harmonization process in Africa or sub-regional effort;
5. To look at the status of harmonization in Ethiopian higher education and thereby see what augurs for the future.

Selected relevant literature has been thoroughly reviewed and interviews were affected to compile this paper.

2. Harmonization of Higher Education

2.1 The Concept

Almost all literature describe harmonization of higher education as the establishment of a common frame of reference to facilitate comparability, compatibility and mutual recognition of higher education and training systems and the qualifications attained among the states, based on shared views on quality, criteria, standards and learning outcomes, for promoting students and labor mobility (Knight, 2012; Okeke, 2012; Eriksen, 2003; Hoosen et al, 2009; DeLong & Dowrick, 2002).

It has been repeatedly indicated that harmonization does not mean each higher education institution or state to operate a uniform system across regions. This would stifle competitiveness, uniqueness and innovativeness of the higher education institutions and states. Therefore, in harmonizing education system, a state or a region is also promoting competitiveness, uniqueness and innovativeness among higher education institutions and states such that while higher education institutions benchmark their systems and programs to the basic regional standards and guidelines, they also uphold

uniqueness in terms of program specializations, curriculum innovativeness, delivery approaches, etc.

Harmonization of higher education is essentially a process that recognizes the significance of regional education cooperation and the importance of establishing an 'area of knowledge' in which activities and interactions in higher education, mobility, and employment opportunities can be easily facilitated and increased. It is the process that acknowledges diversity of higher education systems and cultures within the region, while simultaneously seeking to create a 'common educational space' (Wallace, 2000; Enders, 2004). A region in a supra-national context, with different cultures, religions, languages and educational systems, must develop a harmonized system of education so that it can foster a higher level of understanding, a sense of shared purpose and common destiny in a highly globalized world. This system could be developed or constructed on the basis of a common, but not identical, practices and guidelines for cooperation in education.

A common space or higher education area does not intend to create a uniform or standardized system of higher education. The primary goal is to create general guidelines in areas such as degree comparability through similar degree cycle and qualifications framework, quality assurance, lifelong learning, or credit transfer system and so on (Armstrong, 2009; Clark, 2007). These general guidelines will facilitate and smoothen international student mobility, lifelong learning, and hassle-free movement of talented workers within the region, which will strengthen regional economy in the long run. The regional higher education area is the space in which students, faculty members and HEIs are the key players promoting similar standards of higher education activities. In other words, in a region with a harmonized system of higher education there will be continuous interactions and mobility for students, faculty members and talents. In general harmonization of higher education everywhere has been prompted by, among others, the need to establish a framework to facilitate comparability of higher education quality standards in order to allow mobility of students and to promote regional and international competitiveness, and comparability and compatibility of the curriculum and

qualifications attained for them to be mutually recognizable among the partner states and outside, and hence promote labor mobility.

The most important factor that contributes to the success of the process of harmonization in higher education is the participation and consensus building at the level of national agencies, the public and also other stakeholders. The key element of the harmonization in higher education will be the establishment of a mutually accepted roadmap that will consist of a vision of future goal (such as the establishment of a higher education space/area), areas to develop common frameworks (identified by key stakeholders such as credit transfer system, quality assurance guidelines, regional qualifications framework or comparable degree cycle and so on), methods and the key players who will be responsible for framework development and information dissemination to the public. According to Hettne (2005), harmonization is cyclical, and a policy process (functional cooperation) and policy tools (lesson-drawing, policy externalization, and policy transfer) anchors it.

Regionalization of higher education has political, economic, social and cultural dimensions, similar to globalization (Terada, 2003; Hawkins, 2012). As a political lever, regional cooperation provides opportunities for regions and individual nations to contribute to international quality assurance policy discussions. As an economic lever, regional integration provides smaller higher education systems entrance to possibilities of competition and cooperation on an international or regional scale. As a social or cultural lever, regional activities build solidarity among nations with similar cultural and historical roots (Yepes, 2006). Therefore, higher education regionalization looks differently, depending on the dimensions, actors, and values involved in the process.

2.2 Benefits/Advantages

Admittedly, there are benefits in creating a common higher education space. The more obvious ones are (Hawkins, 2012; Armstrong, 2009).
- greater mobility,
- widening access and choices,
- academic and research collaborations,
- enhanced collaboration on human capital investment, and

• The promotion of regions and/or nations within the fast changing global higher education landscape.

