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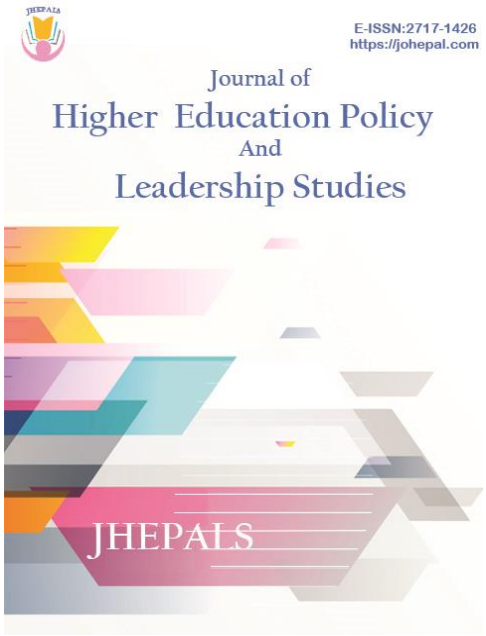
Re-Imagining Internationalization of Higher Education: Tales, Tips and Lessons for an African Credit Accumulation and Transfer System



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Re-Imagining Internationalization of Higher Education: Tales, Tips and Lessons for an African Credit Accumulation and Transfer System

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Abstract

This research interrogated tales, tips, and lessons regarding ways in which African universities can move towards an African credit accumulation and transfer system (CATS) that facilitates student and staff mobility within the continent. The research guided by the post-positivist paradigm, employed the qualitative research methodology to gather data. Twelve African universities spread across six geo-political areas of Africa were purposively sampled. Heads, their deputies, or senior officers of the international office or the Quality Assurance office represented these universities. The tales, tips, and lessons of this study revealed that African universities need to have clear receiving and sending policies, put procedures in place to recognize qualifications, programs, and institutions, make information on accredited diplomas and degrees readily available, put in place health insurance facilities, devise mechanisms for linguistic tutoring, have access to mobility scholarships, enforce mandatory university partnerships, devise mechanisms for licensure and registration, improve foreign language proficiency and develop transversal skills among other issues. The research concluded that an African CATS is feasible because Africa will benefit through lifelong learning, enhanced mobility, better exposure, and networking. The research recommends an African CATS in Higher Education and a related policy for HE enacted, adopted, and enforced at the continental level.

Keywords: Internationalisation; Higher Education Mobility; Credit Accumulation and Transfer System (CATS); Quality Assurance

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Introduction

Continuous and rapid developments in the global higher education arena today more than ever before present new insights, questions, greater challenges, and vast new opportunities for institutions, policymakers, scholars, and students alike (Streitwieser, 2014, Balaban & de Jong 2023). Internationalization of HE which is sometimes called cross-border higher education, in some places, international mobility in higher education, applies to students and staff and, more recently, to educational programs and institutions. Tight (2022, p. 239) points out that internationalization has been seen as "a contemporary trend driven by Western developed nations". These sentiments were captured well by Lasanowski (2023), who pointed out that international student mobility is booming. The main catalyst for mobility is the demands of a globalized economy (Lasanowski, 2023). The globalisation then influences the patterns of student movement across borders. According to the OECD (2022), international mobility serves several purposes such as participation in international knowledge flows where both learners and faculty are exposed to new ideas and technologies, benchmarking their processes, attracting and keeping talented personnel for the economy and research system of the host country, generating revenue for higher education institutions and for the economy and help developing and emerging countries build capacity (OECD, 2022, p. 3).

Internationalisation of higher education has been perfected by the advent of technology. It is through technology that the world is now seen as merely a global village. Bates (2018) opines that technology enhances overall engagement, mobility, collaboration, and partnerships in higher education. It means Higher Education institutions in Africa should move fast to embrace this new phenomenon and catch up with the rest of the world. To achieve the IPP Africa (Integrated, Peaceful and Prosperous Africa) premised around the African Union's vision of "An Integrated, prosperous and peaceful Africa, driven by its citizens and representing a dynamic force in the global arena", significantly more action is still required on several fronts. According to Burkle and Cobo (2018), in the context of African higher education, there is a need to redefine knowledge in the digital age in line with global changing trends. Thus, technologies have enabled more interactivity for students anywhere and at any time. These hybrid models of online and in-person activities and tools have managed to change learning, teaching, and assessment globally (Burkle & Cobo, 2018). These ideas are corroborated by Lasanowski (2023) who points out that global mobility is fuelled by a shift to post-industrial society. She also points to the rise of services-oriented knowledge economies as a major factor that influences global mobility in higher education. Thus, Lasanowski (2023) points out that the world's middle class is booming. This growth trend in the world's middle class is seen also as the driver of the increase in worldwide tertiary participation.

In pursuit of the internationalisation of higher education in the African continent, the importance of understanding the impact of worldwide student mobility and the internationalisation of higher education is more important now than ever before. Collins and Halverson (2018) agree that student mobility is important. They went further to urge higher education to rethink their educational practices "in the age of technology." They recommend that higher education institutions should pursue the digital revolution and educational provision driven by technology. This, to them, has a great impact on social and

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economic systems at local, national, regional, and global levels. In marching towards the African vision, Africa must do things very differently to take advantage of the current momentum towards 2063 by making higher education comparable across Africa.

