

Regional Integration of higher Education in East Africa: A Review of Potential Benefits, Challenges and Ways Forward

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Abstract: Research shows that regional integration in education enhances capacity of member states to cultivate and educate local workforce by harmonizing education policies. However, regional integration of education across the globe seemingly faces inherent and various challenges including reconciliation of a diversity of national systems, curriculum, and qualification frameworks. This study seeks to explore achievements, obstacles and key strategies to enhance educational regional integration within the East African Community (EAC). Only secondary qualitative data were utilized in this analysis. The data analysis process used thematic content analysis by coding extracts pertinent to the study's research questions. Data indicated that the integration of education within the East African Community (EAC) has led to several accomplishments, such as the establishment of Educational Centers like Centers of Excellence and Higher Education Integration, the mobility of students across member states, the acknowledgment of qualifications, and a harmonized curriculum. However, the data highlighted numerous challenges that hinder the complete regional harmonization of education. These challenges include limited political will, a lack of financial and human resources, instability in educational policies, inadequate implementation of free movement protocols. This study proposes that to enhance the harmonization of regional education, individual states should: bolster their political commitment to education, promote human and financial resources, and ensure dynamic but relative stability in educational policies. The study concludes that the regional integration of education in EAC has optimized regional education in EAC African Community even if there are still some horizons that needs further scientific, political and practical reflections.

Keywords: *Educational regional integration, EAC, regional educational policies, curriculum harmonization of regional Education Systems.*

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Introduction

In recent decades, geographical regions and regional organizations across the globe have increasingly taken on roles in the governance of higher education policies, a responsibility traditionally held by nation-states. For example, in Europe, the prominent Bologna Process, which aims to create the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), facilitating the free movement of students, staff, faculty, and knowledge through standardized degree structures and credit transfer systems has been contributing to reforming higher education (Gornitzka, 2010; Ravinet, 2008; Vukasovic, 2013). Similarly, there are some comparable initiatives aimed at establishing commonalities within education systems in Africa (Hoosen, Butcher, & Njenga, 2009; Woldegiorgis, Jonck, & Goujon, 2015), Latin America (Verger & Hermo, 2010), and East Asia (Knight, 2012). However, regional integration of education across the globe faces inherent challenges of reconciling various national systems, curricula, and qualification frameworks. This is frequently obstructed by a robust national reluctance to relinquish control over educational policy. Additionally, the considerable differences in educational quality and funding among member states further complicate the establishment of common standards and the assurance of equity (Ravinet, 2008).

Chou and Ravinet (2015) articulated and framed this phenomenon as the emergence of 'higher education regionalism', which they characterized as 'a political initiative for the creation of regions that involves at least some level of state authority (national, supranational, international), which subsequently designates and outlines the geographical regions of the world to which such activities pertain within the higher education policy domain. Despite the diversity among regions, these initiatives share a common focus on the significance of fostering intra-regional mobility and degree recognition to effectively compete in the global higher education market against other regions (Chou & Ravinet, 2016).

Previous research emphasizes that collaboration within the regional education sector enhances a nation's capacity to cultivate and educate its local workforce. This logic is evident in states that are either small or newly independent, which may struggle to offer advanced education to all their citizens at that moment due to factors such as the significant expenses or insufficient human resources. One strategy that has been adopted involves collaborating with neighboring nations or countries that share similar languages for instance. The cooperation among the Nordic countries exemplifies this, as evidenced by the Nordic Council of

Ministers, founded in 1952, and has since formulated specific regional strategies and initiatives, particularly in the realm of higher education (Maassen et al., 2008). Detailed policies have been crafted concerning students' mobility and institutional networking (Nordplus), along with agreements pertaining to student admissions within the region (Nduwayezu, 2022). Current instances of the establishment of regional educational hubs can be viewed as a progressive step in this development, such as Singapore's Global Schoolhouse initiative aimed at Southeast Asia (Elken et al., 2015).

According to Woldetensai (2009) in a similar vein, an examination of contemporary initiatives across Africa, Asia, and Latin America highlights the significance placed on the achievement of regional education. For instance, in 2007, the African Union published a pivotal report titled "Harmonization of Higher Education Program in Africa: A Strategy for the African Union," which aimed at fostering stronger connections among higher education institutions, networks, national systems, regional university associations, and other essential stakeholders in higher education. A notable aspect of developing a pan-African higher education and research environment is the focus on enhancing the capacity and function of regional university associations (African Union, 2007).

Examples of ongoing initiatives for regionalization in African education encompass the African Quality Rating Mechanism, the Nyerere African Scholarship scheme, the AfriQAN network of quality assurance agencies, regional centers of excellence, the revised Regional UNESCO Arusha Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications, a Pan-African University, and the newly launched Open Education Africa project. Initiatives at the regional level aimed at promoting the establishment and harmonization of quality assurance and accreditation systems, student mobility programs, standardized degree levels, research and education ICT infrastructure, and research networks are currently underway. These initiatives demonstrate Africa's intention and commitment to foster enhanced pan-regional collaboration and system harmonization, while still acknowledging the significance of bilateral and multilateral internationalization efforts (Sarah Hoosen et al., 2009). Nevertheless, the integration of education across Africa faces challenges due to fragmented national systems that are rooted in colonial legacies, which complicates the harmonization of curricula and the recognition of qualifications. Moreover, a lack of political will and hesitance to cede sovereignty impede regional cooperation. Disparities are exacerbated by uneven education quality, inadequate infrastructure, and shortages of teaching workforce. Additionally, limited funding, weak institutional capacity, and poor connectivity further hinder integration initiatives.

