

AfCFTA CONFERENCE

TITLE: *Higher education and regional integration: The case of a regional community of islands in Africa*

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According to the *World Trade Report 2023*, the Covid era has left a fragmented landscape in international trade. This calls for a stronger multilateral trading system particularly for African countries. This is why African countries are trying to build bridges through continental and regional strategies. AfCFTA (African Continental Free Trade area) has been hailed as a great step forward to build the Africa of the 21st century. However, its implementation is set within a changing environment with new demographic patterns and technological settings. African integration is not easy to achieve as each country is diverse from many different perspectives. However, it is to be noted that regionalisation has sometimes to fight against nationalism which compels states to focus on their own priorities (Hawkins: 2012).

Regional communities are seen as building blocks towards continental integration. Regionalisation needs catalysts to be more effective, and this is why the AfCFTA protocols highlight the importance of education/higher education with the need for state arrangements regarding the recognition of educational qualifications across continental borders (AU 2018). This study focuses on higher education integration in relation to an African community of island states in the Indian Ocean, the IOC.

THE IOC COMMUNITY

The Indian Ocean Commission (IOC) is an intergovernmental organisation that brings together five member states which are found off the southeast coast of Africa:

- (1) **The Union of Comoros**-An archipelago of an area of land of 1,861 km² and a population of 852,075. Ranked 152 as per 2024 HDI. The country figures in the UN list of least developed countries. It is considered a low-income country
- (2) **Reunion Island** -(A French department) -An island of 2,512 km² with a population of 885,700. The country enjoys a dynamic and developed economy. As an outermost island, it benefits from support funds from France
- (3) **Madagascar** - Ranked 177 as per 2024 HDI index. As per UN list of least developed countries, it is also considered a low-income country
- (4) **Mauritius** -Ranked 72 as per 2024 HDI. The country is classified as an upper middle-income economy
- (5) **Seychelles**-Archipelago. Classified as a high-income economy. Ranked 67 as per HDI index

Based on the preconditions for regional integration (Page 1999; Torrent 2022), we can say that these islands satisfy to a certain extent the following preconditions:

(a) **Geography.** They are all found off the east coast of Africa in the southwestern part of the Indian Ocean.

(b) **Population:** Except for Madagascar, all the other islands have very small populations.

COUNTRIES	YEAR	POPULATION
COMOROS	2023	852.08
MAURITIUS	2023	1,261.04
MADAGASCAR	2023	30,325.73
REUNION	2023	850,000
SEYCHELLES	2023	119,77

Table 1: Population. Source: World bank and French Government

(c)**The size of the economy and income per capita:** Here it varies amongst the islands, but this is not a key pre-condition according to Torrent (2022).

COUNTRIES	YEAR	GDP per capita (US\$)
COMOROS	2023	1,587.2
MAURITIUS	2023	11,416.9
MADAGASCAR	2023	528.7
REUNION (data for France)	2023	44,460.8
SEYCHELLES	2023	17,879.2

Table 2: GDP/Country

Source: World bank data

(d) **Political congruence:** Except for the Comoros with its political instability and to some extent Madagascar, all the other islands have stability with a democratic regime. At the level of political systems, there are some differences which can be explained by the colonial history of each of these islands.

(e) **Common background (and common history):** All the islands of the IOC community have been French colonies and Reunion is still a French department. The French language and culture play a strong role in these islands.

This regional community was created in 1982, and it is the only African regional community of islands. The IOC aims at strengthening the links amongst the islands of the Indian ocean region to help them in achieving the sustainable development goals. It thus provides a legal framework for the islands within the community to collaborate for economic, social and cultural purposes (IOC:2024). As far as trade is concerned, there is a preferential trade agreement under the IOC trade protocol with no customs duties for products meeting IOC rules of origin. On the website of Mauritius trade, details about the trade agreement of IOC are given with the conditions for the application of the rules of origin which insists that the preferential rate is only applicable for traded goods which have been made from materials originated from inside the IOC community.

