



The Internationalisation of Southern Africa Development Community's Higher Education Curriculum

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Abstract : Southern African Development Community (SADC)'s internationalization of higher education curriculum presents substantial opportunities and challenges. This paper explores the multifaceted process of integrating global perspectives into the curriculum of higher education institutions across SADC region. The 62 journal research papers, selected through purposive sampling, were obtained from databases including Scopus, DOAJ, DHTE, and WoS. Using citation analysis and keyword co-occurrence, the paper explores key themes, trends and influential studies, articulating the discourse concerning opportunities and challenges around the internationalisation of SADC's higher education curriculum. It identifies opportunities, which include enhanced global competitiveness, collaborative partnerships, cultural exchanges, innovation in research and supportive policy development. However, the paper also highlights policy inconsistency, resource constraints, quality assurance and cultural differences. The findings underscore the potential of internationalized curricula to enhance SADC's higher education quality and relevance. Ultimately, this contributes to the region's socio-economic growth and global integration. In conclusion, the SADC region's internationalization of higher education curriculum presents mutually significant opportunities and distinguished challenges. To maximize the benefits of internationalization, a concerted effort is required from member states to work together to create an enabling environment for international cooperation and exchange such that higher education institutions can unlock their full potential.

Keywords : Internationalisation, Higher Education Curriculum, Southern Africa Development Community Region.

INTRODUCTION

Higher education in Southern Africa has experienced a unique transformation in relationships with the numbers and diversity of academic programmes, enrolments, crafting of quality assurance practices and institutional governance frameworks (Woldegiorgis, 2024). These developments have allowed institutions of higher learning across the region to regain crucial positions in terms of the bloc's development agenda (Li, 2024). This is against the

background that the world of work and business has become more international, more globalised, more multicultural and more cosmopolitan. This puts the internationalisation of the curriculum as an important component of reforms in higher education in SADC member states to provide both lecturers and students with international and intercultural opportunities (Tanyu, 2024). In other words, the engagement of students in SADC's higher education internationalisation agenda has the potential to influence positively their future lives including that of society.

Therefore, higher education internationalisation entails exposing students to enriching educational experiences, promoting global understanding and cooperation, and preparing students, faculties, and departments to succeed in this interrelated and diverse world. This incorporation of diverse standpoints into the set of programmes available in higher education institutions exposes students to cultural exchange. In other words, this fosters global citizenship and enhances their readiness for the interconnected world (Bacchoo, Mishra & Archer, 2025). Hence, this has emerged as one of the defining issues in SADC's drive for higher education curricula internationalisation to make it a formidable basis for boosting research capacity, innovation and industrialisation across regions (Bekele, Cossa & Barat, 2021).

This paper intends to contribute to already existing discussions on SADC's agenda on the internationalisation of the higher education curriculum. The paper makes it through the advancing and illuminating conceptualisation of SADC's higher education curriculum internationalisation agenda, and theorizing the numerous policies guiding SADC's higher education and their interaction enables or hinders the realization of the curriculum internationalisation agenda. In addition, it sets the scene by providing opportunities and challenges for SADC's internalization of the higher education curriculum. Finally, the conclusion advances strategies for responding to the identified challenges that we believe resonate with SADC's higher education curriculum internationalisation agenda.

RESEARCH METHODS

This paper is grounded in a comprehensive systematic literature review approach to identify and analyse relevant issues concerning the topic under investigation (Nguyen, Kumar & Soares, 2022). The systematic literature review followed 3 stages as proposed by Tranfield, Denyer and Smart (2003) providing a step-by-step guide to sufficiently interrogate the issues broadly to avoid skipping any significant detail, and to make it easy to understand. In

addition, it reduces the potential effect of search bias (Thomé, Scavarda & Scavarda, 2016). The schematic representation below shows the activities required to fulfil each stage of the systematic literature review process.