The East African Community (EAC) was originally established in 1967 by Kenya, Uganda, and the United Republic of Tanzania, and it now comprises eight nations. Following its revitalization in 1999, after having disbanded in 1977, the republics of Burundi, Rwanda, and South Sudan became members. The potential for further expansion exists, as the Treaty that founded the Community stipulates that a nation may be admitted to the EAC if it adheres to the membership criteria outlined in Article 3 of the EAC Treaty (The East African Community, 2002). An increase in membership brings about greater diversity. With the inclusion of French-speaking nations such as Rwanda and Burundi, and the Democratic Republic of Congo nearing membership, the

Community's Summit has, for instance, sanctioned the adoption of French as an official language of the Community (The East African Community, 2021).

This text exemplifies the increasing necessity for intentional initiatives aimed at incorporating a variety of stakeholders into the Community. Higher education possesses significant potential to contribute meaningfully to the EAC integration process and to uphold the unity of the community. The continued existence of the Inter-University Council for East Africa (IUCEA), which served as a unifying element even after the original EAC's dissolution in 1977, attests to this potential (Nkunya, 2017; Nduwayezu, 2022). The collaboration among education institutions within the region was sustained by IUCEA, previously referred to as the Inter-University Committee, until its reformation into the Inter-University Council for East Africa (IUCEA) in 1980. Consequently, it was not unexpected that the revitalized EAC acknowledged IUCEA as one of its enduring institutions. This acknowledgment further emphasizes the Community's recognition of the critical role that higher education plays in fostering regional integration (Rasanga, 2013).

Article 102(1) articulates that "to fulfill the objectives of the Community, as delineated in Article 5 of the Treaty, the Partner States consent to implement coordinated measures to promote education and training collaboration within the Community" (The East African Community, 2002). A principal initiative under this article is to "revitalize and enhance the efforts of the Inter-University Council for East Africa." Article 5 of the Treaty is titled, Co-operation in the Development of Human Resources, Science and Technology. Without delving into specifics, it is evident that education broadly, and higher education (HE) specifically, plays a crucial role in the realization of all four pillars. Effective governance of HE in the region is essential for the Community to fully benefit from regional integration. Nevertheless, this endeavor is not devoid of challenges. The contribution of HE to the development and execution of the visions of the individual Partner States exhibits slight variations from one state to another. Nonetheless, there exists a common thread that connects all of them (Kuria, & Banyankimbona, 2025).

Despite the differing timelines associated with various visions (Burundi National Development Plan 2018-2027; Kenya Vision 2030; Rwanda Vision 2050; South Sudan Vision 2040; Uganda Vision 2040; and United Republic of Tanzania Vision 2025), there exists a shared commitment to reassess the education systems to guarantee the provision of quality education, improve access, and specifically tackle the shortage of skills in the fields of Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) as well as Information and Communication Technology (ICT). The IUCEAC plays a pivotal role in coordinating the harmonized development and execution of the East African Community's higher education system (Halai & Tennant, 2016). The primary aim of this study is to conduct a critical assessment of the present state of regional integration of education within the East African Community (EAC). This entails a twofold objective. Firstly, to investigate and record concrete accomplishments achieved in harmonization, including the mutual recognition of qualifications and enhanced mobility of students and staff, which are significant advantages of integration. Secondly, to pinpoint and evaluate the ongoing policy, institutional, and resource-related obstacles that persistently impede the complete realization of the Common Higher Education area. The ultimate intention is to provide

evidence-based recommendations aimed at expediting the regional integration processes in higher education.

Literature Review

Previous research has emphasized the significance of regional integration of education for member states. This encompasses: educational harmonization, degree accreditation, free movement of students between states (Knight, 2016; Christopherson, 2008; Cerna and Chou, 2014). Additionally, it has been highlighted that there are several challenges that hinder the complete integration of regional education. These challenges include: insufficient human and financial resources, a lack of political will, ineffective policy implementation (Motohashi et al., 2005). In this section, the contributions of various scholars to the field of regional integration of education are examined. Moreover, the challenges faced and key strategies to overcome them are also explored.

Previous studies state that at global scale, regional education policies have served as a crucial instrument for fostering educational harmonization, curriculum development, particularly within the European Union (Witte, 2002) as well as within Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) (OECD, 2017). The significance of regional education policies in enhancing the allocation of innovation resources and promoting collaboration across sectors of educational harmonization is highlighted. Accordingly, regional integration of education as emerged as an essential element in the progression of national economies, especially in China, it plays a pivotal role in the shift towards a more innovation-oriented economy. However, there is a scarcity of studies that provide scientifically described assessments of harmonization outcomes especially in the context of limited attention given to the dynamic interactions among the collaborating regions. Furthermore, there are limited scientific analyses that have explored the mechanisms by which policies are enacted, including the varying performances of these policies across different economic and social contexts, as well as analyses of heterogeneity. Furthermore, while regional education integration policies have progressively received worldwide acknowledgment, particularly in developed nations, the investigation into their implementation in emerging economies like China remains scarce. This limitation hinders the comprehensive application of established policy experiences to developing countries (Knight, 2016).

Similarly, Dupuy (2020) asserts that, on a global scale, regional education integration policies have demonstrated effectiveness in facilitating innovation, free movements of students and harmonization of qualifications accreditations. These policies serve two primary functions. Firstly, they enhance the development of research capabilities. Secondly, they ensure that educational resources are aligned with industry requirements, thereby mobilizing both intellectual and industrial assets to generate the necessary momentum for regional economic transformation. Markard (2008) further notes that the current emphasis of regional education policy is focused on fostering scientific research excellence and the implementation of technology in educational institutions. Nevertheless, these policies frequently fall short in effectively promoting collaboration, thereby underutilizing the potential for regional development. Within the context of regional policy, education systems represent a vital element, and regional education policies are increasingly acknowledged as a crucial

instrument for enhancing cooperation (Christopherson, 2008; Elken et al., 2015).