The issue is that so far only trade between Madagascar and Mauritius falls under the IOC trade regime (Mauritius Trade). Reunion island concentrates too much on European partners for trade though there are more competitive advantages in trading with neighbouring countries (Temoignages: 2024). This is a disappointing situation taking into consideration World Bank's expectations regarding the power of regional integration in facilitating the implementation of trade agreements. As highlighted in AfCFTA,

higher education integration is linked to economic integration. So, enhancement of trade amongst the IOC islands could be enhanced with higher education integration in the region. Furthermore, in its strategic development plan (IOC: 2023) one of the objectives of the IOC for sustainable economic growth for the region is to facilitate trade and mobility.

RATIONALE FOR THE STUDY

First there is a gap in the literature regarding higher education integration **within the context of regional integration of island states**. In fact, island states are seldom key players in our global world.

For economic reason, the HE integration is important. Bray (2011) insists that small states face uncertainty and instability with the movement of regional blocs seeking competitive advantage through economic integration. As we have seen earlier, the overarching trade protocol of the community is not working as expected. The integration process must be strengthened. The IOC countries are therefore becoming less competitive compared with the other powerful regional communities of Africa with their enabling agreements. One approach used by other communities such as the European Union is to use higher education integration to contribute to the whole community integration process. In the case of Africa, Governments have envisaged that “integration will strengthen the capacity and competitiveness of higher education institutions.” (OBREAL&AAU:2022).

Furthermore, through higher education integration amongst the countries of the Indian Ocean Commission Community, there will be more mobility of students as well as academic staff.

Transfer of skills will be facilitated amongst the countries with workers circulating easily in the region.

Some of the IOC islands belong to strong African regional blocks and with an integrated Higher education system, the universities in the IOC will have a stronger voice when negotiating within another regional block.

KEY RESEARCH QUESTION

How can an integrated higher education system be created amongst the IOC community of island states?

OBJECTIVES

- (1) To examine existing policies in relation to higher education integration amongst IOC islands.
- (2) To examine how far the higher education systems of the IOC countries are harmonised.

- (3) To analyse the potential for building a common education area amongst the island states of the IOC Community.

KEY TERMS

There has been much debate around the definitions of the higher education integration and higher education harmonisation without much consensus. I will therefore not go into the intricacies of the theoretical debates, but I will focus on finding working definitions. Higher education integration and higher education harmonisation are sometimes used interchangeably with such related terms as “cooperation”, “partnership” or “collaboration”. However, Woldegiorgis (2013) insists that they are not synonymous, and Knight (2013) rather situates the related terms along a continuum. Woldegiorgis (2013, pp.) includes as harmonisation such processes as “establishing benchmarks for qualifications, programme delivery and certification of credit systems, quality assurance mechanisms, accreditation, recognition of diplomas”. These processes are set up to facilitate comparability, compatibility and employability across regions. Delong & Dowrick (2002) find these harmonisation processes as “synchronising”. This means that the aim of integration is not to have replicas of systems but rather aiming at convergence.

The Tuning approach has also been quite successful (Tuning Africa 2014). This approach demands harmonisation at the level of curricula based on common understandings and reference points to lead towards comparability and compatibility of qualifications. Work on the harmonisation of curricula does not usually take place at the early stages of higher education integration.

Within the context of this study, **Higher education integration** is taken to be the synchronised stage with **harmonisation** across several areas of higher education systems

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

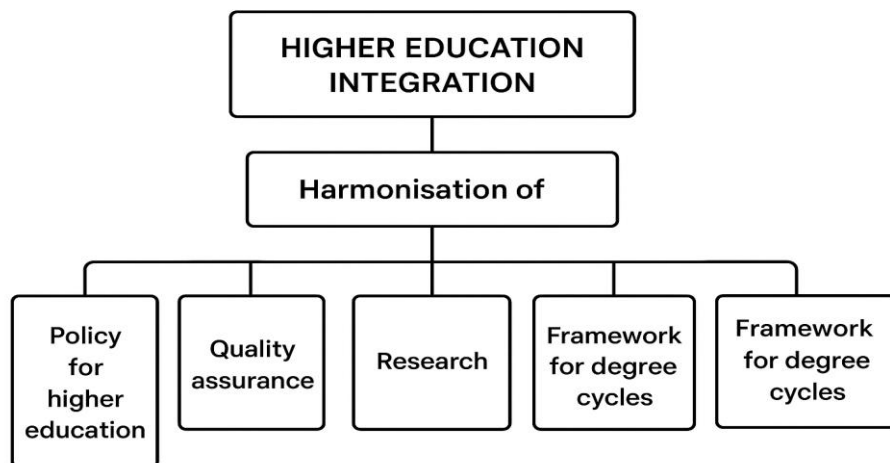
Our conceptual approach is based partly on the literature on higher education integration and on the approaches adopted by regional communities who have used higher education integration to achieve better results in regional integration on the whole. The European model of higher education integration driven by the Bologna process stands out as a quite successful model which has influenced other communities such as Mercosur and Asean. As we have discussed earlier, various elements are included in the process of harmonisation and many of these elements have been used for the purpose of higher education integration in some of the largest regional communities (HAQAA 2:2022). So based on the IOC context, the literature and the practice in relation to higher education integration and harmonisation,