On the surface, the continent appears to be on track. However, going deeper, one glaring missing link in Africa is vivid and this missing link is the march towards an African CATS in Higher Education. Teferra (2018) points out that there is no common and reliable means of measuring and transferring acquired knowledge in Africa. CATS not only makes teaching and learning more transparent but also facilitates the recognition of all studies (Horn & Price, 2020). Yet, when Africa has CATS in Higher Education, this will enable the continental higher education system to transform teaching and learning. According to Teferra (2018), the CATS will help Africa promote the free movement of students across the continent, advance the harmonisation of higher education systems, and foster a HE system that produces quality graduates. CATS has the potential to aid curriculum design and quality assurance. It allows for the transfer of learning experiences between different institutions. It also allows greater student mobility and more flexible routes to gain degrees in Africa (Horn & Price, 2020).

Credit Accumulation and Transfer System (CATS)

As a starting point, there is a need to be clear on what credit is. We take the definition of the ECTS Users' Guide (2015) which thinks that there is growing consensus among HEIs that the basis for credit allocation is "the student workload required to achieve the objectives of the program". To make it easier for HEIs, these objectives should preferably be specified in terms of learning outcomes. In that context, the credit can have a numerical value. Junor and Usher, (2008) who appear to agree with these sentiments, further point out that postsecondary credit is awarded to students who have demonstrated successful completion of a module or unit. Horn and Price (2020) point out that credits are taken from one higher education institution to another where they are counted towards a qualification. Further, Horn and Price (2020) point out that a student who has completed a course at one institution can transfer the credits to another institution. These transferred credits allow the student to switch institutions but maintain their academic status. This means a student can complete his/her degree without the burden of redoing previously done courses.

The credit represents a portion of an academic qualification. Horn and Price (2020) further add that for the credit to accumulate, a student must meet a minimum standard, commonly known as a "pass," in the assessment process. To Junor and Usher (2008), these credits often allow individuals to continue further academic pursuits. The credits that have been accumulated form the building blocks of a post-secondary credential. SEAMEO (2015) who also appears to share similar views, says the CATS is a mechanism through which higher education institutions share students' workload and accomplishments with other institutions. This will enable them to facilitate their horizontal mobility and vertical progression. They point out that CATS seeks to avoid duplication of studies. On the other hand, CATS saves time and money for students who decide to embark on an exchange program. What is important for Africa is that an appropriate system of credit transfer is a key facilitator of student mobility and cooperation among higher education institutions. This means that Africa needs to harmonise the credit transfer systems so that they can apply to all countries. Horn and Price (2020) are of the view that this is a way of helping learners earn

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the credentials that they want from a provider who is best positioned to serve them. According to Lasanowski (2023), rapidly developing economies affect the magnitude and direction of mobility flow. Many of these countries are also found in Africa. This makes the case of the CATS imperative in the context of a continent whose members require a great amount of skilled labour to support this growth.

Technology as an Enabling Environment

It is through the wide use of technology that has enabled HIEs to interact with each other. This interaction also facilitates student and staff mobility. This argument is supported by Juror and Usher (2008) who are of the view that technological advances in communication and transportation have increased educational opportunities for post-secondary education students around the globe. They further point out that owing to advances in communication and transportation, individuals, and information now more than ever before, travel quicker and considerably cheaper between countries, regions, and continents. This is an opportunity for HEIs because they no longer have a local, jurisdictional, or even domestic focus. It means HEIs in Africa need to move with the times. In that case, their visions must change. Globalisation entails visions that become global. Juror and Usher (2008) agree with this kind of reasoning and even go on to add that governments and employers should recognise that the workforce of the future must include well-trained, globally aware professionals with international work experience who can solve economic and social challenges for sustainable development. They went on to point out that at the same time, students and faculty are becoming increasingly interested in spending time in different academic environments, often in foreign surroundings (Juror & Usher, 2008). This length of stay in foreign environments is now made easier and quicker by technology and communication advancement and HEIs must capitalise on this development in their noble quest for internationalisation and globalisation of their practices.

Quality Assurance in Credit Accumulation and Transfer Systems (CATS)

Quality Assurance in CATS is critical considering that its major aim is to facilitate the recognition, validation, and accumulation of learning outcomes of individuals who are aiming to qualify (Medved & Ursic 2021). This is important for African higher education whose major objective is renewed commitment by African governments to re-vitalize Higher Education in the continent to support Africa's development agenda. This will improve the general understanding of learning outcomes, increase transparency, increase cross-border citizens-mobility between and within member countries, and at the same time foster learners' and labour mobility and portability of qualifications in a borderless area of lifelong learning (EQAVET, as cited in Medved & Ursic 2021).

In some countries like those under the European Union, quality assurance is given priority. Medved and Ursic (2021) content that by 2020 countries are expected to have created the necessary conditions and taken measures for the gradual implementation of quality practices to vocational qualifications at all levels of the European Qualifications Framework. Africa needs to take a cue from such practices to support the flexibility of programs and the availability of pathways to achieve qualifications. This on its own will enhance the opportunities for lifelong learning. This will then make it easier to recognise the learning achieved by learners in other contexts.