Lyu (2017) posits that regional education policies improve the efficiency of technology transfer among higher institutions by promoting the establishment of modern education teaching system. A notable example is the "Cluster Policy Steering Group" in the UK, which is chaired by Lord. In a similar vein, qualitative research conducted on the innovation network in Zhongguancun, China, reveals that the collaboration among industry, universities, and public research institutes serves as a vital mechanism for the transfer and dissemination of academic research and knowledge (Cerna and Chou, 2014).

Other research, such as that conducted by Knight (2016) and Christopherson (2008), indicates that educational integration plays a significant role in the development of regional education through various mechanisms. For instance, they assert that another category of mechanisms pertains to the involvement of universities in enhancing the regional business and entrepreneurial landscape. These mechanisms encompass initiatives that foster a more entrepreneurial culture among faculty, students, and alumni, efforts aimed at stimulating business start-ups or 'spin-outs' among graduates and staff, as well as strategies designed to create a more conducive business environment for both new and established enterprises. Furthermore, the promotion of graduate entrepreneurship contributes to regional development by enriching the pool of skilled human resources available to local businesses and ensuring the retention of these skills within the region. Universities that successfully attract international students gain access to cross-border networks and connections that can benefit the region and lay the groundwork for future cross-border collaboration and investment.

Maassen et al. (2008) believes that the rationale for human resource development emphasizes that regional collaboration within higher education sector enhances a state's capacity to cultivate and train its domestic workforce (capacity planning). This concept is particularly evident in small or newly independent nations that face challenges in providing comprehensive high-level education to all citizens, often due to factors such as prohibitive costs or insufficient human resources for such initiatives. The strategy that has been implemented involves forming partnerships with neighboring countries or those that share similar languages (Elken et al., 2015).

Benefits of Regional Integration to Member States

At the national level, this rationale for educational integration manifests in two distinct forms of competition. Firstly, for the most talented students, which frequently includes numerous fee-paying international students who significantly bolster the economies of their host nations through their notably higher tuition fees, accommodation expenses and daily expenditures. For nations facing skill shortages and demographic issues, international students continue to provide financial contributions post-graduation, as they enter the labor markets of the host countries via post-study visa pathways. Secondly, countries and their higher education institutions (HEIs) vie for academic and scientific talents who enhance the domestic knowledge economy by training the necessary skilled workforce, generating research outputs, and fostering innovation. Regional cooperation strategies often highlight the necessity of making the region appealing to international students and foreign talents (brain gain), as well as to

domestic and regional talents (to mitigate brain drain). The EU's directives regarding students and researchers from third countries, along with measures related to the portability of supplementary pensions and the recruitment of researchers, serve as policy examples (Chou, 2012; Cerna and Chou, 2014).

The rationale for academic development in regional activities serves as a key motivator for individual scholars and students to transcend borders: enhancing existing knowledge and gaining exposure to and acquiring new knowledge. International and regional collaborations have been integral to academia; scholars have sought out and established connections with colleagues overseas to conduct research projects, co-author publications, and pursue research funding. Similarly, academics have engaged in collaborative efforts with international colleagues in education, such as inviting guest lecturers, facilitating student exchanges, and creating joint programs. The element of prestige has consistently played a crucial role in these advancements. For example, during the medieval period in Europe, students pursuing medicine, canon law, and civil law were drawn to Bologna, while those interested in the arts and theology aimed to gain admission to Oxford and Paris (de Ridder-Symoens, 1991).

Numerous studies emphasize that educational integration yields various advantages for member states. These advantages encompass the harmonization of curricula, technology, degree accreditation across multiple states, the free movement of students between states, the standardization of school fees for all member states, and the establishment of regional higher education institutions that serve the interests of all member states (Knight, 2016; Christopherson, 2008; Cerna and Chou, 2014). Nevertheless, other research has identified that the regional integration of education faces several challenges. These challenges include insufficient human and financial resources, a lack of political will among member states, external interferences, inadequate commitment to regional educational policies, instability in educational policies (Anthony & Muliaro, 2008; Othieno & Nampewo, 2012). Some studies propose that addressing these challenges requires a focus on the development of human and financial resources. Furthermore, states should demonstrate commitment to regional policies and engage in signing regional treaties related to education. Additionally, states must combat instability in educational policies and external influences (Sirat & Bakar, 2016; Kago, C., & Masinde, 2017).

Previous studies build upon earlier studies that have examined instances of the regional integration for education in Europe, Asia, and America and indicate East African Community (EAC) as a successful regional institution in Africa (Markard, 2008; Elken et al., 2015). Furthermore, whereas prior research has predominantly been conducted at the national level, this study expands its scope. It evaluates data from all member states of the EAC, thereby providing a comprehensive overview of the contributions made by regional integration of higher education including achievements, challenges, and essential strategies for addressing these challenges. Ultimately, this research aims to fill the knowledge gap regarding the situation of regional integration of education by exclusively utilizing qualitative data as opposed to previous studies which have primarily relied on quantitative data. In doing so, this research aspires to make a significant contribution to the fields of regional integration and educational development.

