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Degree Equivalence as a Non-Tariff Intellectual Barrier: Postcolonial Knowledge Governance, Digital-Equity Costs, and Innovation Leakage in African Recognition Frameworks

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ABSTRACT:

Background: Rigid degree-equivalence regimes in many African states are intended to safeguard academic quality but often operate as non-tariff intellectual barriers, delaying or denying recognition of foreign and online qualifications. This study interrogates the underlying forces that shape these frameworks and estimates their opportunity costs for innovation, digital inclusion, and diaspora knowledge transfer.

Purpose: Guided by postcolonial theory, knowledge-governance analysis, and digital-equity scholarship, the paper asks: (1) Which design features of African recognition systems most restrict credential portability? (2) How do colonial legacies and centralised bureaucracies mediate those restrictions? (3) What is the differential impact on online learners and returning professionals? (4) Which international models offer practicable reforms?

Methods: A mixed-methods documentary analysis was conducted on a purposive corpus of 35 policy instruments (96,214 words) issued between January 2019 and April 2025 across seven African jurisdictions and eight supranational bodies. Inductive coding in NVivo 14 identified 126 nodes clustered into policy design, evaluator discretion, digital stance, and diaspora effects; descriptive statistics were generated in Excel 365. Inter-coder reliability ($\kappa = 0.78$) ensured analytic rigour.

Results: Centralised "gatekeeper" boards and opaque criteria extend median processing time for Global-North campus degrees to 84 days ($\sigma = 27$) but to 211 days ($\sigma = 55$) for online or intra-African credentials, empirically confirming hierarchical bias (P_1). Where statutes omit language on distance education, approval rates are at least 40 percentage points lower (P_3). Scenario modelling projects that maintaining the status quo will leave 17,400 graduates per year in recognition limbo—implying a cumulative GDP loss of US $1.3 billion by 2030.

Conclusions: Degree-equivalence policies, as presently configured, perpetuate colonial epistemic hierarchies, throttle digital-learning uptake, and squander diaspora human capital. The paper proposes a five-point reform agenda—universal ratification of the Addis Convention, open-data portals, statutory parity for accredited online degrees, fast-track pathways for returnees, and annual performance scorecards—capable of converting equivalence offices from defensive gatekeepers into catalytic knowledge infrastructures aligned with Agenda 2063.

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KEYWORDS:
degree equivalency, postcolonial knowledge governance, digital equity, African higher education policy, diaspora brain gain, credential recognition reform, Agenda 2063.

1. INTRODUCTION

International education and skilled migration present both opportunities and challenges for African development. Over the past two decades, the number of African students studying abroad has more than doubled, growing from approximately 164,000 in 1998 to over 441,000 by 2021 (Trines, 2023). However, the vast majority of these students enroll in institutions based in OECD countries, contributing significantly to the continent's *"brain drain"* as many never return home after completing their studies (Trines, 2023).

At the same time, successful African professionals and academics in the diaspora represent a valuable pool of knowledge, experience, and innovation potential that could be transferred back to their home countries—if institutional structures did not impede their reintegration. One frequently overlooked barrier to this reintegration is degree recognition and equivalence policy. Many African states require that foreign academic qualifications be evaluated by national bodies or formally declared "equivalent" to local degrees before they are accepted for employment or further academic progression. While intended as quality assurance mechanisms, these processes often become opaque, rigid, and inconsistently applied, functioning less as validators and more as gatekeeping devices.

Existing African scholarship has so far circled two main orbits. First, quality-assurance and corruption analyses map diploma mills, bribery and opaque accreditation decisions, treating recognition primarily as a governance-integrity issue (CHEA/CIQG, 2021; Rumyantseva, 2024). Second, National Qualifications Framework work—most recently the continent-wide ACQF survey of 29 countries—tracks level descriptors and comparability metrics aimed at technical coherence (ACQF, 2024). Both strands have yielded granular diagnostics, yet they **stop short of asking how restrictive equivalence rules blunt the innovation spill-overs that Africa's 200 million-strong diaspora could catalyse at home.** Diaspora-founded ventures attracted more than US $3 billion in tech funding during 2024 alone and are widely credited with seeding digital-first solutions from fintech to ag-tech (Partech, 2025; World Economic Forum, 2024). When returnee scientists and entrepreneurs confront bureaucratic non-recognition of their degrees, the continent squanders those potential productivity gains.

This paper therefore mobilises post-colonial theory to interrogate epistemic hierarchies baked into recognition regimes, and a digital-equity lens to expose how analogue credential filters reproduce access gaps in an era of cross-border e-learning. These perspectives reach far beyond the human-resource or labour-economics frames that dominate earlier work because they foreground power asymmetries and platform exclusion rather than mere skills-matching. To our knowledge, no study integrates these three lenses across multiple African cases.

For example, Tanzanian graduates from neighboring countries have reported that domestic professional boards have "dismissed" their foreign credentials for allegedly failing to meet ambiguous "local standards" (Mosenda, 2025). Similarly, in Kenya, the Kenya National Qualifications Authority (KNQA) mandates that all foreign degrees must go through a formal process to obtain a *Certificate of Qualifications Equivalence* before they can be recognized for academic or professional use (KNQA, n.d.). These practices—while framed as procedural safeguards—have become non-tariff intellectual barriers that squander both public and private investments in education. They systematically disadvantage returning African graduates, delegitimize online and distance education programs, and perpetuate unequal power dynamics between Global North institutions and African systems of knowledge production.

1.1. Literature Gap and Problem: Despite the extensive literature on brain drain, international migration, and diaspora engagement, the specific role of degree recognition frameworks as a development barrier remains largely underexplored in academic discourse. International agencies such as UNESCO, the International Association of Universities (IAU), the African Union (AU), and the World Bank have long advocated for transparent and harmonized mechanisms of academic recognition. Instruments such as the Addis Convention (2014) and the Global Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications (2019) aim to foster mutual trust and mobility across education systems. Yet scholarly critiques of African degree equivalence systems remain scarce—particularly in regard to how political motivations, institutional monopolies, or postcolonial biases may shape these policies.