The immediate advantage of such harmonization in higher education system is presented as easier exchange and mobility for students and academics between nations within different regions apart from member states availability to access systems, tools and best practices for quality improvement in higher education. For some countries, harmonization serves as a jump start for keeping up with globalization

2.3   Challenges

The implementation of the harmonization idea is not without challenges (Hawkins 2012; Armstrong, 2009).
   • Steps should be taken in order to increase student readiness.
   • barriers to language and communication must be overcome and
   • There should be serious efforts to reduce constraints that are very 'territorial' in nature.

Admittedly, students involved in mobility program may be faced with adjustment problems particularly with respect to instructional practices, curriculum incomparability, and cultural diversity. Then there is the language problem: differences in languages pose a great barrier for inward and outward mobility of students at the macro level. 'Territorial' constraint, whereby each country hopes to safeguard the uniqueness of their educational programs, which in turn, may ultimately constrain the implementation of regional harmonization efforts, is a major consideration to be factored in.

2.4 Forms of Harmonization

The likely scenarios of higher education landscape as a result of harmonization of higher education systems in Southeast Asia are generally perceived as follows (Olds and Robertson., 2014).

Students from different countries spend at least a year studying in other countries.

1. Students in different locations are offered the same quality of education regardless of higher education institutions.

2. Graduates from one country are recruited by the employment sector in other countries.
3. A multi-national workplace.
4. Close collaboration between faculty in creating and developing new knowledge.
5. Close collaboration between students in creating and developing new knowledge.
6. Close collaboration between employment sectors in creating and developing new knowledge.
7. Larger volume of adult students in the higher education system.
8. Close collaboration between International Relations Offices who are the key player behind mobility program.

Arguably, the model that is most desired and considered most feasible is that which does not require all higher education systems to conform to a particular model. The general consensus is that a system that become a reference or one that can be fitted into without threatening cultural diversity and national identity is considered most feasible and desired. The scholars only borrowed ideas from others but they went on further to expand and introduce innovative ideas (Abbas, 2011). This approach has led to development of unique learning culture, which is the basis of a stronger community. As a result of harmonization, differing national standards come closer together. However, it has been very difficult for nations to agree on common standards mainly because issues of sovereignty usually become points of contention and also because it is not, in itself, an easy process

3.5 Plan of Actions

The following actions are deemed necessary in achieving the desired goal in harmonizing higher education among different countries/regions (Yan Liang, 2008; Yepes, 2006; Kehm, 2010; Hettne, 2004).

Regional Accreditation: Accreditation is very important in higher education. It is viewed as both a process and a result. It is a process by which a university/college evaluates its educational activities, and seeks an independent judgment to confirm that it substantially achieves its objectives, and is generally equal in quality to comparable institutions. As a result, it is a form of certification, or grant of formal status by a recognized and authorized accrediting agency to an educational institution as possessing

certain standards of quality which are over and above those prescribed as minimum requirements by the government.

Unified Education Framework: Intergovernmental organizations establish standards for HEI's including curriculum. Consequently, revising curriculum and delivery modes in all programs are still on the process to meet labor market needs. Thus, a unified curriculum in region is highly recommended to achieve the desired goal of one community. The focus should be on learning outcomes.

Improve Quality of Education: Countries need to improve the quality of their education systems as many graduates lack the skills needed in today's rapidly changing workplace. The shortage of skilled workforce in the different regions, male and even more so female, has been a major bottleneck in economic and social development. There is a need for greater emphasis on technical and vocational education and training (Liang, 2008; Kehm 2010).

Scholarship for Students/Faculty Exchange: The Scholarships aim to provide opportunities to the young people to develop their potential and equip them with skills that will enable them to confidently step into the enlarged community. Another medium of attaining the quality of education is by educating the teachers, academics and other educational personnel and upgrade their professional competency. Programs can be introduced that focus on talent management, leadership selection and review of teachers' and lecturers' workload.

Regional Skills Competition: Encourage the participation of higher education institutions in skills competitions to support workforce development and to achieve regional standards competency.