Theoretical Review: Neo Functionalism Theory

Neo-functionalism is a theory concerning regional integration that expands on the principles of functionalism, highlighting the manner in which states collaborate to tackle common issues and, through this collaboration, generate momentum for more profound integration. Originating from Mitrany (1966), this theory asserts that integration occurs gradually as states engage in specific technical or functional endeavors. Such collaboration nurtures trust, interdependence, and the formation of joint institutions that progressively broaden cooperation into additional domains. A key element of this process is the notion of spillover, where advancements in one area naturally leads to or necessitate integration in another. Lindberg (1963) categorized spillover into three types: functional (technical interconnections between sectors), political (a shift of loyalties and advocacy from national to regional levels), and cultivated (the encouragement of integration by supranational entities through mediation or incentives).

Nevertheless, neo-functionalism has encountered considerable criticism, particularly from intergovernmentalists who emphasize that national governments and their interests are the primary catalysts for regional cooperation. Critics contend that neo-functionalism exaggerates the certainty of integration, overlooks domestic political disparities, and is excessively linked to the European context, which restricts its relevance to regions with distinct political and economic circumstances (Cini 2004; Wiener & Diez 2004; Eilstrup-Sangiovanni 2006). Neo-functionalism serves as a valuable framework for examining Educational Regionalism in East Africa. It offers perspectives on how technical collaboration, including the harmonization of academic curricula, the standardization of qualifications, and the enhancement of student mobility, may generate functional and political spillovers that bolster the broader integration agenda of the EAC. Simultaneously, the limitations of the theory prompt researchers to consider the influence of national priorities, institutional capacities, and local political contexts that may hinder such spillovers. Therefore, neo-functionalism provides both an explanatory and critical perspective for comprehending how educational cooperation can act as a catalyst for fostering deeper regional unity in East Africa.

Research Methodology

This research utilized a qualitative document analysis, focusing solely on secondary data published from 2020 to 2024. The methodological framework entails the systematic collection, examination, and synthesis of policy documents, scholarly articles, published books, websites government reports, official communiqués from EAC, and institutional publications pertaining to the Eastern African region. The objective is to deliver a thorough desk-based review of regional integration of education, encompassing all 8 EAC partner states: Burundi, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Kenya, Rwanda, Somalia, South Sudan, Tanzania and Uganda. The data analysis employed thematic coding to extract essential information aligned with the study's objectives: identifying current successes, delineating significant challenges (, and compiling existing recommendations put forth by regional stakeholders and experts.

The rationale for the chosen method is rooted in its appropriateness for conducting a comprehensive regional review within a specified timeframe, facilitating a thorough comparative

analysis of policies without the logistical and ethical challenges associated with primary data collection across various countries. The sole reliance on recent secondary data (2020-2024) guarantees that the results accurately represent the latest policy landscape and advancements following recent membership expansions, including the accession of DRC and Somalia. This methodology allows the research to systematically evaluate and juxtapose the achievements and shortcomings of educational integration across the diverse contexts of East Africa, producing a unified, high-level set of insights and practical recommendations for policymakers, researchers and regional educational bodies.

Results

In this part, the findings related to the integration of higher education within the East African Community (EAC) are described. It provides qualitative insights into current achievements, challenges, and prospective strategies.

Current Achievements in Education Harmonization

This section provides a summary of the current achievements of the EAC in higher education harmonization. It outlines several initiatives that have been implemented by the EAC regarding education harmonization. Furthermore, it evaluates their degree of success. These initiatives encompass: the harmonization of education systems, the establishment of centers of excellence in education, the mobility of students, and the regional recognition of degrees and certificates.

Harmonization of Education Systems and Quality Assurance

In the late 2000s, the IUCEA produced a comprehensive Handbook for Quality Assurance in Higher Education and provided training to numerous senior university officials (including vice-chancellors, principals, executive officers) on optimal quality assurance (QA) practices, with assistance from Germany's Rectors' Conference and the German Academic Exchange Service. Subsequently, in 2012, the council established a more extensive East African Higher Education Quality Assurance Network (EAQAN) (Halai & Tennant, 2016). EAQAN is responsible for promoting the creation of QA units at universities and enhancing QA systems within both universities and national QA organizations.

In order to fulfill these goals, EAQAN is committed to the ongoing training of dedicated QA officers, while also fostering the exchange of knowledge and information, organizing regional QA forums, and developing standardized training materials. It is important to highlight, however, that EAQAN lacks the authority to enforce QA procedures and instead depends on the voluntary collaboration of universities and national government entities for the application of its quality standards. Efforts to position EAQAN as a more formidable regional accreditation and oversight organization encountered resistances from the EAC member states. Consequently, there are currently no initiatives to establish external accreditation agencies beyond the national QA authorities. As of 2015, more than 80 universities had become part of the EAQAN network (Rasanga, 2013).

A significant accomplishment is the continuous effort to align educational curricula, standards, assessments, and evaluations among the Partner States. This vital initiative seeks to promote the unrestricted movement of human resources by guaranteeing the mutual acknowledgment of academic and professional credentials, which is a fundamental aspect of the EAC Common Market

Protocol. To advance this objective, the EAC has formulated and implemented strategic plans that encompass all educational levels, including Pre-Primary, Primary, Secondary, Teacher Education, and Special Needs Education, as well as Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) (EAC, 2023). This cohesive strategy is crucial for establishing shared educational standards and enhancing the quality of learning outcomes across the region (Kuria, & Banyankimbona, 2025; Halai & Tennant, 2016).