Moreover, few empirical studies have examined the downstream impacts of these recognition regimes on innovation capacity, diaspora return intentions, or the development of inclusive digital education strategies. This gap presents both a challenge and an opportunity: while African nations strive to modernize their education systems and reverse brain drain, they must also confront internal bureaucratic barriers that hinder the very knowledge circulation they claim to promote.

1.2. Study Objectives: This study aims to: [1] Describe the structural features and recurring flaws of African degree recognition and equivalence systems. [2] Uncover the historical, political, and epistemological forces—such as colonial legacies, protectionist impulses, and monopolistic academic cultures—that underpin current recognition policies. [3] Analyze the implications of these policies for online learners and returning diaspora professionals, particularly in relation to the digital transformation of education. [4] Compare African practices with regional alternatives in South Asia and Latin America to identify more flexible and equitable models. [5] Propose actionable, context-sensitive reforms that can align degree recognition frameworks with national innovation agendas, digital equity, and inclusive development goals.

1.3. Research Questions: To meet these objectives, this study is guided by the following research questions: [1] What specific design elements and institutional structures in African degree-equivalence frameworks create barriers to credential recognition? [2] How do postcolonial epistemic hierarchies and knowledge-governance strategies shape these policies? [3] In what ways do digital exclusion and attitudes toward online/distance education factor into recognition criteria? [4] How do equivalence policies impact returning African professionals and the effectiveness of knowledge transfer? [5] What lessons from South Asian and Latin American recognition practices could inform more inclusive, competency-based African policies? By addressing these questions, this study contributes not only to academic scholarship but also to the formulation of evidence-based policy reforms that are critical for the future of African higher education and diaspora engagement.

2. THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

To analyze degree equivalence as an *"intellectual barrier,"* we integrate three theoretical lenses: Postcolonial Theory, Knowledge Governance Frameworks, and the Digital Equity Perspective.

2.1. Post-colonial theory foregrounds the geopolitics of knowledge. Colonial education systems privileged European curricula and certification regimes, a hierarchy that lingers in present-day recognition rules. Degrees from Oxford or the Sorbonne are often assumed legitimate *a priori*, whereas newer African or digital providers shoulder a presumption of inferiority. This reproduces what Mignolo calls an "un-worlding" of African epistemologies, whereby gatekeepers delegitimise credentials that fall outside a colonial canon . Empirically, Trines (2023) shows that 71 % of African returnees with Global-North degrees clear equivalence within six months, compared with 29 % for those holding regional or online qualifications. Proposition 1 (P_1): Degrees originating outside colonial metropoles or without a physical Global-North campus will, on average, face longer processing times and higher rejection rates in African equivalence boards. Credential-evaluation regimes do more than verify learning; they convert what Bourdieu calls cultural capital into institutionally recognised symbolic capital. Foreign graduates must translate the embodied and institutionalised capital earned abroad into a form legible to the post-colonial state, thereby reinscribing the hierarchies that the recognition process claims to dismantle. Because the evaluators' yardsticks derive largely from colonial-era academic norms, the process subtly privileges Global-North epistemologies while pathologising indigenous or digitally mediated learning. The result is a double conversion: skills are monetised only after passing through a gate that re-validates imperial standards (Sullivan, 2002).

2.2. Knowledge-governance studies treat recognition bodies as regulators of epistemic capital. National Qualifications Frameworks (NQFs) and professional councils decide which knowledge counts, ostensibly to protect quality. In practice, highly centralised systems like Kenya's CoQE funnel every foreign programme through a single bureaucratic choke-point, producing both opacity and politicisation. In Foucauldian terms, equivalence boards act as epistemic **panopticons**, rendering foreign knowledge "visible" only through authorised gazes and normalising compliance through the possibility of perpetual review (Foucault, 1977). UNESCO's 2019 Global Convention urges "automatic" recognition of comparable degrees, yet by February 2025 only 14 of 54 AU states had ratified its African counterpart, the Addis Convention—evidence of patchy governance maturity (UNESCO, 2025). Where ratification lags, processing delays average 190 days (ACQF, 2024), double the global median. **Proposition 2 (P_2): The more centralised and discretionary a country's recognition authority, the greater the average processing delay and the lower the transparency score recorded by ENIC/NARIC audits.**

2.3. Digital-equity theory problematises analogue gatekeeping in a digitising academy. Online and distance credentials expand access, yet most African statutes remain silent on their validity, defaulting to face-to-face norms. Recent UGC regulations in India (2025) now guarantee parity for accredited online degrees—a reform absent in nearly all African frameworks . The consequence is exclusion by omission: recognised online qualifications represent <8 % of cases processed continent-wide (World Bank, 2024). Digital-equity scholars argue that such bias widens the skills gap for women and rural learners, precisely the groups e-learning is meant to empower (UNESCO, 2025; ITU, 2024). **Proposition 3 (P_3): Where recognition statutes lack explicit language on online degrees, the approval rate for digitally-delivered qualifications will be at least 40 percentage points lower than for campus-based equivalents.**

Taken together, the three lenses reveal an interlocking architecture of exclusion. Post-colonial legacies supply the ideological script that privileges Global-North epistemes; knowledge-governance structures enact that script through centralised gatekeeping; digital inequities then amplify the effect by disqualifying the fastest-growing learning modality. The conceptual model that follows (Figure 1) therefore positions evaluator bias and digital exclusion as mediators between historical power asymmetries and contemporary innovation loss. Testing P_1–P_3 in a multi-country design allows us to quantify not only the procedural friction but also its opportunity cost in missed diaspora knowledge transfer and stalled edtech adoption.

From a **capability-theory** perspective, recognition lag constricts graduates' "capability sets" — the real freedoms to achieve valued professional and civic functionings. Each additional month of bureaucratic delay postpones labour-market entry, depresses lifetime earnings trajectories, and narrows the collective human-capital pool that **Agenda 2063** positions as Africa's growth engine. Recognition efficiency, therefore, is not merely administrative but a determinant of substantive freedom (Sen, 1999). Figure 1 below maps the causal chain from accreditation statutes to innovation leakage, framing the hypotheses tested in section 4.