I have adopted the following conceptual framework in relation to higher education integration for the present study:

HIGHER EDUCATION INTEGRATION BASED ON

Harmonisation of

- *Policy for higher education*
- *Quality assurance*
- *Research*
- *Framework for degree cycles*
- *Recognition of qualifications*



METHODOLOGY

Within a case study, a broad qualitative approach with thematic analysis has been adopted. Data have been obtained using documents and secondary sources within an interpretative paradigm. As Morgan (2022, p 64) highlights, working with documents can “reduce some of the ethical concerns associated with other qualitative methods “Access would not have been easy when dealing with data from several countries at the same time and time would have been a major constraint. Since documents from official sources have been used, there is not really an issue of authenticity. Furthermore, details about sources have been given to strengthen authenticity of data as recommended by Morgan (2022).

Data related to public funded institutions will be our focus. Private institutions are not always under the purview of regulatory bodies, and they do not often publish their data. I must point out that the period for data collection spans from May to June 2024.

One constraint has been the lack of data for Comoros whose higher education system is not well developed. Furthermore, for Reunion Island, as it is part of France's overseas territories, data given for mainland France apply for this overseas territory as well.

I also wish to point out that since I have spent more than twenty years in the higher education sector in Mauritius, the use of documents helps in mitigating any element of bias on my part when discussing about Mauritian higher education system.

GENERAL POLICY FAVOURING REGIONAL INTEGRATION FOR EDUCATION/HIGHER EDUCATION

We have to say that the higher education systems of all islands are state regulated even if there are some differences in approaches. In all cases of the IOC community of islands, the state defines the general policies for education and higher education. This commonality could facilitate integration. Now let us examine whether the IOC has some broad guidelines regarding higher education integration. As per the amended agreement signed in 2020 amongst the IOC countries, there is some space in the objectives for regional collaboration in the fields of culture, science, education as well as higher education:

“La COI vise à promouvoir notamment: – la coopération dans le domaine culturel, scientifique, universitaire et éducatif” (Article 2 of the agreement).

In the IOC treaty, there are no identified instruments to enable this regional objective on higher education to be achieved. However, there have been a few successful projects which have benefitted from funding by the IOC following diplomatic negotiations. Amongst the projects related to higher education, we have the Twenex project which involves research and innovation (Le journal des Archipels:2024)

With an integrated HE, there would be much success.

Now we will consider national policies/strategic plans for Higher education of the islands.

Reunion island follows France higher education policy though education is under the control of l'Académie de la Reunion which determines how educational policies are to be implemented on the island.

l'Académie de la Reunion defines its local educational strategies in “Projet stratégique académique 2021-2025” with a focus on national priorities. As indicated on the website of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Regional Co-operation, the Government of Mauritius attaches much importance to internationalisation and regionalisation but collaboration with the Indian Ocean islands is not mentioned in the latest Higher education strategic plan (HEC:2022).The Seychelles advocates “the

development of a sense of regional identity “in its educational policy document *,Education for a learning society*, (Ministry of Education Seychelles). Furthermore this interest in regionalisation is echoed in the Seychelles *Education Sector Medium Term strategic plan 2018-2022 and beyond*.

Madagascar in its *Plan sectorial pour l'éducation 2018-2022* articulates its educational strategies in line with global as well as regional initiatives.