Centers of Excellence and Higher Education Integration

The EAC has strategically focused on the creation of Centers of Excellence (CoEs) within higher education to deliver high-quality training and research that addresses both current and future skill requirements (Nduwayezu, 2022). For example, the Inter-University Council for East Africa (IUCEA), which is a specialized body of the EAC, plays a crucial role in this endeavor by coordinating the advancement of higher education and promoting regional integration through academic partnerships. Additionally, the IUCEA has been vital in executing programs such as the Africa Higher Education Centers of Excellence (ACEs) Program, which enhances institutional capabilities in essential sectors and propels world-class research and innovation across East and Southern Africa (EAC, 2025; Japheth, et al., 2024). A notable instance is the Eastern and Southern Africa Higher Education Centers of Excellence Project (ACE II), an initiative funded by the World Bank and facilitated by IUCEA. This project strategically allocates resources to centers that specialize in areas such as STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics), Agriculture, Health, and Applied Statistics. For example, Centers of Excellence (CoEs) address specific health challenges in the region, providing specialized training in fields like Oncology in Uganda, or they focus on essential technological requirements, exemplified by the African Center of Excellence in Internet of Things (ACEIoT) located in Rwanda. By establishing these regional hubs, the East African Community (EAC) guarantees that specialized training and advanced research are accessible to all partner States, thereby promoting regional self-sufficiency in vital skills (Nkunya, 2017).

Promoting Mobility and Digital Skills

The IUCEA has officially set a goal to foster international student exchange and to advance "inter-university academic activities in teaching, research, and community service for improved regional integration through academic mobility (Nzioki, (2013). Generally speaking, economic integration and an increasing emphasis on internationalization have already produced significant improvements in mobility among the EAC member states in recent years (Anthony & Muliaro, 2008; Ole-Sein, 2024). Although reliable data is limited and the majority of mobile students from the region pursue their studies abroad in locations such as Europe, the United States, or China, Uganda has emerged as a progressively vital international education center for East African students. As reported by ICEF Monitor, the nation accommodated 16,000 international students in 2016, with the majority hailing from the neighboring country of Kenya (Onduko, 2013; Onyango, 2022).

This phenomenon is reflected in Kenya, recognized as the economic hub of East Africa and a significant destination for intra-regional labor migrants. Currently, the nation accommodates an estimated 4,000 to 5,000 international students each year, predominantly from East Africa (Brankamp & Daley, 2020). A

recent investigation revealed that over 25 percent of foreign students at four selected Kenyan universities originated from East African nations, with notable numbers of graduate students hailing from Tanzania and Rwanda. Furthermore, Rwanda has also seen an increase in its foreign student population. Although the total may be modest, the number of international degree-seeking African students in this small nation has more than doubled in the last five years, rising from 524 in 2012 to 9000 in 2024 (UNESCO) (Brankamp & Daley, 2020; Oyvat & wa Githinji, 2020).

One contributing factor to the increasing mobility is the notable growth of intra-regional research collaboration, coupled with an enhanced availability of scholarships for graduate students in recent years. A pertinent example is the World Bank-supported ACE II initiative, officially referred to as the Eastern and Southern Africa Higher Education Centers of Excellence Project (ACE II), which was initiated in 2016. This five-year initiative aims to foster the establishment of research and innovation hubs at universities and institutions within the ACE II participating nations: Kenya, Rwanda, Tanzania, and Uganda (part of the EAC), in addition to Ethiopia, Malawi, Mozambique, and Zambia (Basnett, 2013; MINKO, 2024). These centers are intended to operate as regional incubators for technological innovation and specialized research on issues pertinent to regional development, such as irrigation systems or electrical micro grids. Overall, the ACE II initiative finances 24 centers where over 3,500 graduate students engage in research, including at least 700 PhD candidates. Notably, Rwanda hosts four of these centers, which are available to qualified students from all ACE II nations, including Burundi, which lacks any ACE centers (Belete Hailu, 2024; Ole-Sein, 2024).

The Community has achieved significant advancements in facilitating the mobility of students and educators among Partner States. This progress is supported by the provision of visa exemptions for students enrolled in accredited training institutions, thereby reducing bureaucratic obstacles for individuals seeking higher education (Kago & Masinde, 2017; Onduko, 2013). In addition, the EAC has initiated and executed essential projects aimed at enhancing digital skills development. One notable example is the Digital Skills for an Innovative East African Industry Project, which has had a profound effect on digital skills training, ensuring that the regional workforce is adequately equipped for the digital economy (EAC, 2025). This emphasis on cultivating a skilled labor force is crucial for the economic development and competitiveness of the region (Mwesigye, 2021; Makanga, 2021).

Strategic Initiatives and Recognition of Qualifications

When the EAC member states reached an agreement to establish a common market (Kago & Masinde, 2017), it opted to enhance economic integration through the creation of a regional qualifications framework aimed at facilitating the seamless movement of learners and labor, as well as enabling the mutual recognition of academic and professional qualifications throughout the region (Konosi & Ratemo, 2019; Oluoch, 2018). After years of development and with financial backing from the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency, the IUCEA unveiled a detailed East African Qualifications Framework for Higher Education (EAQFHE) in 2015, which serves as a crucial instrument for the harmonization of education systems within the EAC (Shabani & Okebukola, 2017; Kago & Masinde, 2017).

The EAQFHE formalizes the duration, framework, and educational outcomes of academic degree programs. In addition, it creates a standardized credit system and outlines the minimum credit requirements for recognized benchmark qualifications, similar to the ECTS (European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System) established by the Bologna reforms. Although some of the existing policy documents released by the IUCEA seem to lack completeness, the official EAQFHE guidelines clarify that one credit unit corresponds to 10 hours of notional learning time, which encompasses both contact hours and independent learning. Referred to as EACAT (East African Credit Accumulation and Transfer), this innovative credit system aims to enhance the comparability of academic qualifications and to streamline the transfer of credits between different programs, as well as to simplify the acknowledgment of prior learning. In accordance with the IUCEA guidelines, a full year of study on a full-time basis is recognized as equivalent to 120 EACAT credits (O'Leary, 2017; Shabani & Okebukola, 2017; Maina, et al., 2022).