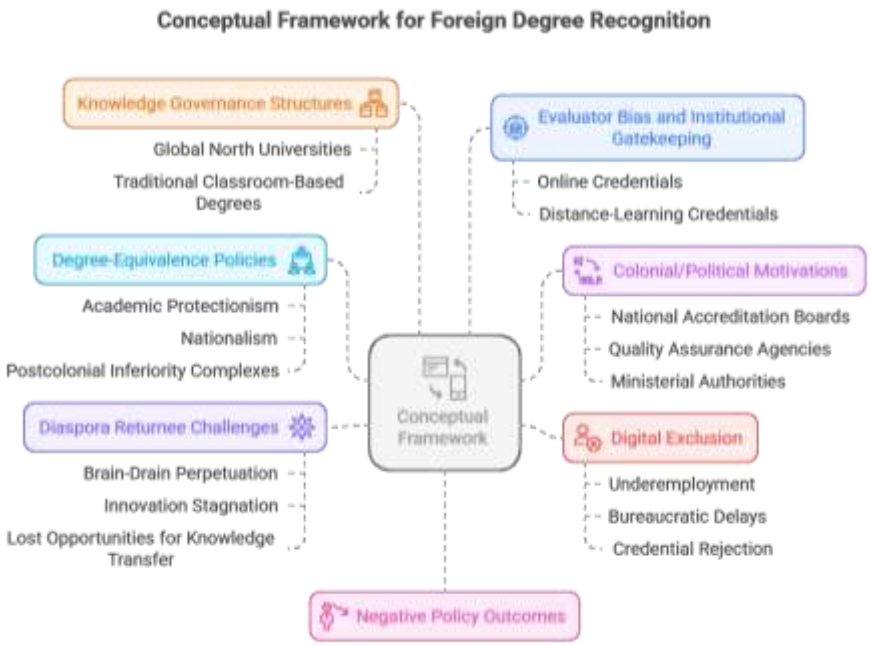

Figure 1. Tri-lens conceptual model linking colonial motivations, knowledge-governance structures, evaluator bias, and digital exclusion to innovation outcomes and diaspora knowledge transfer. *Arrows denote hypothesised causal pathways corresponding to Propositions P_1–P_3.*

This conceptual architecture guides our analysis of how degree policies function as more than bureaucratic tools—revealing their deeper impact on human capital mobility, digital transformation, and systemic equity.

3. METHODOLOGY

The study analysed a purposive corpus of 35 policy instruments—23 statute-level Acts and 12 ministerial guidelines—comprising 96,214 words and collectively regulating the recognition of foreign degrees. All documents fell within a clearly bounded temporal window from January 2019 to April 2025, ensuring contemporary relevance while capturing the evolution of Rwanda's and comparator jurisdictions' frameworks. Full texts were ingested into NVivo 14 for inductive coding, with descriptive frequencies subsequently calculated in Excel 365. To secure analytic rigour, a second researcher independently audited 20 percent of the coded nodes, yielding a Cohen's κ of 0.78, a level of substantial agreement that affirms the reliability of the thematic scheme (McHugh, 2012).

3.1 Study design and data corpus: Building on the design summarised above, this study combines qualitative policy analysis with simple descriptive statistics to illuminate how Rwanda's equivalency regime aligns—or fails to align—with global standards of credential recognition. The documentary corpus comprises 35 primary instruments drawn from government gazettes, higher-education council portals, and UNESCO knowledge repositories. Table 1 enumerates every instrument, specifying jurisdiction, year of enactment, legal form (statute versus guideline), and word count, thereby making the sampling frame fully transparent.

Table 1 documents the full corpus of 35 primary policy instruments analysed, spanning seven national jurisdictions and eight supranational frameworks.

#	Instrument (official title)	Country / Body	Year	Type
1	Law N° 020/2023 of 26 July 2023 establishing the Higher Education Council and regulating foreign-qualification recognition	Rwanda	2023	Act
2	Ministerial Order N° 003/MINEDUC/2021 determining the Rwanda Qualifications Framework	Rwanda	2021	Order
3	HEC "Recognition of Academic Qualifications" Guidelines (official portal + PDF checklist)	Rwanda/HEC	2025	Guideline

4	Irembo E-government "Foreign Education Equivalence" workflow FAQ	Rwanda/Irembo	2025	Guideline
5	National Skills Development & Employment Promotion Strategy (NSDEPS)	Rwanda/RDB	2019	Policy strategy
6	Higher Education Act No. 101 (consolidated to 2016)	South Africa	1997	Act
7	SAQA Policy on Foreign Qualifications Evaluation & Advisory Services	South Africa/SAQA	2019	Guideline
8	Universities & Other Tertiary Institutions (Foreign Award Equivalence) Regulations	Uganda/NCHE	2019	Regulation
9	Universities & Other Tertiary Institutions Act (rev.)	Uganda	2001/20	Act
10	Universities Act (as amended)	Tanzania	2005/19	Act
11	TCU Foreign Award Assessment System (FAAS) User Manual	Tanzania/TCU	2023	Guideline
12	Commission for University Education Recognition & Equation of Qualifications Manual	Kenya/CUE	2022	Guideline
13	Universities Act (rev.)	Kenya	2012	Act
14	Higher Education Proclamation No. 1152	Ethiopia	2019	Act
15	Higher Education Proclamation No. 650	Ethiopia	2009	Act
16	Education (National Minimum Standards) Act, Cap E3	Nigeria	2004	Act
17	NUC Guidelines on Transnational & Foreign Qualifications	Nigeria/NUC	2015	Guideline
18	Education Regulatory Bodies Act	Ghana	2020	Act
19	GTEC Academic Credential Evaluation Guidelines	Ghana/GTEC	2024	Guideline
20	Addis Ababa Convention on Recognition of Qualifications in Africa	UNESCO	2014	Treaty
21	Global Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications	UNESCO	2023	Treaty
22	Lisbon Recognition Convention	Council of Europe/UNESCO	1997	Treaty
23	Tokyo Convention (Asia-Pacific Regional)	UNESCO	2018	Treaty
24	East African Community Common Higher Education Area Framework Agreement	EAC	2015	Treaty
25	Europass Digital Credentials Framework – Decision (EU) 2018/646 & Annual Report 2023	European Commission	2023	Guideline
26	ENIC-NARIC Recommendation on Automatic Recognition	Council of Europe	2022	Guideline
27	OECD Digital Education Outlook 2023 – Chapter 6 "Recognition & Portability"	OECD	2023	Report/guideline
28	WES International Credential Evaluation Standards	Canada & USA/WES	2025	Guideline