Increase Usage of English Language: Language is a key towards the development of a global community.

3.6 Key Actors, Activities, and Progress

Over the past years, regional bodies have emerged as new and key actors in higher education policy making, offering the possibility of higher education regionalization (Wesley, 2003, Hawkins, 2012). Regional bodies introduce a new level to the local, national, and global spectrum of higher education policymaking and practice. Regional bodies can provide a smaller venue for

national organizations to collaborate on norm-setting and policy harmonization that relate specifically to regional needs, values, and identity (a national-to-regional trend). Regional bodies can also give voice to smaller developing countries that do not have the economic status or ability to participate in international policy making discussions (a national-to-regional-to-international trend). Likewise, regional bodies have the potential for grassroots initiatives to gain a broader audience (local-to-regional-to-international trends) (Wesley, 2003, Hawkins, 2012). It is against this background that this paper turns to initiatives taken by regional bodies in their roles and activities in harmonizing the higher education sector.

3. International Experiences
3.1 The Bologna Process and the European Higher Education Area

The Bologna Process is an important process of harmonizing various systems of European higher education that has the objective to create a European Area of Higher Education. The Bologna Process is a process aimed at ensuring comparability in the standards and quality of higher-education qualifications that opened on 19 June 1999, when the ministers from 29 European countries met in Bologna to sign an important agreement, the Declaration of Bologna, which officially marked the start of this process.

The main objective of the Bologna Process is to create a European Higher Education Area and promote the European higher-education system around the world, to increase international competitiveness. To ensure the comparability of European university systems, the Bologna Declaration identified a number of main objectives, whose progress has been monitored and managed through a series of Follow-Up Conferences, held between 1999 and 2010.

Achieved objectives and objectives still being pursued include (Laursen, 2010; Emnet, 2013):

- adopting a simple and easy to compare qualification systems;
- adopting a system based on two main cycles, Level 1 and 2. To access the second cycle, students will have to complete the first cycle, which cannot be less than three years long;
- consolidating a system of credits – based on the ECTS system – that can be acquired also in different areas of discipline;

- promoting mobility (for students, teachers, researchers and technical and administrative staff), by removing the obstacles of free circulation;
- promoting European cooperation in reference to quality evaluation;
- promoting the importance of a European higher education area: development of study plans, cooperation between universities, mobility programs, integrated study plans, training and research.

The European effort towards integration and harmonization began with the Bologna Process. This effort is considered to be relatively more systematic and more institutionalized as compared to other regional initiatives, due to the fact that the Bologna Process has been integrated into the larger framework of the European Union (EU) (Keeling, 2006). The focus area and the action lines undertaken were establishing the three-cycle degree system and system of credits, creating a common quality assurance system, encouraging mobility of students and staff as well as promoting a European dimension in higher education and enhancing the attractiveness of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) (Teichle, 2009).

The Bologna Process is a collective effort of public authorities, universities, teachers, and students, together with stakeholder associations, employers, quality assurance agencies, international organizations, and institutions, including the European Commission. The Bologna Process was launched with the Bologna Declaration, of 1999. From 1999 - 2010, all the efforts of the Bologna Process members were targeted to creating the European Higher Education Area, which became a reality across 47 countries with the Budapest-Vienna Declaration of March 2010.

The Bologna reforms help to make European universities and colleges more competitive and attractive to the rest of the world. The Bologna Process also supports the modernization of education and training systems to make sure these meet the needs of a changing labor market. This is important as the proportion of jobs requiring high skills grows, and the demand for innovation and entrepreneurship increases.

3.2 Harmonization in Southeast Asia

The idea of harmonizing higher education systems in Southeast Asia was inspired by the development of regionalism in higher education in Europe, specifically the establishment of the European Higher Education

Area (EHEA). The idea of regionalism in higher education in Asia or Southeast Asia is a very exciting idea, indeed. Southeast Asia has been integrating rapidly mainly through trade and investment. The region is also witnessing increasing mobility of people in the region and between regions. This new context places higher education in a pivotal role in developing human resources capable of creating and sustaining globalized and knowledge-based societies. Harmonizing the highly diverse systems of higher education in the region is seen as an important step towards the regional integration objective. The most common measure is the step towards a greater degree of integration in higher education policies and practices through concerted regional efforts (AIMS, 2012; Emnet, 2013; Hawkins, 2012)