Additional significant elements of the qualification framework encompass the establishment of defined admission criteria, pathways for progression, assessment standards, and specific learning outcomes associated with each of the eight qualification levels specified in the EAQFHE. Furthermore, the guidelines advocate for the uniformity of credential titles and the development of an 'East African Graduation Statement.' This document, akin to the European Diploma Supplement, would accompany degree certificates and furnish details regarding the qualification. Although the framework has yet to be put into practice, it is anticipated that the governments of the EAC nations will ultimately synchronize their national qualification frameworks with the EAQFHE (O'Leary, 2017; Sangwa & Mutabazi, 2025).

In addition to direct educational initiatives, the EAC has established programs aimed at enhancing regional integration through both intellectual and professional channels (Grinberg, 2024). The annual EAC Secondary School Students' Essay Writing Competition has encouraged intellectual participation and increased regional consciousness among young people, with the winners being honored at the highest level during the EAC Heads of State Summit (Oketch & Rolleston, 2007). Moreover, the implementation of Mutual Recognition Agreements (MRAs) in essential professional fields such as Accountancy, Engineering, Architecture, and Veterinary Science guarantees that professionals educated in one Partner State can operate without hindrance throughout the Community, thereby eliminating obstacles to the free movement of labor (Oluoch, 2018; Ziguas, et al., 2024).

Challenges

This section outlines the findings regarding challenges that have the likelihood of hindering the implementation of the regional education system. It examines issues such as human and financial constraints, abrupt reforms, lack of recognition for degrees and disparities in scholarship fees. Through the analysis of these challenges, this study aims to identify the reasons likely to be behind the current low success rates of regional integration of education in East Africa and to explore related potential solutions.

Reforms in higher education in the EAC are not regionally coordinated

The coordination of higher education reforms within the East African Community (EAC) faces significant obstacles due to unilateral changes in national policies. This is illustrated by

Kenya's transition from the 8-4-4 system to the Competence-Based Curriculum (2-6-3-3 system) and Burundi's implementation of the BMD (Bachelor, Master, Doctorate) framework alongside its shift to a 9-3-3 system, both of which have not been adopted regionally (Odebero, 2011). These differing national educational frameworks exacerbate the longstanding issue of inconsistent entry qualifications, reminiscent of the previous A-Level conflict. This inconsistency complicates the mobility of students and workers across borders, as graduates from one nation may be considered unqualified in another. Although the IUCEA has made efforts to address this through the East African Qualifications Framework for Higher Education (EAQFHE), its successes are still hindered by an ongoing lack of harmonized regional policies and regulatory frameworks essential for its implementation across all member states (Anthony & Muliaro, 2008; Othieno & Nampewo, 2012).

Limited regional education political will

Certain EAC member states are not fully engaging in regional integration for education. For instance, some states fail to make their contributions punctually. Furthermore, there are instances where states modify their curricula without prior consultation with their counterparts. Data indicate that conflicts and strained diplomatic relations among some member states discourage others from fully committing to the educational framework. This situation hinders the establishment of a cohesive regional education system (Kamili & Namusonge, 2015; Kimeu, 2020).

Challenges of Qualification Recognition

The Bologna reforms have demonstrated that the reorganization and alignment of degree programs is not an impossible task, despite resistance from universities and other stakeholders against altering established structures (Zmas, 2015). However, the execution of such extensive reforms necessitates political determination and a willingness to relinquish certain national and institutional privileges. This presents perhaps the most significant obstacle to establishing a CHEA in East Africa. Currently, numerous integration and harmonization initiatives within the EAC are hindered by the nationalistic agendas of countries that disagree on various matters (Zahavi & Friedman, 2020; Azevedo, 2014).

Despite prior initiatives undertaken by member states, a significant gap persists in the recognition of degrees and academic credentials from universities within these states. The absence of mutual acknowledgment of qualifications in East Africa is primarily rooted in the differing national regulatory and accreditation practices, which regard educational quality as a national concern rather than a regional one. Partner States uphold distinct, frequently non-equivalent, National Qualification Frameworks (NQFs) and utilize varied Quality Assurance (QA) standards and procedures for program approval and institutional licensing (Konosi & Ratemo, 2019). This situation renders it exceedingly challenging for regional entities, such as the Inter-University Council for East Africa (IUCEA), to implement uniform benchmarks. As a result, a degree or professional certificate that is fully accredited in one EAC nation may meet skepticism or outright rejection by regulatory boards, government agencies, or prospective employers in another nation. This fragmentation in regulation is exacerbated by the inconsistent capabilities of national quality assurance bodies and the absence of legal harmonization that would automatically obligate national

institutions to adhere to regional recognition agreements, significantly hindering the free movement of skilled labor and undermining the fundamental principle of regional integration in education (Oluoch, 2018; O'Leary, 2017).

Unequal School Fees

Similar challenges are likely to arise in the education sector, where integration remains in its early stages. It is perhaps not surprising that financial concerns, such as the agreed equal treatment of students from all member nations regarding tuition fees, encounter opposition from underfunded universities, over half of which have not yet achieved full membership in the IUCEA. Additionally, some universities are apprehensive that the enhanced transferability of qualifications may lead to a loss of students to institutions in other countries (Othieno & Nampewo, 2012). Regardless, the expenses related to restructuring degree programs and curricula present a significant barrier, while established interests and the unwillingness to relinquish sovereign rights and institutional independence are likely to impede academic integration for the foreseeable future (Mpofu & Maphalala, 2021; Amutuhaire, 2024).