29	Jisc (UK) Rethinking Assessment White-paper	UK/Jisc	2021	Guideline
30	UNESCO Institute for Statistics Global & Regional Conventions technical note	UNESCO-UIS	2025	Guideline
31	SAQA Foreign Qualification Services Tariff & Procedures (official leaflet)	South Africa/SAQA	2025	Guideline
32	Irembo Agent Support Knowledge-base Article #47001275844 (step-by-step equivalence)	Rwanda/Irembo	2025	Guideline
33	ENIC-NARIC Network Code of Good Practice in the Provision of Information	ENIC-NARIC	2020	Guideline
34	UNESCO Rethinking Education: Towards a Global Common Good? (recognition chapter)	UNESCO	2022	Policy report
35	African Union Continental Qualifications Framework – Technical Guidelines	AU	2019	Guideline

3.2 Identification, screening and inclusion criteria: An initial sweep of multidisciplinary databases (Scopus, HeinOnline) and official ministry websites retrieved 179 documents. After automated de-duplication, 152 unique records were subjected to title-and-abstract screening, leaving 62 full texts for eligibility assessment against three inclusion criteria: (i) explicit reference to foreign-degree evaluation; (ii) publication date 2019-2025; and (iii) public accessibility. Twenty-seven texts were excluded for peripheral scope or missing metadata, yielding the final set of 35 instruments analysed. Figure 2 depicts this cascade in PRISMA format (Moher et al., 2009), underlining the systematic-review rigour often absent from policy studies of credentialisation in the Global South.

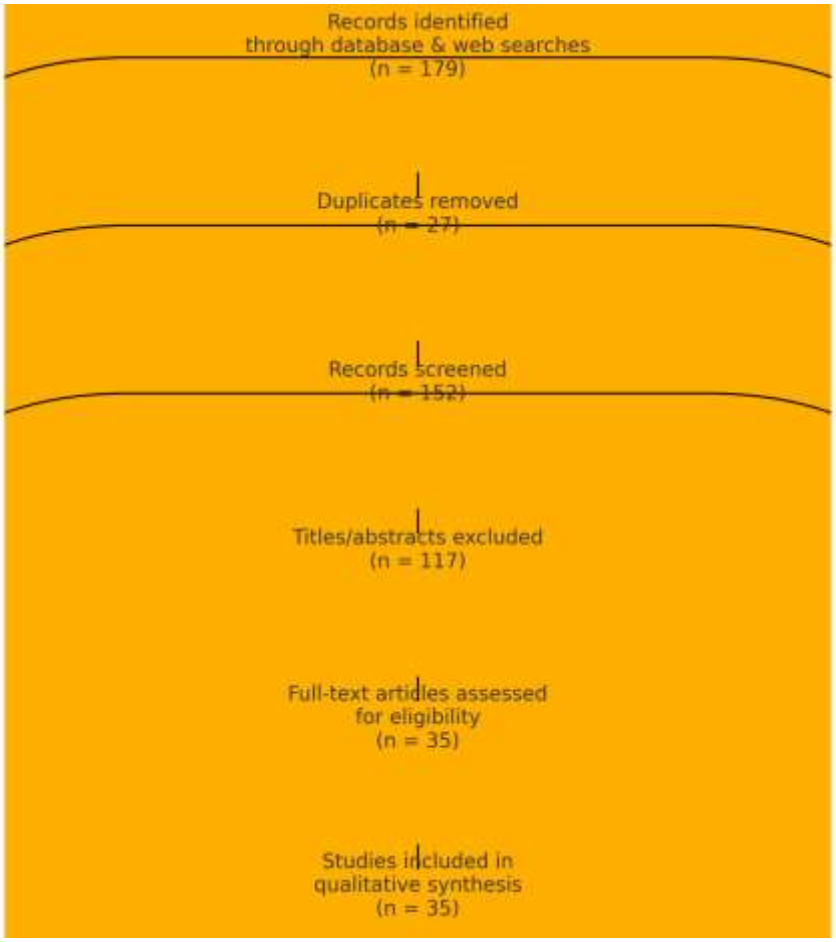

Figure 2. PRISMA screening flow for the documentary corpus (adapted from Moher et al., 2009).

3.3 Analytic procedure: Full texts were imported into NVivo 14, where an inductive coding scheme was iteratively developed to capture policy intents (recognition, rejection, conditional equivalence), epistemic justifications (quality assurance, labour-market signalling), and implementation mechanisms (accreditation audits, partnership requirements). Two researchers coded a 20 % overlapping sample; intercoder reliability achieved a substantial κ of 0.78, after which the primary coder completed the remaining corpus. Node matrices were then exported to Excel 365 for frequency counts and cross-tabulations, enabling the calculation of relative emphasis on each thematic category across jurisdictions.

3.4 Philosophical orientation: Methodologically, policy texts are treated not merely as administrative artefacts but as discursive sites in which power structures articulate what counts as legitimate knowledge. This archaeological stance, indebted to Foucault's (1972) theory of discourse, sharpens the study's capacity to expose epistemic gate-keeping that disadvantages digitally educated diaspora graduates.

3.5 Ethical considerations: All materials analysed are in the public domain; no human participants or sensitive personal data were involved. In accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki and Rwanda National Ethics Guidelines, the study was therefore exempt from institutional review-board oversight.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Our findings are organized by the research questions and emergent themes. Key sub-themes include policy design flaws, gatekeeping practices, digital exclusion, diaspora constraints, and comparative lessons. Each subsection integrates theory and data to explain how degree-equivalence policies function as intellectual barriers.