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Internationalization of HE & African CATS

The RUFORUM handbook (2011) appears to be a shining example for Africa. This handbook builds on the renewed commitment by African governments to re-vitalize Higher Education in the continent to support Africa's development agenda, especially under the frameworks for the Second Decade of Higher Education in Africa (2006-2015) and the Comprehensive African Agricultural Development Programme (CAADP) (RUFORUM, 2011). The handbook uses the two frameworks to provide guidelines for reinvigorating higher education in the continent to respond better to the critical need for quality and skilled human resources and for universities to engage more pro-actively and effectively in the continent's development process (RUFORUM, 2011).

Some Useful Examples

A well-known and documented CATS is the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS). ECTS is said by European Commission (2015), to be a tool that helps to design, describe, and deliver study programs and award higher education qualifications. In Europe, they use the ECTSs, in conjunction with outcomes-based qualifications frameworks, making study programmes and qualifications more transparent. In the process, they facilitate the recognition of qualifications in many countries.

Another good example for Africa is the Asian situation. According to SEAMEO (2015), the Asian Development Bank (ADB) is implementing a project called: "*Harmonization and Networking in Higher Education, building a Common Credit Transfer System for Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) and Beyond*" This project aims at providing GMS (+ ASEAN + Japan + Korea) means for harmonising existing credit transfer arrangements in higher education. This very good project is structured in four stages: *Explore, Experiment, Experience* and *Expand* seeking to create a regional and all-inclusive academic credit transfer framework. It is also done in support of the ASEAN Leaders' vision to build an ASEAN Community from 2015 consisting of three 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 contributing to realizing an ASEAN Community that is people-centered and socially responsible.

In South Africa, the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA)'s policy for credit accumulation and transfer (2021) is a good example. This policy provides "the tools that contribute to the facilitation of lifelong learning, articulation and flexible learning pathways in South Africa" (SAQA, 2021, p. 3). They also point out that the policy shares the criteria for Credit Accumulation and Transfer within the National Qualifications Framework (CAT Policy and Criteria). It also sets out the principles for the CAT system in South Africa. These principles can also inform the African Credit Accumulation and Transfer system. SAQA (2021) argues that in line with the African aspirations for facilitating the internationalisation of higher education, the system is set to benefit all lifelong learners. SAQA (2021) also mentioned that the system could be used to facilitate "the implementation of an integrated, articulated, quality-assured national qualification framework". Another area that can benefit Africa in this framework is that the credit accumulation and transfer system should be underpinned by the provision of the best opportunities and support mechanisms that promote international mobility for both students and faculty. It should also enable learners to succeed anywhere where they are settled.

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Another very good example in Africa is the initiative called the Harmonization of African Higher Education, Quality Assurance and Accreditation Initiative, (HAQAA2) (Mashininga, 2023). This is a continental initiative that seeks to harmonise the higher education quality assurance and accreditation systems for the benefit of the continent. This research seeks to support this initiative by bringing to the table evidence from research. This initiative is funded by the European Commission under the Africa-European Union Strategic Partnership (HAQAA2, 2022). This Africa-EU Strategic Partnership seeks to:

> Bring Africa and Europe closer together by supporting economic cooperation and promoting sustainable development, with both continents co-existing in peace, security, democracy, prosperity, solidarity, and human dignity. The renewed partnership is based on an ongoing dialogue with the European Union's African partners, including the dialogue during the 6th European Union-African Union Summit held in Brussels in February 2022. (HAQAA2, as cited in Mashininga, 2023, p. 2)

HAQAA2 is an initiative that among other things seeks to promote academic mobility and utilise the Association of African University's membership body of over 400 higher education institutions across the five regions of Africa. It is also a commitment to enhancing the quality of higher education in Africa. Hence this study that seeks to re-imagine the internationalisation of higher education in Africa through tales, tips, and lessons for an African credit and transfer system in higher education resonates with this initiative.

Statement of the Problem

Higher education institutions in Africa are using different credit transfer systems which are either too general and all too inclusive or too narrow and applicable to only a limited number of institutions. This stifles students' mobility and as a result, the number of students moving *within the continent* remains relatively small. Africa is failing to learn from other parts of the world where higher education has grown, in size, fluidity, and complexity. These practices are holding back African development. This is because future development depends on how the continent embraces processes that promote the internationalisation of higher education. Otherwise, the continent is engaging in retrogressive practices that stifle the globalisation and internationalisation agenda. The problem is clear. There is no continental African mechanism through which higher education institutions share students' workload and accomplishments with other institutions. This mechanism, premised around the Credit Accumulation and Transfer System (CATS) will facilitate students' horizontal mobility and vertical progression.

- Thus, the research question was: How can African HEIs move towards an African credit and transfer system that will promote student and staff mobility within the continent?
- The research objective was: To examine ways in which African HEIs can move towards an African credit and transfer system that will aid student and staff mobility within the continent.

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Research Methodology: Materials and Methods

This methodology section presents the theoretical framework, research methodology, data analysis, and research participants, among others.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for the credit accumulation and transfer that influenced this study is the Bologna process's Credit Accumulation and transfer process (Bekhradnia, 2004). This process seeks to widen participation and lifelong learning in higher education. It also sought to harmonize a continental education system through the adoption of a Europe-wide Credit Accumulation and Transfer (CAT) system as was the case in this study.

According to Bekhradnia (2004), the aims of the Bologna process that resonate with the African context are that of furthering lifelong learning, improving life-wide learning, widening participation, reducing noncompletion, and increasing the mobility of students. SAQA (2021) appears to buttress this view by claiming that CAT has been prioritized in South Africa because of its potential to positively contribute to the facilitation of lifelong learning.