Resource Scarcity and Implementation Gaps

The absence of sustained and sufficient financial and human resources presents a significant challenge to the effective execution of educational regional integration within the East African Community (EAC). This deficiency greatly restricts the capabilities of central coordinating entities, such as the East African Quality Assurance Network (EAQAN), which frequently functions with inadequate budgets, resulting in a harmful deficit in both professional staffing and necessary infrastructural support. As a result, the region experiences a shortage of a critical mass of qualified Quality Assurance (QA) professionals essential for the effective development, implementation, and monitoring of harmonized standards across various member states (Atsiaya, 2014). Additionally, this lack of resources leads to ineffective steering and oversight mechanisms, indicating that even when regional protocols and frameworks are established, there is insufficient financial strength or personnel capacity to guarantee compliance, perform regular audits, or enforce sanctions, thereby rendering comprehensive and cohesive reform implementation nearly unfeasible (Epulu, 2019).

Language Barriers

Research indicates that linguistic differences among some member states obstruct effective educational integration (EAC, 2023). For instance, Burundi and the DRC utilize French as their primary language of instruction. Furthermore, Tanzania and Kenya have adopted Swahili as their official languages (Kago & Masinde, 2017). Studies suggest that language barriers can impede student mobility, curriculum sharing, and overall educational advancement (Epulu, 2019).

Cultural Differences

Cultural diversity likely poses a considerable obstacle, though a richness, to the successful educational integration within the East African Community (EAC), primarily due to differences in language and curriculum that disrupt a unified regional educational environment. The absence of a standardized medium of instruction, even with Kiswahili recognized as an official language, results in communication difficulties for both students and educators when they cross borders (Omolo, 2023).

Additionally, the varied colonial histories have led to national education systems characterized by differing curricula, quality benchmarks, and qualification frameworks, which obstruct the mutual acknowledgment of academic credentials and restrict the mobility of students and teachers (Ochieng, 2022). These educational and linguistic separations hinder the formation of a cohesive sense of 'Eastafricanness,' as individuals frequently lack a shared sense of belonging and understanding of the integration agenda, ultimately undermining the social and cultural foundation necessary for the long-term success of political and economic integration (Mugisha, 2023). Consequently, cultural diversities should be used as sources of mutual cooperation and complementarity rather than sources disharmonies in general and particular in education.

Strategies for Mitigating the Challenges

This section outlines several strategies that EAC members can employ to advance regional integration in education. Although the EAC has made efforts to promote education, numerous challenges continue to exist. This section will delve into strategies for tackling these issues, which include enhancing mobility, harmonizing educational systems, and aligning higher education with market demands.

Effective Implementation of Harmonization of Education Policies

The alignment of educational systems within the East African Community (EAC) serves as a crucial strategy for promoting regional integration and enhancing human capital development. At the heart of this initiative, the harmonization and mutual acknowledgment of academic and professional qualifications, as specified in Article 11 of the EAC Common Market Protocol, and implemented through Mutual Recognition Agreements (MRAs) (Khalid, et al., 2019) are important. This structure should guarantee that a degree or professional certification earned in one Partner State is recognized throughout the entire Community, thus promoting labor mobility and educational access. Targeted harmonization initiatives have concentrated on creating uniform guidelines for curriculum frameworks to ensure coherence and relevance across all educational levels, from pre-primary to tertiary (EAC, 2023), as well as the establishment of regional quality assurance and accreditation systems, particularly in Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET), to uphold common standards (EAC, 2025).

Enhancing Mobility and Exchange Among Students and Educators

The enhancement of mobility and interaction among students and educators should be recognized as a crucial factor in promoting regional integration. Initiatives such as the EAC Scholarship Programme, along with various student and staff exchange programs, have likelihood to facilitate cross-border educational opportunities, thereby improving access to higher education while nurturing intercultural understanding and reinforcing the essence of "East Africans" should be promoted (Sirat & Bakar, 2016; Kago, & Masinde, 2017). Additionally, the EAC should advance this mobility by implementing visa exemptions for students enrolled in accredited institutions across other Partner States. And henceforth effectively eliminating a significant obstacle to educational exchange and adhering to the obligations outlined in the EAC Common Market Protocol.

Alignment of Education with Market Needs

The aligning education with market demands guarantees that integration initiatives effectively support the economic objectives of the EAC. The EAC TVET Harmonization Strategy highlights the importance of "Competitive Technical and Vocational Education and Training for Regional Integration" by ensuring that training programs are tailored to labor market requirements, enhancing institutional capabilities, and facilitating the collaborative establishment of training facilities (EAC, n.d.). Additionally, the Community emphasizes essential skills such as foundational learning, 21st-century competencies (which encompass problem-solving, creativity, and collaboration), and STEM fields as vital for fostering innovation and sustainable development within the region (Kruss, & Petersen, 2016). Moreover, encouraging private sector involvement through collaborative platforms guarantees that education and training systems stay pertinent and responsive to industry demands. Through these synchronized efforts, which include harmonized qualifications and mobility programs alongside labor market-focused education, the EAC should steadily construct a robust and interconnected educational framework that aligns with the broader goals of the Common Market and the anticipated Political Federation (Abubakar, et al., 2025; Nhleko, et al., 2021).