For Comoros, the major policy document on Education i.e. *LETTRE DE POLITIQUE DU SECTEUR DE L'EDUCATION ET DE LA FORMATION POUR LA PERIODE 2018-2020* does not speak about regionalisation. However, the national development plan, “Plan Comores Emergent 2030” sees its geographic situation in the Indian Ocean as a key opportunity for development in emerging sectors.

So, the existing policy framework of IOC is not really an enabling one for all the IOC countries to work together for the harmonisation of higher education. There is no legal framework to support it though the IOC has been able to support some higher education projects through bilateral agreements namely institutional ones.

FRAMEWORK (for Degree cycles)

Compatibility in qualification structures could enhance integration process for higher education. There are two traditions amongst the islands of the Indian Ocean within the IOC community linked with the colonial past of the countries. Seychelles and Mauritius have followed the British higher education system model while Madagascar and Comoros have a model closer to the French system of higher education.

Reunion is obviously following the French system as it is still a French island. So, as a general structure we have in the French model, the LMD model with a path of three years of study for licence, 2 years for Master and 3 years beyond Master for the PhD. The University has adopted the ECTS credit system where the system is designed to facilitate recognition and transfer of qualifications. With the ECTS, credits are based on the notional hours of study i.e. the total hours of study including self-study and not only on the direct contact hours of lectures. Assessment and grading in the ECTS system have their own specificities.

Madagascar has also moved towards the LMD general structure and trying to implement the ECTS across its HE system with the help of CAMES.

As per the website of the University of Comoros, the University has moved towards the LMD structure with 3-year degree programmes, 2-year master's program and 3 years for doctoral studies. Furthermore, Docet4 Africa on its presentation of the University of Comoros insists that “Les modalités des

enseignements, des évaluations et de délibération sont organisées suivant le système LMD”. (Special note: not checked because credit structure of programmes not available)

Mauritius and Seychelles have both the model of: Bachelor’s degree of 3 years followed by a master’s degree of one or two years and 3-4 years beyond the master’s degree for the PhD. The trend regarding the duration of the studies for the degrees at different levels is going towards the LMD approach. All the public-funded universities have a credit structure for their programmes. In Mauritius there is some variation regarding the value of credits for each public funded university who have used the ECTS framework to work out their own credit systems. A national credit value and transfer system framework (NCVTS) has already been developed (HEC:2024). This has been done to facilitate credit transfer at national level, and this will help in the mobility of students and programmes. Collaboration with HAQAA3 will also help in the alignment of the NCVTS with the ACTS.

It is expected that things are going to change with the advent of the National credit system where there will be more uniformity. Seychelles’ only public university has a well-defined credit system which is different from the Mauritian one and the ECTS.

COUNTRIES	GENERAL MODEL OF DEGREE CYCLES	CREDIT SYSTEM
Reunion	LMD	ECTS
Mauritius	British model (bachelor-master-PhD)	No harmonised system across institutions at present. Existing ones are compatible with ECTS
Seychelles	British model (bachelor-master-PhD)	Well-established credit system but not based on ECTS
Comoros	LMD	ECTS (not fully harmonised across the institution)
Madagascar	LMD	ECTS (not completed harmonised across the institutions)

Table 3

STRUCTURES FOR DEGREE CYCLES AND CREDIT SYSTEM

We can see that the degree cycles of the IOC countries are somewhat compatible with each other and at the level of the credit systems, the trend is towards the ECTS or a system compatible with it.

RECOGNITION OF QUALIFICATIONS

Shabani (2022) identifies “recognition” as a key element within an integrated higher education system and insists that structures for recognition of qualifications help in the mobility of students, workers and researchers. There are three aspects that are central to “recognition”:

- (1) Recognition of academic qualifications
- (2) Recognition of professional qualifications
- (3) Recognition of the value of the student experience through credits awarded by a higher education institution

Credit recognition is usually carried out at the level of the university whereas for academic and professional qualifications from foreign universities, the recognition is usually carried out by a body other than the university.

There is no automatic recognition of IOC countries’ qualifications amongst the islands. Structures for recognition vary from island to island.