Three key aspects of the Bologna process could contribute to the African context. The three key aspects of Bologna's CAT system include modularisation, credits, and credit transfer. Modules are curriculum devices that are used to divide the curriculum into logical and distinct components. On the other hand, credits are a means of attaching relative value to the different components of the course (Bekhradnia, 2004). Credit transfer will allow students to move between courses or to move to other higher education institutions with the credits that they would have accumulated. SAQA (2021) appears to agree with this kind of reasoning by pointing out that such a system of credit accumulation and transfer can ensure that opportunities for individual students to progress from one qualification to another or one institution to the other are enhanced.

The Bologna Process framework has associated instruments that will assist with the content and its relevance to the program being pursued. According to Bekhradnia (2004), some of these associated instruments include a framework of levels and level descriptors. This framework can give details of the level of the credits being considered. For example, are the credits for the honours degree or a general degree? Is it at the certificate or the diploma level? The second type of associated instrument is that of the learning outcomes. Learning outcomes specify what the students will learn in the module. It also specifies what the student attains by studying a particular module. The third associated concept is that of a transcript that explains in detail the content of the course and the marks obtained. The Bologna supplement calls this the "Diploma Supplement" (Bekhradnia, 2004). In the words of Bekhradnia (2004), the fourth one is that of "a trusted and comparable quality assurance system" (p. 9). The quality assurance system gives confidence to the universities involved that the credits attained in other universities are of an appropriate standard. SAQA (2021) supports the idea of quality assurance and points out that the framework should ensure implementation of an articulated, and quality-assured framework that benefits all lifelong learners. This greatly benefits higher education in Africa. This was confirmed by SAQA (2021). They point at the objectives of a single integrated framework, facilitating access to lifelong learning, progression within, redress of past unfair discrimination, and contributing

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to the full personal development of each learner, among others. This is the framework that guided this study.

Research Methodology

This research was guided by the interpretivist paradigm regarding the views that reality is subjective, multiple, and socially constructed (Yin, 2016). Thus, the research employed the qualitative methodology to gather data from 12 African universities spread across six geo-political areas of Africa. According to Yin (2016) and Hays and Singh (2023), in qualitative research, one has an opportunity to study a real-world setting. This will then enable the researcher to discover how people cope and thrive in universities. How they can move towards an African credit and transfer system. This was the case in this study because it captured the contextual richness of people's everyday lives. Studying the meaning of people's lives, under real-world conditions enabled me to unearth ways in which universities can move towards an African credit and transfer system. Thus, this qualitative research in many ways than one represents the views and perspectives of the people affected by the absence of an African credit and transfer system in HE.

Through this qualitative research, I managed to gain deeper insight into the credit transfer system. I also managed to experience people's emotions when they showed how the absence of the system stifles their growth, creativity, communication, and their mobility. According to Marriam (2015), qualitative research can help in exploring attitudes and behaviour in-depth as was the case in this study. Qualitative research can extrapolate any evolving beliefs (Hays & Singh, 2023). However, qualitative research is often accused of being less stringent than its quantitative counterpart, and that it is not statistically representative (Marriam, 2015).

Qualitative research enabled me to gain insight into the goings on in universities from the people who are experiencing hardships due to the absence of the Credit Accumulation and Transfer System. The allure of qualitative research is that it enables one to conduct in-depth studies about a broad array of topics (Yin, 2016). This was the case in this study. Moreover, qualitative research offers greater latitude in selecting topics of interest (Hays & Singh, 2023), as was the case in this study. The main aim of this qualitative research was to gather an in-depth understanding of how African universities can move towards an African credit and transfer system in Higher Education. It was also to uncover the reasons that govern such practices through a mixture of tales, tips, and lessons. This qualitative method investigated the *why* and *how* of the credit and transfer system in Higher Education, in addition to the *what*, *where*, and *when* (Yin, 2016; Hays & Singh, 2023). This is one reason why the research employed a small, focused sample that managed to elicit deeper insights, through exploring the insights of the purposively selected participants.

Research Participants

The participants in this research were drawn from twelve (12) African universities. These universities were spread across six geo-political areas of Africa. The purposive sampling technique was employed. The participants were drawn from the internationalization offices or the quality assurance offices of the universities under study. These were heads, their deputies, or any senior officers of the international office or quality assurance office of the targeted university who represented these universities. I chose this group because they

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possessed the information that I have been seeking. I managed to get individuals with specific characteristics that resonated with the research question. According to Yin (2016), purposive sampling can be used to target niche demographics to obtain specific data. This was the case in this study. The participants in this research managed to provide me with high-quality information that was specific to credit accumulation and transfer systems in the African context. Through purposive sampling, I managed to select a sample that was representative of the characteristics that the study was interested in. The participants were interviewed during an international conference. Some of them participated in focus group discussions.

Data analysis

The collected data was analysed using thematic analysis methods (Cresswell & Cresswell, 2018). Thematic qualitative analysis involved identifying, analysing, and interpreting common themes, qualitative data patterns, repeated ideas, topics, and patterns (Cresswell & Cresswell, 2018; Abramson, 2015). The themes were arrived at using some statistical analysis and coding (Saldaña, 2013). This was done through quantification of the categories that were coded to form the themes, as an objective way of investigating the probabilities of themes being in specific categories (Paris & Winn, 2013).