The above authorities hinted that Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) leaders set a vision to build an ASEAN Community with three building pillars: the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC), the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC), and the ASEAN Political-Security Community (APSC). The primary goal of ASCC is to create an ASEAN Community that is people-centered and socially responsible based on shared values. Education, particularly higher education has been treated as the core action line in promoting the ASEAN-Socio Cultural Community and in supporting the continued economic integration of ASEAN by 2015. Higher education in the region has been mentioned in many official declarations as one of the important steps to enhance human resource development in the region. An ambitious plan was set up in 2009, aimed at creating a systematic mechanism to support the integration of universities across Southeast Asia. Student mobility, credit transfers, quality assurance and research clusters were identified as the four main priorities to harmonize the ASEAN higher education system, encompassing 6,500 higher education institutions and 12 million students in 10 nations.

It is also mentioned that the ultimate goal of the plan is to set up a Common Space of Higher Education in Southeast Asia. The strategic plan calls for the creation of the ASEAN area of higher education with a broader strategic objective of ensuring the integration of education priorities into ASEAN's development. The education objectives aim to:

- advance and prioritize education and focus on: creating a knowledge-based society;
- achieving universal access to primary education;
- promoting early child care and development; and
- enhancing awareness of ASEAN to youths through education and activities to build an ASEAN identity based on friendship and cooperation as a key way to promote citizens' mobility and employability and the continent's overall development.

The declaration advocates specific reforms focusing on a harmonization in the higher education system with the objective of increasing the international competitiveness of ASEAN higher education. Since then, individual ASEAN governments have increased public investment in universities to support the ASEAN Higher Education Area, and the region's burgeoning knowledge economy. Measures have been set up to strengthen the performance of Southeast Asian Universities across a wide range of indicators such as teaching, learning, research, enterprise and innovation. These initiatives also pave the way for further collaboration and integration between universities in the region, enhancing the overall reputation of ASIAN universities compared to their competitors in the West and elsewhere in the world.

3.3 The Harmonization of Higher Education in Latin America and the Caribbean

The development of harmonization of higher education in Latin America and the Caribbean is not only inspired by the Bologna process of Europe but it also received both technical and funding support form EU Commission. Latin America and Caribbean nations together with European countries agreed to work towards a common space in higher education by the year 2015 (Cetina, E. 2005). Though the policy components are not stipulated in clear terms like the Bologna Process, the general objective of the harmonization process in the region is to create a comparable and transferrable degree structure that facilitates mobility of students and professors in the region. They have already established national and regional quality assurance institutions and are working on the coordination of them in facilitating the harmonization process. But the process of harmonization in the Latin American countries has been criticized for the fact that it did not

involve universities and research institutions in the process of policy formulation rather it simply took them as subjects of the policy (Emnet, 2013).

3.3 Harmonization of Higher Education in Africa

In implementing the Plan of Action for the Second Decade of Education for Africa (2006-2015), the AU Commission has embarked on a process of developing a framework for harmonization of Higher Education Programs in Africa. The rationale for this is based on the belief that such an initiative will help to 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 professional mobility for both employment and further study (Hoosen et al, 2009). According to the African Union Higher Education Programs (AU HEP), harmonization of higher education in the continent is intended to facilitate the comparability of qualifications awarded across the continent and help drive quality assurance measures, which will ultimately contribute to greater quality of education in Africa (Emnet, 2013). Creating a mechanism for benchmarking and comparison of qualifications will allow professional mobility for employment and further study, as well as expanded job markets.

In 2011 the AU Commission, the European Commission, Association of African University (AAU), representatives from Ministries and agencies started the African Higher Education Harmonization and Tuning proposal in Africa and Sixty universities across the continent were selected to participate in five subject groups - medicine, agriculture, mechanical engineering, teacher education and civil engineering- which could be an indication of the involvement of new actors in the process but the tuning process is not harmonization in strict sense since it does not necessitate universities to integrate whole curricula but obligates them to find a common language, not only among each other but also with their neighboring community (Emnet, 2013).