Discussion of the Findings

Results of this study indicate that integration of education within the EAC has resulted in significant achievements. These include the harmonization of the education system and the mobility of students across different countries. Nevertheless, several challenges still exist. These challenges encompass a lack of resources, instability within the education system, and others (Cabanda et al. 2020; Chou & Ravinet, 2015; Jules, 2017; Robertson et al., 2016).

To commence, various activities in educational regionalism have been unveiled. These include the harmonization of education. Results show that the East African Community (EAC) member states have aligned their pre-primary, primary, secondary, and university education systems. This alignment has facilitated the seamless transfer of students, credits, and other educational elements across borders. Furthermore, policies promoting free movement have allowed students to relocate from one country to another with ease. Ultimately, the EAC has strategically emphasized the creation of Centers of Excellence (CoEs) in higher education, aimed at delivering high-quality training and research to address both current and future skill requirements (Ministry of East African Community Affairs Uganda, n.d.). The Inter-University Council for East Africa (IUCEA) has also played a crucial role in educating undergraduate, master's, and doctoral students. This initiative has significantly contributed to the advancement of education within the EAC member states.

Results indicated that the East African Community (EAC) has established initiatives aimed at fostering regional integration through both intellectual and professional channels. The execution of Mutual Recognition Agreements (MRAs) in essential professional fields such as Accountancy, Engineering, Architecture, and Veterinary Science guarantees that professionals educated in one Partner State can operate without hindrance throughout the Community, thereby eliminating obstacles to the free movement of labor. These findings are consistent with earlier research regarding the impact of educational regionalisation and

educational advancement among member states. For instance, prior studies have shown that educational initiatives in Europe facilitated the harmonization of educational systems (Chou & Ravinet, 2015; Jules, 2017; Robertson et al., 2016). Likewise, research conducted by Woldegiorgis (2013) demonstrated that educational regionalization in Asia resulted in the acknowledgment of degrees and diplomas across different states. Additionally, findings indicated that educational regionalization in Central America contributed to the establishment of a unified higher education system in the region. However, these outcomes contrast with the findings of Cabanda et al. (2020), who reported that educational regionalization in Europe led to an increased number of students from other member states pursuing education in the USA.

Secondly, the results indicate that despite the various achievements in education by EAC member states, there remain challenges that hinder the complete harmonization of the education system. For instance, the data shows a lack of resources and materials necessary for the implementation of regional harmonization. Additionally, some states fail to make their contributions punctually. This scarcity significantly restricts the capacity of central coordinating bodies, such as the East African Quality Assurance Network (EQAN), which frequently operates with inadequate budgets, resulting in a detrimental shortfall in both professional staffing and essential infrastructural support. Furthermore, the data reveals that instability within the education system obstructs the harmonization process. For example, challenges within the education systems of certain member states frequently arise, which impedes long-term harmonization efforts. Lastly, the data indicates that some states do not recognize degrees from other states, thereby restricting students' mobility between states. These findings are consistent with previous studies on the challenges of educational regionalism globally. For instance, studies by Woldegiorgis (2013) and Carvajal et al. (2024) have shown that frequent changes in education systems by member states have contributed to the slow development of education in South America. Similarly, research by Bykovska et al. (2023) revealed that insufficient financial and human resources have hindered the harmonization of education systems in Asia. Conversely, this work contradicts other studies that did not emphasize the importance of political will in achieving the harmonization of education systems.

the data indicated several strategies for enhancing the harmonization of the education system within the East African Community (EAC). For instance, the data implies that member states must exhibit political will to achieve this harmonization. The findings reveal that when states bolster their commitment, it can significantly benefit the education system by ensuring timely contributions, ratifying treaties, facilitating student mobility between states, and recognizing degrees across borders. Furthermore, the data advocates for member states to empower their universities and to foster human resource development within their jurisdictions. The findings also assert that degrees should receive accreditation from all member states, and that school fees ought to be standardized while promoting the free movement of students. By implementing these measures, educational regionalism in the EAC can yield positive outcomes. These outcomes are consistent with prior research on effective strategies for advancing educational regionalism globally. For example, the work of Kruss & Petersen (2016) suggests that treaties facilitating the free movement of students between states should be established. Additionally, Carvajal et al. (2024) recommend that

countries should enhance the development of human and financial resources. Finally, Cabanda et al. (2020) concluded that individual states should strive for educational stability, whereby states within the same region adopt unified long-term educational goals and strategies.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study explored the opportunities available to Eastern African nations, challenges and the key strategies for tackling the challenges by educational regionalism in East Africa. Only secondary qualitative data were utilized in this research. The findings indicated that there are numerous opportunities for East African countries arising from educational regionalisation. For instance, the results show that it has facilitated the harmonization of education systems and quality assurance, promoted mobility and digital skills strategic initiatives, and recognized qualifications, among other benefits. However, several challenges are highlighted and have the likelihood of hindering the comprehensive implementation of educational regionalism in East Africa. The study suggests that East African countries should work towards harmonizing their curricula. Additionally, they should lessen the restrictions on the free movement of students between countries. Finally, it is essential to enhance the political will among member states to ensure better implementation. The study concludes that EAC educational harmonization have led to the pivotal roles for education institutions. However, challenges still persist and consequently should be tackled by EAC educational policies reforms and harmonization. Additionally, the long-term curriculum ought to be developed and approved by member states to prevent abrupt policy changes. Lastly, member states should address the challenges related to the accreditation of certificates and degrees across different states.

As further scientific contribution, empirical studies on the successes, challenges and innovative mitigations measures about regional integration of education are using qualitative and quantitative or mixed are recommended. In this regard, further collaboration for research among universities and research institutions in EAC should be further framed and strengthened.

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