In the first place, the qualitative data analysis involved reading through a data set from the interviews and from the focus group discussions. This data set included transcripts from in-depth interviews and focus groups. I then identified patterns in meaning across the data to derive themes (Barbour, 2018).

I found thematic analysis to be appropriate for this research because it is an active process of reflexivity (Paris & Winn, 2013). This is because my subjective experiences were at the center of making sense of the data (Silverman & Marvasti, 2008). It also provided me with a flexible method of data analysis (Barbour, 2018). This enabled me to come out with credible themes despite the diverse methodological backgrounds and inclinations.

Results and Discussion

The findings of this study were analysed and produced some of the themes presented in Table 1 below. These are discussed fully in the sub-sections that follow.

Table 1.
Critical Requirements for an African Credit and Accumulation System

Issue subscribed to	Frequency	%
Knowledge base or repository	8	67
Clear receiving and sending policies,	10	83
Put procedures in place to recognise qualifications, programs, and institutions,	10	83
Make information on accredited diplomas and degrees readily available,	8	67
Put in place health insurance facilities,	9	75
Devise mechanisms for linguistic tutoring,	9	75
Have access to mobility scholarships	12	100
Institute mandatory university partnerships,	7	58
Establish mechanisms for licensure and registration,	11	92
Develop transversal skills	12	100

** Number of Participants: 12

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Knowledge Base/ Repository

This research found that it is prudent for HEIs to know African students pursuing credits or credentials abroad. They mentioned the issue of the knowledge repository. This knowledge repository issue was mentioned by 67% (7) of the participants in this research. One of the research participants was more elaborate and pointed out that:

> Knowledge is power. Institutions must know the staff and students who seek mobility programs. A database can be established that seeks to share knowledge about the students who are seeking to transfer from one institution to another. In the same manner, information about staff can also be helpful.

The information about knowledge means there must be put in place accessible databases tracking students pursuing credits. The information can also be on students who are pursuing credentials abroad and other related programs, courses, and educational endeavors. The credit data that resides with each African institution that has established agreements with international institutions should be accessed by all interested stakeholders. A good example that can help Africa is the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada which collects information from its members and has constructed the Canadian University International Exchange Agreements Database (CUE, 2023). Lessons for Africa are that the continent needs to do the same and move fast to establish such an important database as a starting point. This means that an *African Universities International Exchange Agreements Database* is a good starting point if the continent needs to benefit from the internationalisation of Higher Education. This was confirmed by Laurier (n.d.) who pointed out that information on pathways is of paramount importance. Laurier (n.d.) pointed out that pathways are important in admitting transfer students from other institutions. To Laurier, this helps college graduates to transition smoothly from a diploma program to a degree program. Pathways are also helpful by simplifying the sometimes long and complex transfer credit assessment process through standardization (Laurier, n.d).

This means that for many African higher education institutions, data is not readily available. In any case, the data are no longer available due to security concerns. As a result, it is largely unclear how Africa compares with other educational world leaders in the global arena in terms of student mobility as information on this important aspect of HE development appears missing in the six universities in this study. Yet CUE (2023) thinks that such a database has many opportunities available for students who are interested in going abroad, According to CUE (2023) students can go abroad either as part of their program of study or for an extracurricular experience.

Clear Receiving and Sending Policies

One important pre-requisite for a CATS program in Africa that was mentioned by 83% (10) of the research participants is clarity in sending and receiving policies. Participants pointed out that as a starting point, African Universities need to have clear receiving and sending policies that are accepted in sister African countries. Two enthusiastic participants had this to say:

> African universities must be driven by clear policies that are binding to all parties. One of these policies is the receiving and sending policy.

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Internationalization of HE & African CATS

> I see the future of CATS as hinging on clear policies that can be accepted by all the institutions involved. The policy should promote the articulation between qualifications and the articulation within institutions and the articulation across African higher education institutions.

What that means is that CATS can be used as a tool. ECTS Users' Guide (2015) appears to concur with this view, arguing that as the name implies, CATS is a tool for transfer and recognition of credits for studies abroad. In addition to being a tool for transfer and recognition of credits, it is also a useful mechanism for students to receive credit for the work done at another HEI. Such practices make students highly mobile. This mobility of students and staff has benefits for HEIs. Through CATS, credits will then be used to ensure the recognition of studies at a host institution, indicating the workload students had to invest in for the successful completion of a study program. This means the idea of a binding policy for the CATS system appears credible. SAQA (2021) while arguing to support its policy, gave some useful hints on the effectiveness of policies that guide qualification frameworks. According to SAQA (2021), their Policy explains aspects of the operation of the system. Their policy is also in place so that it is used to set out the specific roles of SAQA, the specific roles of the Quality Councils, and the specific roles of the higher education institutions involved. SAQA (2021) further pointed out that a policy also binds the skills development providers, all the recognised professional bodies, and the employers who will benefit from the mobility of the student.

According to the ECTS Users' Guide (2015), the advantage of a policy that guides CATS as a transfer system is that it provides a simple and broadly defined tool that can be applied across institutions in Africa. It can also be applied in the processes of measuring the workload and expediting the recognition of studies that have been undertaken in other countries. On the other hand, it provides HEIs with a device that they can use with considerable freedom to translate their programs into an understandable, transparent equation for students and other institutions (ECTS Users' Guide, 2015). This can only be possible in Africa if HEIs put in place clear receiving and sending policies that will enable African HEIs to fall back on when faced with such opportunities.