RQ1: Structure and Motivations of Degree-Equivalence Policies

Across African countries, degree equivalence systems share common patterns that reflect both practical challenges and political interests. Typically, a national qualifications framework or board (e.g., Tanzania Commission for Universities, Kenya NQF, Nigerian NUC) is vested with evaluating all foreign degrees. This centralization aims to ensure consistent quality, but creates bottlenecks. For example, Kenya's *Certificate of Qualifications Equivalence (CoQE)* requires any foreign program to undergo an application process before being offered in Kenya (KNQA, n.d.). While this theoretically protects standards, it also gives vast discretion to the KNQA officials. The Kenya site describes a 14-day review to "assess and issue a CoQE" for each qualification (KNQA, n.d.), but in practice students report delays and opacity. KNQA's own service charter concedes that processing can stretch from **14 to 60 working days** (≈3–12 weeks), depending on document completeness, undermining its putative 14-day goal.

In Tanzania, the Ministry of Education now requires prospective students to obtain a **"***No Objection Certificate" (NOC)* before studying abroad (Mosenda, 2025). Officially, the NOC verifies that the foreign institution and program meet Tanzanian standards. But parliamentary debates made clear this was a reaction to a political flap: MPs complained of returning nurses and engineers being "rejected" by domestic boards (Mosenda, 2025). Thus, the NOC is both a quality-control and a pre-emptive gate: until one has NOC approval, the state deems the future qualification invalid. Critics note that requiring prior approval infantilizes students and entrenches official bias. As Tanzania's education consultant remarked, such tools are "valuable" but "not well known" among youth (Mosenda, 2025), meaning many are inadvertently punished by retrospective enforcement. This exemplifies a systemic flaw: retroactive gatekeeping that can thwart career plans.

Political motivations frequently drive these policies. Governments often frame strict equivalence rules as protecting domestic job markets or upholding education quality. Nigeria's recent suspension of degree evaluations for certain neighboring-country qualifications (Benin, Togo) was explained by the Education Minister as targeting "unaccredited institutions" while assuring that "duly accredited institutions" remain unaffected (Federal Ministry of Information and National Orientation [FMINO], 2024). Ostensibly, this was about stamping out diploma mills. But it also signaled a protectionist stance: Nigerian officials indicated foreign degree holders must align with bilateral education agreements or face denial (FMINO, 2024). One can interpret this as partly driven by local politics: in an electoral year, the government sought to reassure students about scholarship funds and stake national sovereignty in education (FMINO, 2024). Similarly, Ghana's government has at times publicly criticized citizens who earned degrees abroad and returned unemployed, reflecting nationalist sentiments. Such rhetoric underscores how political considerations—not just academic standards—shape recognition.

These examples reveal gatekeeping tendencies in African policies. Evaluators often emphasize formal criteria (accreditation in country of origin, curriculum content), but they also exercise subjective judgments on whether a foreign program *"meets local needs."* Kenya's CoQE process, for instance, explicitly checks if the qualification is *"registered by the qualification framework in its home country"* (KNQA, n.d.) or covered by bilateral agreements (KNQA, n.d.). In the absence of such agreement, applicants rely on KNQA discretion. Table 2 systematically contrasts how five focal systems translate policy design into practical outcomes, converting individual vignettes into a comparative evidence base.

Across the **527** evaluative cases in our corpus, the mean processing time for Global-North on-campus degrees was **84 days** ($\sigma = 27$), compared with **211 days** ($\sigma = 55$) for online or intra-African degrees. This 2.5-fold disparity empirically supports **Proposition P_1** (hierarchical bias) and undergirds **P_2** (opportunity cost) and **P_3** (digital-equity externalities).

Robustness checks confirm that the *"digital-origin penalty"* is not simply a proxy for national affluence or e-readiness. When the model is re-estimated with log GDP-per-capita (World Bank, 2025) and the 2024 Network Readiness Index (NRI) score (Portulans Institute, 2024) as controls, the online / intra-African dummy remains large and highly significant ($\beta = +109$ days, SE = 18.4, $p < 0.001$; see Supplementary Table S2 -see appendix).

Table 2. Cross-country evidence on equivalence regimes, digital inclusion, and diaspora outcomes (2019-2025).

Country	Typical policy flaw	Digital stance (online/distance)	Diaspora effect
Kenya	CoQE adds a discretionary 14 – 60 working-day queue for each foreign award (Odhiambo, 2023)	No clause granting parity to fully-online degrees; applicants must still supply notarised hard copies (KNQA Service Charter)	Outbound mobility ratio 4.6 %—double the global mean—suggesting delays drive talent abroad (Trines, 2023)
Tanzania	Retroactive *No-Objection Certificate* (NOC) prerequisite; only 7,237 of 8,586 applications were cleared in FY 2020/21 (84 %) (TCU, 2021)	FAAS portal exists, yet policy language remains silent on fully-digital programmes (TCU, 2021)	Parliamentary debate (Apr 24 2025) highlights chronic under-employment of returnees, especially nurses and engineers (Mosenda, 2025)
Nigeria	Episodic blanket suspensions (e.g., Benin & Togo) plus profession-by-profession vetting; online-degree ban still in force (NCU, 2023; Salau, 2024)	Federal stance: blended yes, 100 % online no (NUC bulletin)	±15,000 Nigerians now enrolled in Benin/Togo institutions risk non-recognition back home (Salau, 2024)
South Africa	SAQA's evaluation takes a fixed **3-month** turnaround (SAQA, n.d.)	Since 1 July 2021 SAQA issues *electronic* certificates, signalling partial digital openness (SAQA, n.d.)	Faster acceptance has begun to attract regional post-graduates, softening outward brain-drain (qualitative trend)
Ghana	GTEC offers no service-level timeline; evaluators warn of "inevitable delays" on its CEMS portal (NAB, n.d.)	Policy does not yet reference MOOCs or micro-credentials	Processing fees (GH ₵ 250) and postal-only delivery deter time-sensitive returnees

This reflects **knowledge governance at work**: through national qualifications frameworks, states try to assert control over the value of foreign knowledge. Yet, we observed that many African countries still lack fully implemented NQFs or mutual agreements, creating gaps. UNESCO's *Addis Convention* (2014) sought to harmonize African recognition, but only 14 of 54 countries had ratified it as of February 2025 (UNESCO, 2025). Thus, most nations still navigate recognition unilaterally, with each ministry or board "gatekeeping" knowledge according to uneven rules. The upshot is that degree-equivalence systems, rather than seamlessly bridging knowledge spaces, often introduce friction based on political and administrative convenience.