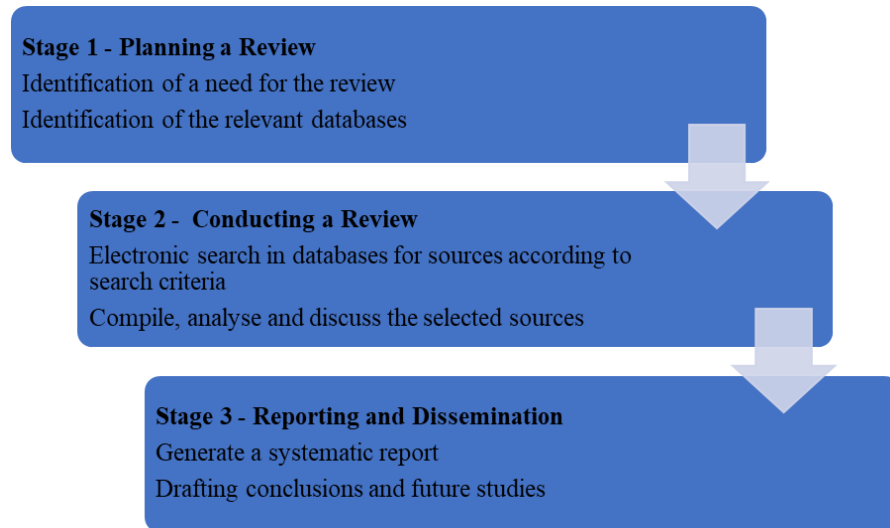


Figure 1. Visual representation of the sources' selection process

To guarantee that the data sources were relevant and contemporary, the review, of this paper restricted its selection to literature sources to those written in English. The scope of this search was methodically constrained to the period spanning 1990 to 2025. This was done to ensure that the data analysed is relevant and contextually significant within contemporary discussion. In addition, the search was carried out by exploring the following databases: DHTE, DOAJ, IBSS, WoS, Scopus, and Scielo SA. The key search words were as follows: “Southern Africa Development Community,” “education and training protocol,” “higher education curriculum,” “internationalisation,” “opportunities” and “challenges.” These terms were carefully selected to encompass the crucial aspects of SADC’s higher education internationalization, enhancing a comprehensive coverage of the issues under review. During the initial stage of the review, the following data were sourced: author(s), title, year of publication and findings or results of the paper. The systematic review of 62 research papers on internationalization written in the English language was inherently limited in capturing the full complexity of the issue under discussion due to the diverse interplay between activity, research, and publication. However, it offers a valuable lens through which prevailing patterns, trends and critical issues can effectively be interrogated.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section delves into the interpretation of findings, connecting them to the themes

raised while uncovering underlying patterns and trends. In addition, it scrutinizes the broader implications of the findings, offering insights into their relevance and significance within the study's context. Conceptualisation of SADC's agenda on internationalisation of the higher education curriculum. This internationalisation of the SADC's higher education curriculum can be conceptualised as the process of integrating global perspectives, standards, and practices into the region's educational framework (Bokaba, 2023). This involves fostering cross-border collaboration among universities, incorporating multicultural and global content into teaching and learning, and aligning local curricula with international benchmarks (Vaishnav, 2025). The aim is to enhance graduates' skills and knowledge, making them competitive in global job markets while also preparing them to address regional challenges with innovative and globally informed solutions (Tolu, Peace & Oye, 2022). This process also emphasises the mobility of students and academic staff, facilitating cultural exchange and shared research opportunities across borders.

At its core, the internationalisation of SADC's higher education curricula seeks to strike a balance between embracing global trends and preserving regional identity (Chasi, 2019). It recognises the importance of harmonising educational policies across member states to ensure seamless cooperation (Bykovska et al., 2023). However, it also values the incorporation of local knowledge and cultural diversity, ensuring that internationalisation does not come at the expense of regional relevance. Ultimately, this concept envisions an education system that empowers students to think globally while acting locally, contributing to both regional development and global progress (Assefa, 2024).