Putting Procedures in Place to Recognise Qualifications, Programs, and Institutions

Up to 83% (10) of the participants in this study thought that Africa should put procedures in place to recognise qualifications, programs, and institutions. In this case, the participants in the research called for procedures to be put in place as a matter of urgency. One of the participants said:

> How do I know I am eligible for a program of study if there are no procedures in place to recognise qualifications, programs, and institutions? How do I know an institution is a bonafide institution before I register? There is a need for a central authority in Africa that assesses or grants recognition for degrees obtained from another African university.

The issue of procedures that recognise qualifications, programs, and institutions is a Quality Assurance issue. Neema-Abooki (2022) argues that African higher education needs a continental quality assurance body that can maintain, promote, and nurture competitive

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standards in African higher education. Thus, the finding on putting procedures in place to recognise qualifications, programs, and institutions means that universities in Africa and employers worldwide will value and recognise African university qualifications. These will be seen as evidence of academic ability if the continent puts in place procedures that are to be followed to recognise qualifications, programs, and institutions (Neema-Abooki, 2022).

According to Kwandayi (2021), quality assurance is indispensable in higher education in Africa. He pointed at issues like quality assurance as a global phenomenon, increase in cross-border education, African Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance, limited opportunities to study higher education in Africa, and others as some of the driving forces for quality assurance in higher education in Africa. Many students and prospective students will get assurance since they will view procedures that are in place to recognise qualifications, programs, and institutions as a passport to success. Some of the procedures that must be in place include among other things that participating institutions publish their course catalogues on the web, they put detailed descriptions of study programs, modules, university regulations, and student services (Neema-Abooki, 2022). On the other hand, course descriptions containing 'learning outcomes' (i.e. what students are expected to know, understand, and be able to do) and workload (i.e. the time students typically need to achieve these outcomes) should be readily available (Kwandayi, 2021). What is important is that each learning outcome is expressed in terms of credits, with a student workload ranging from 1 500 to 1 800 hours for an academic year, and one credit generally corresponding to 25-30 hours of work.

Make Information on Accredited Diplomas and Degrees Readily Available

Once procedures are in place, 67% (8) of the participants in this research pointed out that information on accredited diplomas and degrees should be readily available for aspiring students. One of the participants pointed out that:

> Prospective students want to know if professional degrees such as those in engineering, medicine, law, and accountancy are recognised by the respective professional bodies. This information should be readily available. If I have an engineering degree from an African university and I intend to seek registration as a professional engineer in any country that employer should easily check whether the institution that awards the qualification is recognised by the Professional Engineers Board.

Another one said:

> It is through accreditation that universities will be able to undertake continuous quality improvement, work hard to meet the prescribed standards, create goals for self-improvement, and develop a robust accreditation data management system for their institutions.

Bay Atlantic University (BAU, 2020) agrees with the view that information on accreditation is indispensable. According to BAU (2020), when a university is accredited, this is a clear indication that this university is credible. It is a sign that this accredited university provides quality education. It is also an affirmation that the accredited university meets a certain set of strict and recognised operational standards. BAU (2020) defines accreditation as "a quality assurance process that helps educational institutions to attain their academic

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goals by meeting the guidelines & standards set by accreditation granting agencies" (p. 2). According to BAU (2020), accreditation is an extensive process that universities are subjected to so that they successfully pass the quality checks. These quality checks range from managing the institutional data accurately, providing state-of-the-art facilities, teaching, assessing appropriately, and designing credible course programs, among others (BAU, 2020). Such an institution will win the trust of stakeholders. This trust will then increase enrolments.

Putting in Place Health Insurance Facilities

Of the participants in this research 75% (9), believed that health insurance is critical to the success of CATS. This insurance to them will facilitate student mobility. One of the participants in this research pointed out that:

> It does not make sense to have an African credit and transfer system in higher education when there are no mechanisms in place to support student mobility. Higher education institutions need to put in place health insurance facilities because these facilities will facilitate student mobility.

This view was further supported by the other participant who also added:

> International students will always need a good health insurance policy. This is one way in which the health of a student is not compromised when studying abroad.

The other one also added that:

> The African credit accumulation and transfer program can be compromised by health issues because healthcare costs can be too high for a student to afford, especially when the student is studying in a foreign country. This is the reason why health insurance is mandatory in many countries.

According to the University of Washington (2023), every student who is studying abroad needs some form of insurance such as health insurance. This is because one may fall sick or be injured in an accident. In such an unfortunate incident, the treatment costs could be unaffordable in an international healthcare facility. Healthcare costs abroad are significantly higher than domestic expenses (University of Washington, 2023). This means that health care insurance should be taken as mandatory in any African credit accumulation and transfer program. Health care insurance covers medical emergency costs such as accidental death or permanent disability, dental emergencies, and medical evacuation (University of Washington, 2023).

According to Nobles et al. (2018), the health and wellness of students is a very important topic in higher education. They pointed to the USA as a good example. In their study, they claim that the USA attracts about 20,7 million students in one semester. They lamented that these students lack health insurance literacy that can help them choose the health insurance that will benefit them. Thus, Nobles et al. (2018) point out that health insurance is important because, among other things, it will reimburse expenses incurred, repatriate a student home for further treatment or management, repatriate a corps in the event of death, compensation for permanent disability, and others. Through robust health

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insurance, international students will be able to cover medical expenses hassle-free, avoid financial challenges, be protected from unexpected medical costs, have immediate access to medical care, provide 24X7 assistance, and cover bodily injury to another person, among others (Nobles et al., 2018).