Heads of East African states declared the transformation of the East African Community (EAC) into a Common Higher Education Area, which will facilitate the recognition of academic certificates and the transfer of credits from higher education institutions across the region, at their summit on 20 May in Dares Salaam, Tanzania. The new harmonized system, involving the

five East African countries of Kenya, Rwanda, Uganda, Tanzania and Burundi (South Sudan is expected to join shortly) has been about 10 years in the making and sets a precedent for regional harmonization of higher education on the continent. It is expected to significantly enhance students' and academics mobility across the partner states (Emnet, 2013).

University students in the region will be able to join any of the more than 110 universities of their choice in the EAC partner states at undergraduate or postgraduate levels, giving them greater exposure to regional and possibly international interaction, and preparing them for a regionally integrated EAC with the potential to impact on many aspects of life, both economically and socially. Under the common higher education area, partner states will recognize academic certificates from universities and other higher learning institutions in the region, and students will be able to transfer credits across universities within the countries,"

4. The Ethiopian Experience

4.1. Nationally Harmonized Competence- Based Modular Curricula (NHCMC)

As per the Revised Guideline for Curriculum Modularization in Ethiopian Higher Education Institutions, developed by Higher Education Strategy Center (HESC), (2013) and Assessment of the Implementation Status of the Nationally Harmonized Competence Based Modular Curricula in Ethiopian Public Universities, Sponsored by Education Strategy Center (ESC,2014), Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in Ethiopia have embarked on major reform since last decade. For the reform to take effect, the institutions have used Business Process Reengineering (BPR) as a tool. In the reengineering of the Learning-teaching Core Process, modularization was proposed as a best way for the implementation of curricula and the production of competent global graduates.

The documents reveal that there are a number of reasons why HEIs opted for modularization. The first one is that the pervious curricula are discipline based and the courses are fragmented. They are not organized around competences. As a result, the curricula do not enable HEIs to produce competent graduates. The second reason is that the earlier curriculum does not say anything about student work load which is very important for

students' success in their academic life. The third is that there is a loose connection between the world of education and the world of work because of the inherent problem of the existing curriculum. Furthermore, the traditional curriculum focused on the teacher rather than the learner. However, in recent years there has been a paradigm shift taking place, moving the emphasis from teaching to learning and a more student-centered curriculum. This change has impacted on the curriculum design process with a greater emphasis on the learning in terms of knowledge, skills and competencies within courses and modules. The focus is on how learners learn and the design of effective learning environments (Donnelly, & Fitzmaurice, 2005 cited in the documents).

According to the documents the concept of competence-based education and modularization is not entirely a new idea in Ethiopian education system. The technical and vocational education and training (TVET) applies the concept and has been successful in producing competent middle level workforce. In general, modularization is believed to increase degree comparability and compatibility, curriculum flexibility, and student mobility. It also strengthens the relationship between the world of education and the world of work. Consequently, the following operational definition of terms was provided by the documents.

- *Module*- the self-contained and relatively independent learning unit of a degree program created by clustering of related courses based on the identified competences.

- *Modularization*- the process of creating and/or organizing modules based on the identified competences in a given degree program.

- *Competence*- the capability to choose and use the repertoires of knowledge, skills and attitude in the appropriate context.

- *Competence-Based Education*- the type of education that will enable learners to acquire the necessary capabilities to be applied in the context of the world of work.

- *Harmonization*- the process of bringing together the modularized curricula at cluster and at national levels so as to create comparable and

readable degree programs across Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in the country.

The documents also elaborated that based on their BPR results which was harmonized at national level, few universities (Hawassa, Bahir Dar, Debre Markos, Debre Berhan, Haramaya and Jimma) had taken the courage to move forward in implementing modularization. These universities invited international experts in the area of modularization for training and gained expertise, have cascaded the training down to the academic community and organized their curriculum into module and started the implementation. They were also doing their best to reach other universities with training and awareness creation so that they will be able to implement the modular approach to curriculum in 2012/13 Academic Year. The other universities have also started exerting maximum effort to be in the pipeline with regard to modularization. The guideline served as a springboard for this purpose. After seriously looking at the efforts made by universities to organize their curricula in modular approach and recognizing the role that this approach can play in improving the quality of education, the Ministry of Education through one of its wings, HESC, has given special attention to the effort.