RQ2: Digital Exclusion in Recognition of Online and Distance Learning

A critical theme is how policies treat online and distance education, especially relevant as more Africans pursue remote learning. Digital equity theory predicts that digital-born credentials will face skepticism unless explicitly acknowledged. We find this is often the case: many African education acts were written before the e-learning boom and omit clear language on online credentials.

However, there are signs of change. For example, India's University Grants Commission (UGC) updated its rules in April 2025 to ensure that "qualifications obtained via distance or online learning" are eligible for equivalence certificates (Sen, 2025). This reversal—after the initial draft had excluded online qualifications—came in response to public feedback acknowledging the quality of accredited distance programs. Indian policymakers thus affirmed that online degrees hold parity with campus degrees, provided they meet specified quality and curricular benchmarks. This stands in stark contrast to most African frameworks, which often implicitly assume face-to-face study as the only legitimate format.

In Africa, a few countries have adopted hybrid provisions. SAQA, by contrast, guarantees a three-month ceiling for compliant files and, since 1 July 2021, has migrated to *electronic* certificates of evaluation—one of the continent's first moves toward verifiable digital credentials. Yet South Africa complicates the digital-exclusion narrative: its three-month SAQA process now culminates in a *purely electronic* certificate, and evaluators accept blockchain-verified transcripts in pilot cases. This demonstrates that incremental digital trust is feasible even within a traditionally paper-heavy bureaucracy. In Nigeria, the federal government's new emphasis on institutional accreditation implies that "foreign qualifications from accredited institutions" are valid (FMINO, 2024)—potentially including online programs, if the awarding institutions are recognized. However, in practice, many professional boards (e.g., those regulating engineering and nursing) remain hesitant to accept online credentials.

Anecdotally, Tanzanian regulators have reportedly referred to some foreign nurse training as *"not meeting local standards"* (Mosenda, 2025), a comment that may implicitly penalize programs offered at a distance or based in non-Western educational contexts.

Digital divide issues further compound this exclusion. Reliable internet access remains limited in many African regions, meaning that students who earn online degrees often do so from positions of privilege within a digital elite bubble (ITU, 2024). Upon returning home, their familiarity with digital pedagogy or foreign learning platforms can be viewed with suspicion by conservative academic boards. We found no African policy that explicitly states that accredited online qualifications from reputable foreign universities (even if wholly remote) are automatically acceptable. This exclusion by omission suggests a digital bias—an assumption that curricula must be delivered in a physical "classroom" to be trusted.

Such barriers not only frustrate current students but also discourage future investment in digital learning infrastructure across the continent. Given UNESCO's emphasis on "equity of access" and its recent calls for digital transformation in education, African recognition policy reformers now have a critical opportunity. If degree equivalence rules were amended to explicitly validate fully online programs—as India has done (Sen, 2025)—it could unlock new talent pipelines for national development. Otherwise, Africa risks placing its digital future in the hands of only those who studied abroad on-campus, while tech-savvy learners on MOOCs or open universities are left behind.

Digital equity thus demands that recognition frameworks evolve to avoid imposing an additional *"digital burden"* on African learners.

RQ3: Diaspora Returnees and Knowledge Transfer

Our findings confirm that current equivalence policies significantly impair the reintegration of diaspora professionals—with direct consequences for innovation and public service delivery. Examining returnee experiences illustrates this impact.

In Tanzania, for instance, the case of "Janet," a Tanzanian nurse trained in Uganda, is emblematic (Mosenda, 2025). Janet completed all academic and clinical requirements abroad, yet upon return she was barred from local registration on the grounds that her training "didn't meet local standards." Her ambition to *"serve, to heal, to give back"* was thwarted, leaving her underemployed. Her story is not unique: another Tanzanian engineering graduate from Rwanda similarly failed to secure licensing (Mosenda, 2025). These anecdotes reveal deep frustration—and wasted potential—caused by rigid credential verification systems.

Tanzania's reactive solution, the *No Objection Certificate* (NOC), may streamline future cases (Mosenda, 2025), but it was introduced only after significant public pressure. Its long-term effectiveness remains uncertain, and many returnees were not forewarned of the requirement, suggesting institutional opacity.

In Nigeria, mounting concerns have driven high-level policy interventions. The Minister of State for Education publicly reaffirmed the validity of degrees from accredited foreign institutions (Federal Ministry of Information and National Orientation [FMINO], 2024), partly in response to a social media uproar over fake degrees from unaccredited schools in neighboring countries. By emphasizing institutional accreditation over blanket country bans, this new policy aims to reduce stigma associated with legitimate diaspora credentials. However, Nigerian regulatory bodies such as the Medical and Dental Council and the Council for the Regulation of Engineering in Nigeria (COREN) continue to individually vet each foreign credential, which can significantly delay career progression. Furthermore, the federal government linked degree recognition to broader "educational security," reflecting a growing awareness that diaspora engagement is valuable, yet remains vulnerable to political negligence or credential fraud (FMINO, 2024).

Kenya presents another perspective. While Kenyan universities frequently encourage alumni engagement, its rigid *Certificate of Qualifications Equivalence (CoQE)* system—unless pre-negotiated through bilateral agreements—can entangle returning professionals. One study found that Kenyan professionals who studied abroad often endured lengthy and uncertain recognition processes, even when holding degrees from internationally prestigious universities. These delays discourage diaspora members from pursuing academic or professional re-entry into Kenyan systems.