In Mauritius, The HEC, the regulatory body for higher education has the responsibility regarding the recognition of higher education qualifications. Professional bodies participate in the process whenever a professional qualification needs recognition. The Mauritius Qualifications Authority (MQA) looks after the recognition of qualifications that fall within the TVET area. The criteria for recognition by HEC focus on (1) need for qualification to be recognised in the country in which it was issued (2) Content of curriculum and assessment (3) contact hours (HEC: https://www.hec.mu/recognition_equivalence).

On its website HEC points out that recognition status may also be based on international protocols to which Mauritius has adhered to. Intergovernmental as well as bilateral agreements will also be considered. Here it is to be noted that Mauritius is a member of SADC and that it has signed the Addis convention and Mauritius has its own qualifications framework. Furthermore, since Mauritius is a member of COMESA, professional qualifications from COMESA countries should be recognised.

Madagascar also has formal structures for the recognition and equivalence of qualifications. The responsibility falls under the Ministry for tertiary education. The “Commission Nationale des

equivalences administratives des titres” looks after the process of recognition as per a legal framework. The criteria for recognition only are not spelt out but the criteria for equivalence focus on

- Qualifications issued by public or private training institutions accredited by the State.
- Qualifications approved by the Ministries responsible for education.
- Qualifications issued after an in-person exam.
- Academic training with a minimum duration of 650 hours, equivalent to one academic year.
- Professional training and/or professional internships with a minimum duration of 1,200 hours.

(Translated from legal document available at <https://www.dgbf.mg/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/DECRET-2005-074.pdf>)

As we said earlier, Reunion Island depends on the higher education structures in France. For recognition of qualifications, ENIC-NARIC (European Network of Information Centres-National academic Recognition Information Centres) has a centre in France. The ENIC-NARIC is an international network consisting of 57 centres coordinated by the European Commission, UNESCO and the council of Europe. Foreign qualifications are evaluated by ENIC-NARIC, and statements of comparability and recognition are issued. Criteria for recognition are guided by the European recognition manual for HE institutions according to the Lisbon Recognition Convention. Consequently, in the European area, according to Nuffic (2020), five parameters are used to assess a qualification:

- (1) Level
- (2) Workload
- (3) Quality
- (4) Profile
- (5) Learning outcomes

As far as Seychelles is concerned, there is a National Qualifications Framework and the responsibility for recognition of qualifications falls under the Seychelles Qualifications Authority (SQA). Qualifications are assessed as per the NQF where each qualification level (from degree to doctoral levels) has its notional hours for study and level descriptors in terms of learning outcomes which are clearly spelt out.

The Comoros has no qualifications framework as highlighted by UNESCO in its country profile for TVET. The Ministry of Education supervises the whole education including higher education sectors.

Recognition of qualifications is carried out by the Ministry in line with local standards which are not spelt out.

COUNTRIES	STATE OF STRUCTURE FOR RECOGNITION	CRITERIA
Reunion	Well developed	Defined
Mauritius	Developed	Defined
Seychelles	Developed	Defined
Comoros	Not developed	Not spelt out
Madagascar	Developed	Not Defined for recognition alone but defined for equivalence

Table 4: *Structures for recognition*

Though there is no transparency regarding structures for recognition in Comoros, structures are in place in the other islands for recognition of qualifications in the IOC countries. Criteria are not the same but there is convergence regarding the need for the qualification to be recognised in the country in which it was issued

QUALITY ASSURANCE

Quality assurance cannot be dissociated from quality. However, quality as a dimension is to be distinguished from quality assurance which is an instrument for higher education reform. Quality is linked to the student experience and internal quality assurance structures ensure that organisations have the minimum standards to provide a valid experience to their learners and to improve continuously their provision. For the purpose of accountability, the state has the responsibility to check and control quality within HE institutions through the external quality assurance system. This gives transparency to the higher education system. Furthermore, for the purpose of mobility of students and programmes as well as interinstitutional collaboration, strong structures for quality assurance give confidence in the system. Within a regional higher education area, there should be some compatibility of QA structures for the purpose of harmonisation. We will now examine how far this compatibility exists amongst the QA systems of higher education in the countries of the IOC.