The ministry has sponsored through Leadership and Management Capacity Development Project (LMCDP) series of Training of Trainers (ToT) on modularization. This has contributed a lot to the effort of creating local experts in the area. The ministry is also doing its best in the harmonization of modularization in all public universities. It has organized the harmonization of academic policy to be used by all public universities so that academic quality and standard is uniformly maintained. The policy was formulated in such a way that it can accommodate the new developments emanate from modularization.

It is further noted that along with this expansion, Ethiopian higher education institutions are given the mandate to design need based curricula to produce graduates who are competent enough in facilitating the country's effort to climb out of poverty. To this end, the public universities have been launching a number of programs both at undergraduate and postgraduate levels. In addition, a lot of programs have been reviewed and harmonized to meet the diverse and changing needs of the labor market. The universities

have been revising and reorganizing their curricula to competence based modular approach with the view that this will enhance the graduates' competence so that they can perform key occupational tasks to the acceptable standard. The approach is considered as a major shift in the development of curricula in Ethiopian Higher Education as it is helpful to integrate the needs of various stakeholders into the curricula thereby enhance the relevance of the academic programs. In this regard, unlike the subject specialist curriculum which has completely centralized function, the competency based curriculum divides the responsibility for development and implementation between sector (MoE) and the educational institutions. Hence, the MoE will be responsible for the development of educational standards while the institutions will be responsible for translating the standards into a meaningful program syllabus and instruction at the classroom level. By doing so, they could be able to provide the opportunity for nationally developed standards to be adapted to local community needs /labor market. In general, based on the nature of the curriculum organization, curriculum modularization is found to be a useful means to realize competence based education in current Ethiopian Higher Education system.

Thus, the universities are supposed to implement their curricula in accordance with this nationally agreed upon guideline. Furthermore, in the guideline, the need for proper monitoring of the implementation of these newly implemented curricula is clearly indicated and at the same time it has been harmonized with the academic policy in order to facilitate the harmonized implementation of these innovative curricula.

The guideline was prepared by experts and revised by the National Curriculum Council. Then after, the modularization of the programs has taken place by respective universities and this was followed by harmonization at cluster and national level for at least three times under the auspices of ESC. Finally, the implementation of the NHCMC began in 2012/13 academic year. Issues and concerns that require resolution at national level have been presented by ESC to the council and resolved. Some critical issues have also been brought to the attention of the Institutional Transformation Council (ITC) for decision. The directives from the ITC have been included in the guideline and the Harmonized Academic Policy has also been revised in this line.

The practice of implementing modular approach of learning-teaching in Ethiopian higher education institutions is new. As a result, there may be conceptual differences, confusions in proper implementation of the NHCMC, resistance and complaints from the academia and students about this new modular approach. Furthermore, universities in different contexts may implement the nationally agreed and harmonized modular curricula in different forms and approaches, especially in ECTS assignment, course and module codes, continuous assessment and grading modalities, and block and parallel delivery issues.

4.2. Experts' Reflection on Harmonization of Ethiopian Higher Education System

To gain more insight into the harmonization process interview questions have been sent to the senior education advisor and senior researcher at Education Strategy Center (ESC) and the following limited information has been revealed.

Avoiding unnecessary variations among similar programs and confusion about graduates and the job markets; making degree comparable and readable and increasing international competitiveness; sharing resources of all types and improving relationship among stakeholders; leveraging national economy through human capital; serving the purpose of national qualification framework, and standardized the programs in the country; keeping in equilibrium were listed as the prime purpose of curriculum harmonization in Ethiopian higher education by the interviewees.

In connection to the major benefits of curriculum harmonization the respondents have raised issues related with internationalization of higher education and international competition, connecting learning to the world of work, bringing change in educational idea, increasing students engagement and introducing variety of instructional modes of assessment, etc.; creating opportunity for interdisciplinary work, giving freedom for students and increasing student mobility and flexibility and keeping the required level/standard.

Pertaining to the challenges encountered in curriculum harmonization process the interviewees' responses are related to: time, common understanding among professionals, lack of leadership commitment,

harmonizing programs having similar nomenclature but different content and different names, bringing the stakeholders to involve for the exercise, individual interest, institutions resistance, lack of commitment to implement due to personal interest and problems, etc.