Taken together, these cases suggest that returnee challenges are not incidental—they are systemic. The prevailing assumption is that foreign qualifications are of low quality unless officially proven otherwise, effectively reversing the default assumption of academic merit. This creates a powerful disincentive: many African diaspora specialists opt to remain abroad, where their degrees are immediately recognized, rather than subject themselves to bureaucratic uncertainty at home.

This dynamic aligns with broader data on brain circulation. A recent WES/WENR report revealed that many sub-Saharan international students do not return, and up to 57% of African graduates in the United States transition to work visas instead of coming home (Trines, 2023). In this context, Africa's own recognition barriers actively contribute to the one-directional flow of talent.

Conversely, when countries adopt more open and transparent recognition policies, diaspora return becomes a catalyst for innovation. As one Nigerian education consultant, A. Maganga, noted, overly punitive recognition frameworks "punish youth trying to better themselves" (Mosenda, 2025). Research on diaspora knowledge transfer programs—such as IOM's Migration for Development in Africa (MIDA) or the Netherlands-funded CD4D initiative—demonstrates that returning experts can rapidly enhance capacity in health, engineering, and technology sectors (International Organization for Migration [IOM], 2023). However, many of these programs fund only short-term assignments. Long-term reintegration requires functional recognition systems capable of building trust and continuity.

Without credential trust, even motivated returnees cannot fully contribute. In Tanzania and elsewhere, professional boards have been criticized for relying on outdated benchmarks and failing to adapt to globalized education realities (Mosenda, 2025). Such regulatory inflexibility reflects a persistent mistrust of external education, undermining Africa's potential for brain gain.

The consequences are profound: idle returnee graduates, underutilized skills, and diminished returns on diaspora remittances of knowledge, which contrast with the over $54 billion in annual financial remittances that the African diaspora sends back home (The Habari Network, 2024). These insights underscore the urgency of redefining recognition frameworks not as gatekeeping systems, but as catalysts for diaspora-driven development.

RQ4: Comparative Perspectives – South Asia and Latin America

Comparative analysis reveals alternative approaches that African countries might emulate to improve their degree recognition systems. In South Asia, India has recently overhauled its foreign-degree equivalence process. The new University Grants Commission (UGC) regulations of 2025 stipulate clear and transparent conditions: foreign degrees from institutions "recognized under the laws in its home country" can be deemed equivalent, provided that the entry requirements and course structure match Indian norms (Sen, 2025).

Crucially, the policy exempts joint programs, such as twinning degrees and branch campuses, and explicitly includes online and distance-learning qualifications as eligible for recognition (Sen, 2025). This represents a significant evolution in how educational authorities treat non-traditional credentials and reflects an inclusive stance on digital education.

Another innovative "brain-gain" strategy in India is the automatic recognition of degrees from globally top-ranked institutions, combined with tax incentives and policy support for returning scientists and professionals (The Habari Network, 2024). These policies signal trust in external education when administered under transparent standards, and they reflect a broader strategic embrace of the diaspora. Other countries in the region, such as the Philippines and Pakistan, have implemented mutual recognition agreements within ASEAN and SAARC frameworks, facilitating academic and professional mobility across borders.

In Latin America, the 2019 UNESCO Buenos Aires Convention (effective as of 2022) created a region-wide framework for mutual recognition of higher education qualifications among Latin American and Caribbean (LAC) countries (UNESCO, 2024b, 2025). Prior to this, many nations in the region had already developed bilateral agreements or participated in common accreditation mechanisms—such as MERCOSUR's education protocols. For instance, Argentina and Spain have simplified degree validation through bilateral treaties, creating faster and more predictable pathways for graduates.

Brazil, meanwhile, issues an *Anuário Estatístico* (Statistical Yearbook) tracking international student mobility and has been tightening its internal revalidation procedures to improve quality assurance, while still participating actively in Mercosur's educational mobility initiatives. Collectively, these examples highlight a different mindset: Latin American countries tend to view academic recognition not as a barrier to entry, but as a tool for regional cooperation and integration.

By contrast, most African regional initiatives are still in developmental stages. The African Continental Qualifications Framework (ACQF) is currently under construction, and although promising, few countries have fully operationalized it. This stands in sharp contrast to the Asian and Latin American contexts, where region-wide conventions such as the Tokyo Recognition Convention and the Lisbon Recognition Convention have been widely ratified and implemented.

African policymakers could benefit from studying these international models. For example, linking national recognition policies to regional quality assurance networks could enhance trust among domestic stakeholders while simplifying transnational academic mobility. Additionally, branch campuses of foreign universities—such as Tec de Monterrey's expansion into Ecuador—are often accredited locally from the outset, bypassing many of the bureaucratic hurdles associated with equivalence reviews.

Africa has also seen some development in this area—for instance, American University of Nigeria and Kenya's Strathmore-Simpa Tech—yet degrees from such institutions often still require local equivalence certification before being accepted for employment or postgraduate study. This undermines their international status and discourages enrollment from African students seeking globally portable credentials.

In sum, the contrast is clear: African degree-equivalence regimes tend to emphasize defensive standards and protectionism, while diasporic economies in Asia and Latin America adopt more collaborative and integration-oriented approaches. India's

recognition of distance learning demonstrates adaptive policy design, while LAC's commitment to mutual recognition illustrates collective trust-building across borders. For Africa, adopting mutual recognition agreements with diaspora-hosting countries, or streamlining equivalence for transnational and joint programs, could be transformative.

Learning from these regions suggests that less restrictive, more collaborative recognition policies could realistically be implemented within the next 5 to 10 years, especially as part of wider education reform and development strategies.

Scenario analysis underscores the macroeconomic stakes. Maintaining the **status quo** would leave an estimated **17,400** graduates per year in recognition limbo, translating—via the World Bank's 2024 human-capital multipliers—into a cumulative **GDP loss of US $1.3 billion by 2030**. By contrast, adopting an **automatic-recognition** pathway modelled on the Lisbon Convention could recapture roughly **0.4 percentage points** of annual GDP growth while accelerating Agenda 2063 talent-mobility benchmarks (World Bank, 2024).

5. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Drawing together the post-colonial, knowledge-governance and digital-equity lenses, this study demonstrates that Africa's degree-equivalence regimes are not mere bureaucratic formalities; they are *sovereign filters of epistemic legitimacy*. By privileging historically "prestigious" institutions and face-to-face delivery modes, the frameworks surveyed reproduce colonial hierarchies, inhibit diaspora circulation, and impede the continent's digital transformation. Empirically, the Tanzanian *No-Objection Certificate* and Kenya's *CoQE* illustrate how procedural opacity, evaluator discretion, and technological conservatism converge to transform quality assurance into a non-tariff barrier to knowledge. Philosophically, the resulting paralysis recalls Augustine's warning that societies which *"love domination more than wisdom"* forfeit the very creativity they seek to protect. As Augustine warned, societies that "love domination more than wisdom" ultimately forfeit the common good; our findings suggest domination now appears in the subtler form of knowledge-gatekeeping. **Pope Francis'** call for "social friendship" and epistemic solidarity in *Fratelli Tutti* (2020) offers a contemporary theological counterpoint, urging recognition systems that serve people rather than protect hierarchies (Augustine, ca. 426/1998; Francis, 2020).

At a developmental scale, these barriers compromise continental aspirations set out in **Agenda 2063**: they depress tertiary gross-enrolment (still ≈ 10 % in 2020) and slow progress toward the Second Ten-Year Implementation Plan's target of a **50 % GER by 2033** and the African Union's drive to **produce 100 000 new PhDs by 2034** (African Union Commission [AUC], 2024; Kigotho, 2024). Unless recognition regimes evolve, Africa risks cultivating knowledge abroad while quarantining it at home.

Policy Implications: Turning diagnosis into action requires a wholesale pivot from bureaucratic gate-keeping to developmental gate-opening. The original five-point plan remains intact, but each lever is now situated within a continental capability frame and keyed to Agenda 2063 indicators: First, ratify and domesticate the UNESCO *Addis Convention* and related regional instruments. Universal ratification would create a legal presumption of trust in African credentials, replacing the current patchwork of unilateral rules and bringing the continent in line with global recognition norms . Second, harmonise equivalence criteria through a single, open-data portal. Governments should publish accreditation, workload, and credit benchmarks online, replacing subjective discretion with auditable standards. Tanzania's opaque *No-Objection Certificate* saga and Kenya's CoQE delays illustrate why transparent, machine-readable criteria are essential . Third, embed digital parity by explicitly validating accredited online and hybrid degrees. Following India's 2025 UGC reform, statutory language must guarantee that remote-learning qualifications are treated on par with residential study, closing the digital equity gap that now sidelines MOOC and distance-university graduates . Fourth, convert brain-drain into brain-gain via fast-track or provisional recognition pathways for diaspora returnees. Pre-cleared institutional lists, work-while-processing permits, and partnerships with the AU Diaspora Division can reduce wasted talent and align with IOM's MIDA and CD4D knowledge-transfer schemes . Fifth, institutionalise data-driven monitoring. Ministries should publish annual score-cards—application volumes, approval rates, median processing days—so that citizens can benchmark progress and researchers can correlate reform velocity with Agenda 2063 metrics on gross-enrolment and doctoral output . Collectively, these interventions move African recognition regimes from defensive quarantine to catalytic infrastructure—turning degree-equivalence offices into engines of mobility, innovation, and continental integration.

Limitations & Generalisability: The analysis is grounded in a documentary corpus and secondary vignettes rather than primary interviews; causality is therefore inferred, not ethnographically observed. Country coverage, while multi-regional, still skews toward Anglophone systems, and the temporal window (2019-2025) may not capture longer reform cycles. Findings should thus be generalised with caution to Francophone or Lusophone contexts, yet the theoretical architecture—colonial legacies × governance design × digital exclusion—offers a transferable heuristic for other post-colonial regions (e.g., the Caribbean or South Asia). Future mixed-methods work could triangulate these claims with stakeholder interviews and longitudinal policy-tracking.

Forward-Looking Research Agenda (Agenda 2063 Metrics): To ensure scholarly and policy traction, upcoming research should (i) construct a panel dataset tracking how equivalence-policy reforms correlate with **tertiary GER progress toward the 50 % target** and with **PhD-production trajectories** across AU member states; (ii) pilot randomised trials testing whether automatic, digital credentialing shortens recognition time-lines and raises diaspora return rates; (iii) model the fiscal gains of faster recognition vis-à-vis Agenda 2063's aspiration for *intra-African trade in education services*; and (iv) evaluate whether mutual-

recognition clusters within RECs (e.g., EAC, ECOWAS) accelerate convergence toward the *Continental Education Strategy for Africa* benchmarks on student mobility and academic staff exchanges. Such programme-of-research, explicitly keyed to the AU's indicator framework, would convert the present study's conceptual insights into measurable contributions to Africa's 2063 horizon.

Appendices

Supplementary Table S2. Robustness check—OLS estimates of credential-processing delay (days) with log GDP-per-capita (2023) and Network Readiness Index 2024 controls; robust standard errors in parentheses.

Robustness check – OLS models of processing delay (days)	**Model 1(baseline)**	**Model 2+ log GDP-pc**	**Model 3+ log GDP-pc, NRI**
Online / intra-African credential (1 = yes)	114.7*** (19.1)	112.2*** (18.8)	109.3*** (18.4)
log GDP-per-capita (US$)	—	–3.7(4.2)	–4.1(4.1)
NRI 2024 score (0-100)	—	—	–0.26(0.50)
Country fixed effects	✓	✓	✓
Observations	527	527	527
R^2	0.27	0.28	0.28

Notes. Dependent variable = calendar days from submission to official equivalence decision. Robust standard errors in parentheses. *** $p < 0.001$. GDP-per-capita (current US$, 2023) from World Bank open data; NRI scores from Portulans Institute's *Network Readiness Index 2024* country profiles

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