Devise Mechanisms for Linguistic Tutoring

According to 75% (9) of the participants in this study, language has always been a barrier to student mobility. Hence, there is a need to devise mechanisms for linguistic tutoring to enhance language acquisition in mobile students. CATS alone has been described by participants in this study as 'hollow'. One of these pointed out that:

> A credit accumulation and transfer system on its own is not enough. This system should be supported by mechanisms for linguistic tutoring. On its own, it is hollow. Even tutors should have some knowledge of different cultures and linguistic perspectives to prepare themselves for working with international students.

Another one supported this view by pointing out that:

> In Africa, languages like Swahili, English, French, Portuguese, and Arabic are central to learning. Without one of these key languages, you cannot make sense or communicate your understanding of a subject. These are needed to support the CATS system through the development of critical language skills to make the most effective use of the study materials.

As Africa marches towards an African CATS in Higher Education, it is important to recognise that students from each national group share a set of writing difficulties. These difficulties are closely related to their linguistic and cultural background. According to a study undertaken by Ovchinnikova et al. (2023), they revealed a statistically significant influence of language proximity on student flows within the 21 countries in their study. They point out further that language proximity simplifies the academic, cultural, and socio-economic integration of international students in the destination country (Ovchinnikova et al., 2023). What this means is that mechanisms for linguistic tutoring are some of the most indispensable supporting processes for the CAT system in Africa. This is supported by Ovchinnikova et al. (2023) who point out that linguistic tutoring has the potential to make the process of adaptation to a new environment easier and smoother for international students.

Linguistic tutoring is also important for faculty since it will help equip them with information to better service international students (Ovchinnikova et al., 2023). These international students face challenges when operating in a different cultural and educational system (Cojacaru, 2018). This is the reason why participants in this study thought that CATS on its own is "hollow". As Africa marches towards an African credit accumulation and transfer system in Higher Education it must be pointed out that foreign students' writing is affected by the rhetorical styles of their first languages (Ovchinnikova et al., 2023). This entails linguistic tutoring for such students.

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Internationalization of HE & African CATS

Access to Mobility Scholarships

All the participants in this study 100% (12) were unanimous on the issue of mobility scholarships. Funding has always been an Achilles heel for many African students. In that regard, participants in this research thought it wise that as Africa marches towards an African credit and transfer system in Higher Education it must do so with a mobility scholarship in place to help disadvantaged students who may also want to benefit from CATS. One of the participants put it this way:

> Access to mobility scholarships is important for African HE. The purpose of the mobility scholarship is to encourage students to study abroad as part of their study program by defraying part of the cost of this experience.

According to Baruffaldi et al. (2020), the academic sector has turned into a 'global market' of multicultural teams. They point to the effect of grants on foreign researchers who joined the global market because of the availability of grants. They pointed to the general phenomenon of permanent scientific migrations propelled by the availability of grants. To them, several institutions and organizations have increasingly placed different forms of support on international temporal mobility. This has greatly promoted international mobility. It also helped to shape the quality and quantity of the research outcomes and output in the academics involved. Thus, they opined that those grants, like scholarships, are at the center of many university strategies to foster mobility, collaboration, partnerships, and innovation. Many African students have been handicapped by lack of funds. It appears that even if an African credit accumulation and transfer system is put in place a sizable number of African students will not benefit due to financial constraints. This therefore implies that a scholarship to that effect is important.

In some countries, many of these are in Africa, where one's birth conditions play a bigger role than personal effort in the attainment of higher education (Laajaj et al., 2022). This birth condition undermines students' motivation to apply for study abroad. In this case, it is the scholarship that can change the circumstances of individuals and then improve their access to higher education. This means it is the scholarship that can ensure that the best-performing low-income students' lives are transformed through education (Laajaj et al., 2022). Thus, according to their research, needs-based and merit-based scholarships improve the motivation and social mobility of low-income students.

Mechanisms for Licensure and Registration

To the participants in this study, it is not enough just to have a CATS in place. This was subscribed to by 92% (11) of the participants in this research. They argued that CATS must be followed by mechanisms for licensure and registration for the higher education institutions that are participating in the credit accumulation and transfer system. This was put this way by one of the participants in this study:

> To have a robust African credit and accumulation system, accreditation is also helpful in that regard. This is because accreditation is a status that assures current and prospective students, their families, and the public that an institution or a program meets minimum requirements and that there are reasonable grounds to believe the institution will continue to meet those standards in the future.

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Another one also said:

> I think the success of CATS rests on the availability of mechanisms that are in place to ensure that participating higher education institutions are accountable. This will assure the mobile students that they will be properly trained by qualified and competent academics. These mechanisms should, among other things, include licensure and other forms of regulations. They can also include voluntary certification and standards imposed by higher education authorities.

It follows that accreditation is seen by the participants in this study as an assurance that an institution or program meets the quality standards established by the profession. According to Kinser and Lane (2017), oversight of higher education is an important process that promotes quality in higher education. It is an assurance that the higher education qualification on offer is reputable. It will also help prospective students and their parents in making choices about a quality Programme that meets their needs. On the other hand, accreditation enables employers to recruit graduates they know are well-prepared. Kinser and Lane (2017) are of the view that the degrees on offer should be valuable to the student and society. They mention "fitness for purpose" and "fitness of purpose" as one of the main reasons for the oversight requirement. There is a significant investment of time, money, effort, resources, and others. Governments are interested in the quality of higher education because of the correlation between the quality of higher education and economic prosperity (Kinser & Lane, 2017).