Concerning the progress made so far in the harmonization process the issues reflected are: modularization of curricular and corrections on program duration; harmonization in nomenclature and content; removal of unnecessary and redundant academic programs; introduction of module and their competencies and introduction of professional and graduate profiles; change in pedagogical and organizational aspects; introduction of European Credit Accumulation and Transfer System; modularization and harmonization of over 165 HEI programs; modularization and harmonization of programs at three levels (university, cluster and national).

As regards to any link between the curriculum harmonization in Ethiopia and the harmonization of higher education system in Africa or any other sub-regional effort in the continent the respondents bleak responses are: Ethiopia has developed national qualification framework and examined the experience of many countries in Africa, Asia Europe and Australia

About the initiatives taken so far in joining the harmonization process of the continent's higher education system the interviewees pointed out: The development of National Qualification Framework; the practice of quality assurance in HEIs; the agreement to sign the Arusha Conventions.

Finally, the respondents pin pointed the needs for further work on higher education academic programs, further step to insure the quality and competency of programs via introducing integrated modular approach, and the paramount importance of qualification standard to reinforce the harmonization of higher education in particular reference to Ethiopian context.

5. Conclusion and Possible Suggestions

Nowadays the challenges of higher education is no more confined to a particular nation since the world is highly globalized and knowledge becomes the driving force of economic growth and development in addition to physical capital. To improve the quality of higher education, its relevance

and accessibility, to facilitate transferability and comparability of degrees among nations, to facilitate the mobility and employability of students, regions have been engaging in various cooperation schemes to face common challenges and attain greater excellence. This process of converging aims and objectives together in higher education polices at regional level is termed as harmonization. This harmonization process at regional level raises numerous debates among higher education researchers on how to conceptualize the current trend of regional integration and higher education policy harmonization.

Generally speaking, currently, trends in many regions are moving towards the creation of common space in higher education to address critical issues of access, quality, equity, relevance, employability and mobility. The European Union is widely recognized as being one of the earliest designers in harmonizing regional higher education through initiating improvements by using a systematic and institutionalized approach. The other regions seized the opportunity to cooperate with the European Union to gain the benefits of regional harmonization within the higher education sector. Some initiatives taken by the AU-Commission are also on pipeline.

In order to facilitate student mobility, the African region's diverse higher education systems need more harmonized standards and mechanisms for permeable and transparent quality assurance and credit transfer among institutions. The framework wants to be based on agreed understandings between member countries and invites voluntary engagement from countries.

The task of creating a common higher education space is challenging in view of the vast differences in the structure and performance of the various higher education systems and institutions in Africa. Definitely, Ethiopia needs to harmonize the internal structure of the higher education systems in the first instance before attempting a region/sub region-wide initiative. The implementation of harmonization of the internal structure of the Ethiopian higher education requires to pass different phases and seems to be complex. The first and most important phase in the process is to harmonize philosophies and goals of education, curriculum content, education structures polices and legal frameworks without stifling competitiveness, uniqueness and innovativeness among higher education institution. The next phase of the implementation process requires to aim at examining curricula and

approaches of delivering teacher, with a view of identifying gaps or overlaps and areas to be harmonized. Then to be followed by developing relevant curricula based on the recommendations of different studies.

Moreover, issues related to:

- political dispensations;
- quality of teaching staff produced;
- participation in continent-wide efforts to support higher education in the areas of graduate training and quality assurance (The AU, for example, led the creation of the Pan African University and its centers of excellence in Africa's five regions, which should help to strengthen existing or create new research universities;
- developing strong standardized national qualifications frameworks that will be used to facilitate qualifications transfer across Africa. etc.,. have to be taken seriously to support and improve the harmonization process in Ethiopian higher education. Finally, it has to be stressed that harmonization as applied to education is not synonymous with uniformity, or unification of all higher education systems. Rather, harmonization refers to the coordination of educational programs with agreements to minimum academic standards and ensuring equivalence and comparability of qualifications between and within countries. Thus, harmonization can be understood as a process of ensuring articulation, both horizontal and vertical, between programs and institutions among various higher education systems. In other words, it is the process of establishing benchmarks for qualifications, program delivery and certifications so as to create a common educational space to enhance mobility.

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