Materu (2007) identifies cost and human resources as the two main challenges to quality assurance systems in Africa. Crossley et al (2011) highlight that in small states the unit cost for delivery of education is much higher than that of larger countries and that they need to invest in quality assurance structures to position themselves as knowledge economies. As we have seen earlier, not all the island states of the IOC can invest heavily in higher education, nor do they have skilled human resources in quality assurance. In the national policy documents of the islands, QA is a priority but in practice the situation varies from country to country. For the Comoros, quality assurance seems to be a recent feature in the higher education landscape. In the past primary and secondary school education were the top priorities. According to *La Gazette des Comores* (2022), the country started with capacity building in quality assurance before the setting up of a dedicated cell for quality assurance at the University of Comoros. The standards for quality assurance are not defined on the website of the University. Furthermore, there are no formal external quality assurance structures for higher education in Comoros. However, the Ministry of Education has the responsibility for monitoring/assessing the activities of the public University of Comoros.

The Seychelles through an Act of parliament has set up The Seychelles Qualifications Authority which has the responsibility for the qualifications framework as well as quality assurance in higher education. In fact, as per its website information, SQA defines accreditation as a method for external quality assurance (EQA). The University of Seychelles which is the only public university has its internal quality assurance system with its policy and standards for quality assurance aligned with the standards defined at national level in the SQA quality manual. The external QA system is governed by:

1. Tertiary Education Act (Amendment- ACT 2022)
2. Seychelles Qualifications Authority Act (2021)
3. Seychelles Qualifications Authority Policies and Procedures

(Source: <https://unisey.ac.sc/quality-assurance/>)

It is to be noted that the Seychelles National qualifications Framework is aligned to the SADC qualifications framework. Furthermore, the Seychelles has already developed its credit accumulation and transfer system (SNCATS).

Mauritius has set up its quality assurance structures through an act of parliament. Previously in the nineties, the regulatory function was under the Tertiary education Commission. After the revamping of the TEC ACT, the responsibility for quality assurance has been given to a new statutory body, the QAA. Concern for external quality assurance dates to the end of the last century when the regulatory body for

higher education started defining standards before auditing institutions. The higher education act (HEC website) clearly indicates that Government in Mauritius wants to have robust structures for higher education. Standards are clearly defined for programme accreditation as well as for institutional audits. As per their websites, the public funded higher education universities have aligned their internal quality assurance standards with the national standards. At regular intervals, there are institutional audits of the public funded higher education institutions, and the regulatory body publishes the audit report on its website. According to HEC (2024), through participation in the HAQAA 3), the regulatory body is now exploring alignment of standards with the ASG-QA (African standards and guidelines for quality assurance in higher education).

Quality assurance at the University of Reunion is based on the French quality assurance system for higher education. The external quality assurance system is under the responsibility of HCERES (Haut conseil de l'évaluation de la recherche et de l'enseignement supérieur). The criteria for assessing French universities are clearly spelt out by HCERES (2024). The website of the University of Reunion informs us that internal quality assurance falls under the responsibility of DGS (Direction Générale des services). The University is audited by HCERES according to audit cycles for French universities

Madagascar has quality assurance structures for higher education. However, due to limited funding and lack of trained human resources in quality assurance, structures for quality assurance are not well developed according to World bank reports (2011 & 2024). It is to be noted that Madagascar was a founding member of Cames (Conseil Africain et Malgache pour L'Enseignement Supérieur) which has well established criteria for internal as well as external quality assurance structures. As per article on the website of CAMES (2024), there is currently a clear determination on the part of CAMES and Madagascar to strengthen structures for quality assurance in higher education. Currently, a unit at the Ministry of Education is overseeing external quality of HE and internal quality assurance activities are carried out at the lead University of the country i.e. University of Antanarivo. No audit report has been published on the relevant websites.

Countries	Reunion	Mauritius	Seychelles	Comores	Madagascar
QA in National Policy on HE Education & QA	A priority	A priority	A priority	A priority	A priority

Internal QA system	Developed system	Developed system	Developed system	Under progress	Under progress
External QA System	Developed system	Developed system	Developed system	Under progress	Under progress
Availability of external Audit reports	Available	Available	Not available	Not available	Not available

Table 5 *State of Quality assurance systems in the HE systems of the islands of IOC*

It is to be noted that none of the countries follow the same quality assurance standards. Reunion and Madagascar are close to the quality assurance approach of Europe while the Seychelles and Mauritius are not following the same path.