Developing Transversal Skills

An important finding of this study from all the participants 100% (12), is the transversal skills that should be imparted to the students. The ET 2020 Working Group of the European Commission (2015) sees transversal skills as skills such as the ability to think critically, take initiative, problem-solve, and work collaboratively. These are skills that are relevant for individuals as citizens and in employment in today's varied and unpredictable career paths. One of the participants in this study opined that:

> To ensure the seamless success of the credit accumulation and transfer system in Africa. There is a need to ensure students are exposed to transversal skills. These are skills that graduates can use in a wide variety of situations in life and work. Because of globalisation, these transversal skills are increasingly in high demand in all work situations. It follows that mobile learners should successfully adapt to changes and lead meaningful and productive lives.

Calero López and Rodriquez-López (2020) are of the view that the Bologna Process envisioned the idea of the development of transversal skills in university education. The Bologna Process acknowledged the fact that higher education including university studies is already facing the turn towards inclusive transversal skills development (Calero López & Rodriquez-López, 2020). What then this means for the African credit accumulation and transfer system is that HE institutions in Africa need to modernise education and training systems. When they do this, they are in a position to deliver the right skills needed by the labour market. They are also on the right path to address the question of partnerships and

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funding. Transversal skills are critical because they contribute to the drive for growth and jobs (European Commission, 2015).

According to Tight (2022), transversal skills are valuable proven abilities that can be learned. They can be applied in any kind of work situation or learning situation. The term transversal is used to indicate that they are not exclusive to any type of employment or work situation. The core competencies include mastering language skills, the ability to work with numbers, the ability to work with measures, and working with applications. And working with digital devices among others (Tight, 2022). Thus, in support of their teaching in African Universities, ET 2020 Working Group of the European Commission (2015), Calero López and Rodriquez-López (2020), and Tight (2022) point out that there is a growing need for transversal skills. They enable graduates to develop high-level competencies. These competencies such as leadership, language acquisition, problem-solving, and others are important because they can address complex challenges facing contemporary knowledge-driven organisations. Thus, they argue that transversal competencies set the foundation for personal development, problem-solving, leadership development, resilience, the ability to communicate, the ability to manage one's learning and career, ability to work constructively with others (Calero López & Rodriquez-López, 2020).

Conclusion

The research concluded that by making higher education comparable across Africa, the CATS makes teaching and learning more transparent. It also has a profound effect on the recognition of all studies. CATS aids curriculum design, nourishes quality assurance, allows for the transfer of learning experiences between different institutions, promotes greater student mobility, nurtures global consciousness, and facilitates more flexible routes to gain degrees. CATS provides HEIs with a device they can use with considerable freedom to translate their programmes into understandable, transparent equations for students and other institutions. In addition, the employability and competencies of both students and staff will be greatly increased. Africa will benefit from mobility as this is a sure way of imparting transversal competencies such as 21st-century skills that Africa badly needs for sustainable development. The research then argues that an African CATS is possible because it has immense benefits for HEIs in the continent. A robust credit transfer and accumulation system on the African continent facilitates the implementation of five fundamental concepts in higher education including comparability, transparency, mobility, quality, and coherence in study programs. It also greatly enhances the value of a student's education. Studying outside one's city, province, or country of residence could ensure the student gains all kinds of important insights into cultural or global issues, acquire new skills and abilities, and perhaps learn a second or third language. It is the skills acquired while studying abroad that will subsequently benefit both the individual and society at large.

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Recommendations for HE Policy-Makers

- A more standardised and simpler way to address the increasing demands from students regarding "easy and speedy ways" to facilitate mobility horizontally (higher education institutions and countries) and vertically (lifelong learning).
- An African CATS in Higher Education policy, enacted, adopted, and enforced at the African Union (AU) level.
- African institutions publish their course catalogues on their website including detailed descriptions of study programs, modules, university regulations, and student services that they provide.
- For CATS to function effectively as a transfer and accumulation system in Africa, it must be built on a solid foundation of mutual trust and confidence in the academic judgments made by staff at other institutions.
- A CATS for Africa, should be built on numerical values allocated to study program units based on factors such as student workload, the number of contact hours, or learning outcomes.
- The attitude, behaviour, and mindset of HE in Africa must change to embrace the internationalisation agenda.
- The prerequisites as pointed out in this study should be taken seriously to minimise challenges in the implementation of CATS in Africa.

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I declare that there was no conflict of interest, personal interests, social interests, financial interests, or any other competing interests such as affiliations that had the potential to unduly compromise my objectivity in this research and jeopardize my impartiality.

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This research upheld ethical principles about research such as informed consent, voluntary participation, beneficence, confidentiality, anonymity, results communication, preventing any potential for harm, personal dignity, and results communication, among others.

Originality Note:
This serves to confirm, that this research report submitted by Chrispen Chiome is an outcome of my unrestrained and original work. I have duly recognized and acknowledged every one of the sources from which the ideas and extracts have been taken. The research report is devoid of any plagiarism and has not been submitted somewhere else for publication.

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