Policies guiding SADC's higher education curriculum internationalisation. SADC's agenda on the internationalisation of higher education curricula is guided by several key policies and frameworks aimed at fostering regional integration and global competitiveness (Jooste & Hagenmeier, 2022). One of the foundational documents is the SADC Protocol on Education and Training, which came into force in 2000 (Watson, 2010). This protocol promotes cooperation among member states in areas such as policy harmonisation of basic and higher education, and training (Adamu, 2021). It underscores the importance of aligning educational systems to facilitate student and staff mobility, mutual recognition of qualifications, and collaborative research across the region (Karim et al., 2024).

Another significant guiding framework is the Revised Regional Indicative Strategic Development Plan (RISDP) 2020 - 2030 (Pretorius et al., 2024). This plan highlights education and skills development as critical pillars for regional industrialisation and socio-

economic transformation (Southern African Development Community, 2003). It sets strategic goals to enhance access to quality and relevant education, including science and technology, for SADC citizens. The RISDP emphasises the need for harmonised qualifications frameworks, such as the SADC Qualifications Framework (SADCQF), which ensures the comparability and recognition of qualifications across member states (Bolton et al., 2023). This framework is essential for facilitating cross-border academic exchanges and fostering a unified approach to curriculum internationalisation (Knight, 2012).

At the national level, countries like South Africa have developed specific policies to support higher education internationalisation (Heleta, 2023). For instance, South Africa's Policy Framework for the Internationalisation of Higher Education, adopted in 2020, provides a comprehensive approach to integrating global perspectives into the country's education system (Heleta & Chasi, 2023). It outlines principles such as inclusivity, decolonisation, and the promotion of South-South cooperation, which are relevant to the broader SADC context (Mlambo, 2020). This policy also addresses challenges such as brain drain and aims to balance global engagement with local relevance. The African Union's Continental Education Strategy for Africa (CESA) 2016–2025 also influences SADC's approach to internationalisation (African Union, 2015). CESA advocates for the harmonisation of education systems across the continent, with a focus on quality assurance, research collaboration, and skills development for the 21st century (Danso & Slippe, 2024). By aligning with CESA, SADC member states can leverage continental initiatives to strengthen their internationalisation efforts (Jowi, 2024).

Despite these guiding policies, challenges remain in their implementation. Issues such as policy inconsistencies, limited funding, and socioeconomic disparities hinder progress (Chari, 2024). However, these frameworks make available a solid footing for advancing higher education curricula's internationalisation within the region. Through collaboration, strategic investment in capacity building, and the removal of systemic barriers, SADC can fully leverage these policies to cultivate a regionally cohesive and globally competitive higher education system (Magadlela, 2016).

Opportunities for SADC's higher education curriculum internationalisation. The SADC's agenda on the internationalisation of higher education curriculum bargains for numerous opportunities to enhance the region's educational standards and global relevance (Kotecha, 2012). Firstly, it creates pathways for cross-border collaborations and partnerships with leading global institutions (Sehoole & de Wit, 2014). These partnerships can enable the

exchange of information, proficiency, and resources, enabling higher education institutions within SADC to improve research output, teaching quality, and access to cutting-edge educational tools (Deredzai & Goronga, 2025). Secondly, internationalisation opens up opportunities for student and staff mobility across borders, both within and beyond the region (Teichler, 2017). Such mobility programmes, including study-abroad initiatives and academic exchanges, allow students and lecturers to gain valuable experiences in different cultural, academic, and professional settings (Aba, 2016). This exposure not only enriches the learning experience but also nurtures cultural conception and comprehensive social responsibility, thereby preparing graduates to prosper in an increasingly globalised world.

