

EAST AFRICA: Higher education harmonisation hitches

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A fresh row has erupted over the planned harmonisation of higher education systems in the East African Community region, after member states differed over the duration of degrees.

The five East African Community (EAC) countries - Burundi, Kenya, Rwanda, Tanzania and Uganda - plan to harmonise their higher education as they integrate into one trading bloc.

The integration process saw them sign a Common Market Protocol last July to allow free movement of labour and goods across the region. The process is expected ultimately to encourage nations to adopt regional institutions across sectors.

But the countries have widely varying higher education systems that must be standardised. For example, it takes five years for a student to finish an engineering degree in Kenya, against three years in Uganda. To pursue a medical degree at a Kenyan university takes five years, a year less than in Tanzania and Uganda.

But none of the countries seem willing to adjust the duration of degree study, at least for now, it emerged at a regional higher education forum in Kenya this month organised by the German Academic Exchange Service.

The Inter-University Council for East Africa (IUCEA), the organisation spearheading the harmonisation process, had asked Kenya to consider extending the duration of a medical degree to six years to match countries in the region. Kenya declined, saying the other countries should rather adopt a five-year medical degree.

"Reducing the duration would be cheaper for students regionally and would be more effective," Kenya's Higher Education Secretary, Professor Harry Kaane, told participants at the forum.

It is understood that higher education ministers are also yet to agree on the duration of other courses such as engineering, architecture and the arts.

The planned harmonisation process will require major changes to education systems, some of which countries now seem uncomfortable with.

Governments are also still to resolve a stalemate over whether to adopt a single university accreditation system in the bloc, rather than each country having its own system. The plan was for the Inter-University Council to be transformed into a regional body with the core function of granting accreditation to universities in the five countries.

In February, higher education ministers in the EAC differed over the accreditation system. Some argued that the proposed overall body would interfere with countries' sovereignty and would replicate national authorities such as Kenya's Commission for Higher Education, which regulates activities including quality assurance and setting up universities.

Educationists said surging differences over the higher education harmonisation process signaled a rough road ahead, as the five countries become compelled to reform their education systems.

They have argued that harmonisation could increase the cost pressures on universities, and that more expensive institutions could find students opting for cheaper alternatives in other EAC countries. Also, competition for students could grow, forcing some universities to charge lower fees.

For students the regional approach would mean, for example, that a Kenyan student enrolling at the University of Nairobi for a degree could graduate from the University of Dar es Salaam in Tanzania.

Harmonisation changes such as those contained in the Inter-University Council of East Africa Bill, which was recently published and introduced to the region's legislative assembly, would also make it easier for investors to establish higher education institutions.

Further, it would allow universities to hire one vice-chancellor to run an institution with branches in all five EAC countries, instead of the current system under which branch campuses are run separately.