So based on the above, we must say that there is no harmonisation of the QA systems though quality assurance is already present in all the countries. However, there are some commonalities such as a focus on academic content and duration of programmes. Some of them need to strengthen their structures and make them more transparent to have the trust of the other countries.

RESEARCH

The move towards knowledge economy has made research an imperative for island states (Crossley 2011). The IOC islands have felt this imperative which has started to grow in many of the islands' universities. Unfortunately, the situation is not the same in all the islands. The IOC has already facilitated partnerships for research in the Indian Ocean area in line with the sustainable goals.

According to Herceres (2019), the University of Reunion has a wide potential for research in numerous fields. Various national and international collaborations have contributed to its successful research initiatives. Reunion University focusses research on its opportunities as an island of the Indian Ocean with such areas as environmental issues, agriculture, health and multiculturalism. Research is carried out within a wide complex structure (internal and external institutes). Helix systems have been developed for research and which involves academia, the community and the industries.

In Seychelles also, research is high on the Government agenda. However, all efforts are concentrated on the young University of Seychelles which already has its structures for research with research institutes for

- (1) Creole language and culture research
- (2) Education and socio-economic research
- (3) Blue economy research
- (4) Peace and Diplomacy Research Institute

As per the website of the university, these institutes work closely with the faculties of the university. There are defined policies for research including an ethical framework as highlighted in the quality assurance manual of the university.

Madagascar started its research activities with its research institutes in the pre-independence era according to Feller & Sandron (2010). Unfortunately, just after independence, research activities stopped but later on other institutes were set up. In spite of lack of funding from Government, there are several Institutes of research focussing on local environmental issues. Furthermore, the universities also carry out research in various fields. Collaboration with France is helping in the development of research in the country.

The National policy document of education in Comoros, “*Projet-lettre-politique*” insists that research is a priority for Comoros. Unfortunately, Abdallah (2006) laments the fact that the university of Comoros is not linked with the real world of Comoros, and he recommends more engagement with the community on the part of Comoros University.

In Mauritius, Government funds research in all universities where there are research institutes, research policies as well as research ethics framework. There are various national and international collaborations for research which often operate within a helix framework involving academia, the industries and the community. Apart from the universities, there are research Institutes which work with the Universities for research. The Mauritius Research and Innovation Council (MRIC), a major research institute works with universities, the industries and the community while focusing on national priorities.

COUNTRIES	PRIORITY for research in policy	STRUCTURES for research	Engagement of universities with

	documents/strategic plans for the sector		industries and community
Reunion	Priority	Well structured University and linked with research centres	Engaged with triple helix projects
Mauritius	Priority	Universities and research Institutes	Engaged with triple helix projects in some universities
Seychelles	Priority	Research at university Institutes	Engaged according to main themes
Comoros	Priority	Research at university-not well developed	No evidence
Madagascar	Priority	Research within universities and in research centres	Engaged as per themes of research centres

Table 6 *Table on research structures*

It is obvious that there is a wide discrepancy regarding the development of research in the area. Reunion island with funds and human resources from the French Government is well ahead of the other countries. Membership in research networks is an advantage. Here again Reunion Island dominates with membership in prestigious networks such as CRNS, IRD and INRAE.

Madagascar with its French colonial heritage is a member of French research networks while Mauritius prefers the Anglo-Saxon countries and those which include past British colonies Though all countries have not reached the same level in research, all of them are progressing but at a different pace.

THE OVERALL PICTURE IN THE IOC ISLANDS

As we have said earlier, the islands of the IOC satisfy to a certain extent the preconditions for regional integration. For higher education integration readiness also, there should be a foundation which the island community could consolidate. Using such key elements as policy, degree structures, quality assurance, recognition of qualifications and research can provide a strong basis of the state of HE structures. The results of the present study have shown that most of the islands of the IOC have already some structures which could lead to an integrated HE system for the region. However, the level of development of these structures is not the same since there are hurdles as we have seen:

- (1) Different colonial traditions/models adopted.
- (2) Absence of specific HE policies/legislations at the level of Commission (IOC)
- (3) Lack of funding
- (4) Inadequate trained human resources

The issues for HE integration amongst small states echo the dilemmas for HE continental integration in Africa as highlighted by Muchie (2009) and Oyewole (2022). However, with this small community of islands, the state of readiness for integration could more easily be reached compared to the situation on the continent with the huge discrepancies in the higher education structures amongst the African countries.