Thirdly, aligning the region's curricula with international standards ensures that SADC graduates are equipped with skills and competencies that meet global demands (Watson, 2010). This alignment enhances their employability both within the region and on a global scale, attracting opportunities for career advancement and economic contributions to their home countries. It also encourages the development of programmes that address global challenges, such as climate change and public health, while incorporating local context and solutions (Preckler Galguera & Preckler Galguera, 2018).

Fourthly, internationalisation provides a platform for innovation and entrepreneurship within the region. By integrating global best practices into teaching and learning, institutions can foster creativity and equip students with the tools needed to solve complex problems (Isabirye et al., 2025). Furthermore, the diverse perspectives gained through international engagement can inspire new approaches to development, benefiting both the region and the global community (Skenderi & Skenderi, 2023). Lastly, this process strengthens the role of higher education as a driver of regional integration and development (Peter, Andrea & Pavel, 2023). By harmonising educational systems and fostering cooperation across SADC member states, internationalisation promotes unity and shared goals (Woldegiorgis, 2023). This collaboration can support SADC's development, building a skilled workforce that can advance economic growth, social cohesion, and sustainable development.

Building on the previous opportunities for SADC's higher education curriculum internationalisation, there are even further benefits to explore (Sowazi, 2017). One notable advantage is the region's potential to attract international students and scholars. By creating an education system aligned with global standards while emphasizing local relevance, SADC can position itself as a competitive destination for education (Kwaramba, 2012). This influx of international students not only generates revenue but also enriches academic communities

with diverse perspectives and ideas. Additionally, internationalisation can encourage knowledge transfer and capacity building. As institutions collaborate with global partners, they gain access to advanced technologies, research methods, and innovative teaching practices (Jakubakynov et al., 2024). These collaborations can strengthen the skills of both educators and students, enhancing the overall quality of education within the region. Furthermore, such partnerships can facilitate the development of specialized programs addressing both global and regional challenges, such as sustainable development and public health (Addo-Atuah et al., 2020). By building a shared vision for education across member states, SADC can promote unity and understanding (Nyoni, 2021). Cross-border academic exchanges and joint programmes contribute to strengthening relationships among member states, creating a sense of shared purpose in addressing the region's developmental challenges (Muntschick, 2018).

Moreover, the focus on internationalisation allows for the establishment of regional centres of excellence (Klemenčič, 2017). Certain institutions can specialize in fields such as renewable energy, agriculture, or public health, attracting scholars and students from across the globe. These centres can drive innovation and provide solutions to challenges within SADC while showcasing the region's capacity to contribute meaningfully to global research and knowledge production (Kotecha, Walwyn & Pinto, 2011). Lastly, internationalising higher education curricula prepares the region to respond effectively to the rapid changes in the global economy. By equipping students with globally relevant skills and competencies, institutions can help build a workforce that is adaptable, innovative, and capable of driving economic growth (Aithal & Maiya, 2023). This ensures that SADC remains competitive and able to harness opportunities presented by globalization, such as technological advancements and international trade. These opportunities underline the significance of investing in policies and frameworks that support the internationalisation of higher education, ensuring that the region reaps the maximum benefits from this transformative process (Suntharalingam, 2025).

Challenges faced when internationalizing SADC's higher education curriculum. The SADC region's agenda on the internationalisation of the higher education curriculum faces a range of detailed challenges that require careful examination. One primary challenge is the lack of harmonised educational policies across the member states (Bykovska et al., 2023). Each country within SADC has developed its education frameworks, objectives, and strategies, leading to disparities in curriculum content, quality, and structure (Mwila et al., 2022). This fragmentation creates significant obstacles to achieving a unified approach to

higher education curriculum internationalisation, making it difficult to establish standards that allow for seamless integration and cooperation across borders. Financial constraints are another critical barrier. Many higher education institutions in the region operate with limited budgets that are insufficient to support internationalisation initiatives (Hawawini, 2011). The process of adapting curricula to align with global standards, training educators, implementing student mobility programs, and acquiring advanced technologies requires substantial investment (Knight, 2008). Without adequate funding, higher education institutions are unable to access the resources and infrastructure needed to participate effectively in international collaboration, resulting in inequalities between institutions with varying levels of financial support.

Socio-economic disparities compound the issue by limiting equal access to the benefits of internationalised curricula. Many students from marginalized communities within the region struggle to afford higher education, let alone opportunities for international exposure (Hidayati, 2023). These disparities hinder efforts to create inclusive internationalisation strategies that cater to all demographic groups. If these inequalities are not addressed, higher education curriculum internationalisation may inadvertently exacerbate existing social divides. Governance and management issues represent another significant challenge. Poor governance practices, including corruption and inefficiencies, undermine the ability of some institutions to implement effective internationalisation strategies (Bohlens, 2025). Weak management structures make it difficult to secure partnerships with reputable international organisations and institutions, further isolating higher education institutions from global networks. To succeed in internationalisation, SADC must strengthen governance frameworks and cultivate transparent, accountable leadership within its higher education institutions (Chibambo, 2024).

The region also grapples with a shortage of qualified personnel capable of driving internationalisation. The process requires educators and administrators who are trained in the development and delivery of globally relevant curricula (Catacutan et al., 2023). Unfortunately, many higher education institutions struggle to attract and retain skilled individuals due to low salaries, limited professional growth opportunities, and challenging working conditions. This deficit in human capital significantly hampers efforts to build capacity and sustain internationalisation initiatives. Resistance to change among stakeholders is a less tangible but equally important challenge. Internationalisation often necessitates major shifts in teaching methodologies, institutional cultures, and curriculum design (Rizvi, 2015).

These changes can be met with hesitation or opposition from educators, administrators, and policymakers who are accustomed to established practices. Overcoming this resistance requires effective communication, advocacy, and capacity-building programmes to ensure that all stakeholders understand the value of internationalisation (Leask, 2008).

Lastly, political instability in certain SADC countries poses a significant threat to the sustainability of internationalisation efforts (Koboyatau, 2023). Political unrest disrupts long-term planning, deters international partnerships, and limits resource allocation to education. These challenges reduce the region's ability to attract foreign collaboration and funding, further hindering progress. Addressing these political issues and fostering stability is crucial to advancing higher education curriculum internationalisation agenda across the region. For SADC to effectively tackle these challenges, a coordinated and strategic approach will be necessary (Tanyanyiwa & Hakuna, 2014). Member states must focus on harmonising policies, securing funding, promoting equity, improving governance, and cultivating human capacity to unlock the transformative potential of internationalised higher education curriculum (De Wit & Altbach, 2021).

CONCLUSION

The internationalisation of higher education curriculum within SADC holds immense potential to transform the region's academic landscape, fostering global competitiveness and regional unity. By integrating international standards into local curricula, SADC's higher education institutions can equip graduates with globally relevant knowledge, skills and attitudes while addressing pressing regional challenges. This process supports collaboration across member states, strengthens the capacity of higher education institutions, and promotes innovation and research that benefits both the region and the broader global community. However, higher education curriculum internationalisation is not without its challenges. Policy inconsistencies, financial constraints, governance issues, and socio-economic inequalities threaten to hinder progress. Addressing these obstacles requires a coordinated effort among SADC member states, including harmonising policies, investing in infrastructure, and ensuring inclusivity. Additionally, overcoming resistance to change and strengthening human capacity is crucial for sustaining the momentum of internationalisation initiatives. In conclusion, while the path to higher education curriculum internationalisation in SADC is fraught with complexities, the rewards of a globally integrated education system are far-reaching. With the right strategies and commitment, SADC can establish itself as a hub of

academic excellence, contributing to regional development and playing a vital role on the global stage. As this transformative journey continues, prioritising equity, collaboration, and innovation will be key to unlocking its full potential.

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