HOW TO MOVE FORWARD TOWARDS AN INTEGRATED HE SYSTEM FOR THE IOC ISLANDS.

POLICY

At the level of the Indian Ocean Commission, there could be stronger protocols for the purpose of mobility. At the national levels also, educational policies could be more specific regarding the need for regionalisation. The Indian Ocean area could bring opportunities for all countries.

STRUCTURES OF DEGREE CYCLES

Here the obstacle seems to be at the level of the credit system. The adoption and implementation of the ACTS credit system or alignment with the system could benefit all the islands towards an integrated higher education area.

RECOGNITION

With some refinement, we could have agreement at the level of the Commission (IOC) regarding an Indian Ocean protocol for recognition of qualifications with criteria to be respected. As an important step in this area, it would be appropriate if all the countries of the IOC were to ratify the Addis convention. For the time being only Seychelles and Mauritius have ratified this convention. Otherwise, the IOC countries could develop their own approach towards recognition based on their own context as the MERCOSUR countries have done.

QUALITY ASSURANCE

Small states face the challenge of massification in higher education (Martin 2011). The IOC countries face the same challenge. With agreement for common international standards, the IOC community could enhance their quality structures and build confidence in HE systems amongst the island states. Aligning their own quality standards with each other could be a preliminary step. Collaboration amongst IOC countries would be easier and more joint programmes of study could be developed for the Indian Ocean Universities.

RESEARCH

Multilateral agreements could benefit the IOC countries in the field of research for the purpose of capacity building and for the development of the region with such themes as climate change, disaster management, tourism and ocean economy. Building on what the IOC has already achieved, a common research centre dealing with the common problems of all the island states could be a priority. Engagement in research will be towards regional community as a whole and not on specific national priorities. A virtual platform involving all the islands could help in sharing/disseminating research carried out within the community.

COORDINATION, MONITORING AND EVALUATION OF INTEGRATION PROCESS

For successful integration, there should be proper coordination at the level of IOC with monitoring and evaluation functions defined.

GENERAL CONCLUSION

For ideological reasons, countries have tried to break links with colonisation but at the heart of convergence and divergence of their higher education systems, their colonial tradition is ever-present. These island states must make the best of such a situation. Island states must join forces to face the challenges of globalisation and continental agreements. The islands of IOC could be a strong force for trade if they succeed in breaking the barrier to border crossing for workers and students. As a strong

bloc, they could integrate into larger regional blocs. Fieldwork research on the current state of the higher education systems of the IOC countries could throw additional light on the possibilities for further integration of higher education in the region.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AAU	Association of African Universities
AfCFTA	African Continental Free Trade Area
ASG-QA	African Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in Higher Education
CAMES	Conseil Africain et Malgache pour l'Enseignement Supérieur
CIRAD	Le Centre de Coopération Internationale en Recherche Agronomique pour le Développement
CNRS	Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique
ECTS	European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System
ENIC-NARIC	European Network of Information Centre – National Academic Recognition Information Centre
EQA	External Quality Assurance
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
HAQAA	Harmonisation of African Higher Education Quality Assurance and Accreditation
HCERES	Haut Conseil de l'Évaluation de la Recherche et de l'Enseignement Supérieur

HDI	Human Development Index
HE	Higher Education
HEC	Higher Education Commission
INRAE	National Research Institute for Agriculture, Food and Environment
IRD	Institut de Recherche pour le Développement
IOC	Indian Ocean Commission
LMD	Licence – Master – Doctorat
MERCOUSUR	The Southern Common Market (in Spanish)
MQA	Mauritius Qualifications Authority
NCVTS	National Credit Value and Transfer System
NQF	National Qualifications Framework
TVET	Technical and Vocational Education and Training

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