AFRICAN ORGANISATION FOR STANDARDISATION

CONCEPT NOTE

14th Continental Essay Competition — 2026

Theme - Advancing Intra-African Trade through Conformity Assessment and Mutual Recognition Agreements (MRAs) — Unlocking the Full Potential of the Cotton-to-Clothing Value Chain under the AfCFTA

for Tertiary Students (Under 35 Years) across African Union Member States

Coordinated through National Standards Bodies (NSBs) and National Coordinators

Competition Window	3rd September 2026 – 23rd April 2027
Awards Ceremony	33rd ARSO General Assembly – July 2027
Prepared by	Continental Essay Coordinator — ARSO Central Secretariat

1. BACKGROUND

The African Organisation for Standardisation (ARSO) is Africa's inter-governmental standards body formed by OAU (currently AU) and UNECA in 1977 in Accra Ghana.

The fundamental mandate of ARSO is to develop tools for standards development, standards harmonisation, and implementation of these systems to enhance Africa's internal trading capacity, increase Africa's product and service competitiveness globally, uplift the welfare of African consumers, and serve as a standardization forum for future prospects in international trade referencing.

As part of its mandate to build a culture of standardisation and quality among Africa's youth, ARSO established the Continental Essay Competition to engage tertiary students across AU Member States on issues central to Africa's standardisation, quality infrastructure, and trade agenda.

Following the successful conclusion of the 13th Edition in 2025 | 2026, ARSO is pleased to launch the 14th Continental Essay Competition for 2026 | 2027. The Competition remains one of ARSO's flagship platforms for engaging Africa's next generation of thinkers, innovators, and standardisation professionals, and for generating fresh, youth-driven perspectives on practical pathways to accelerate intra-African trade.

1.1 Theme of the 14th Edition

"Advancing Intra-African Trade through Conformity Assessment and Mutual Recognition Agreements (MRAs) — Unlocking the Full Potential of the Cotton-to-Clothing Value Chain under the AfCFTA"

2. RATIONALE

Intra-African trade remains constrained by non-tariff barriers, foremost among them the lack of harmonised standards, weak conformity assessment infrastructure, and the absence of trust mechanisms — such as Mutual Recognition Agreements (MRAs) — that allow goods tested, inspected, or certified in one Member State to be accepted in another without duplicate testing. The AfCFTA, as Africa's flagship instrument for deepening market integration, can only realise its full promise if products can move across borders efficiently, safely, and with confidence in their quality — a confidence built through robust conformity assessment systems and mutually recognised certification.

The cotton-to-clothing value chain — spanning cotton cultivation, ginning, spinning, weaving/knitting, garment manufacturing, and finished apparel — is one of the AfCFTA's priority value chains and among the most promising for intra-African industrialisation. Africa is a significant producer of raw cotton, yet the continent exports the majority of its cotton unprocessed, capturing only a fraction of the value added downstream in yarn, textile, and garment production. Fragmented standards, inconsistent quality requirements, and limited conformity assessment and mutual recognition arrangements between Member States remain key obstacles preventing African cotton, textile, and apparel producers from trading seamlessly with one another and competing effectively in regional and global markets.

The 14th Continental Essay Competition theme invites tertiary students to critically examine how strengthened conformity assessment systems and MRAs can unlock the full potential of the cotton-to-clothing value chain — driving industrialisation, value addition, job creation, and inclusive economic growth across the continent, in direct support of the AfCFTA's objectives.

3. OBJECTIVES

The 14th Continental Essay Competition seeks to:

- Deepen tertiary students' understanding of standardisation, conformity assessment, and Mutual Recognition Agreements as practical tools for eliminating technical barriers to trade and advancing the AfCFTA.
- Stimulate rigorous, youth-led research and critical thinking on practical pathways to strengthen the cotton-to-clothing value chain through quality infrastructure and regulatory cooperation.
- Identify, recognise, and nurture talented young writers, researchers, and future standardisation professionals and advocates across the continent.
- Strengthen collaboration between ARSO, National Standards Bodies, and tertiary institutions in promoting a standards and quality culture among African youth.
- Generate policy-relevant recommendations and fresh perspectives from Africa's youth to inform AfCFTA implementation and continental quality infrastructure development.

4. TARGET PARTICIPANTS

4.1 Eligible Students

- Enrolled in an accredited tertiary institution (university, college, polytechnic, or technical/vocational institution) in an African Union Member State at the time of submission.
- Aged 35 years or below as at the essay submission deadline to be determined by each National Standards Body
- Open to students of all disciplines — including but not limited to trade, economics, law, engineering, textiles and fashion technology, agriculture, international relations, and public policy — reflecting the multidisciplinary nature of the theme.
- May submit only one essay for consideration; group or co-authored submissions are not eligible.

4.2 National Coordinators

Each National Standards Body (NSB) is requested to designate a National Coordinator who will serve as the official focal point for the Competition in that Member State, working closely with the ARSO Continental Essay Coordination Unit throughout the competition cycle (see Section 5.2).

5. INSTITUTIONAL STRUCTURE

5.1 ARSO Secretariat (Continental Level)

- Develop and disseminate the competition theme, guidelines, evaluation rubric, and promotional materials.
- Coordinate overall competition administration and maintain the master schedule.
- Convene and support the Continental Judging Panel.
- Organise the continental awards ceremony and manage prize disbursement and recognition.
- Liaise with the AfCFTA Secretariat, the African Union Commission, UNIDO, and other continental partners for technical and resource support.
- Compile and publish a post-competition continental report, including winning essays.

5.2 National Coordinators (NSBs)

- Promote and disseminate the Competition to tertiary institutions within the country, including through media, institutional partnerships, and social platforms.
- Receive essay submissions at the national level and verify eligibility (age, enrolment status, originality).
- Constitute a National Judging Panel to score submissions against the continental evaluation rubric.

- Shortlist and submit the top three (3) national entries to the ARSO Secretariat by the national submission deadline.
- Organise national-level recognition for participating and shortlisted students, where feasible.
- Submit a national participation report to ARSO, including the number of institutions and students reached.

5.3 Tertiary Institutions

- Sensitise and mobilise students to participate in the Competition.
- Where possible, support participating students through writing clinics, research guidance, or referral to institutional writing centres.

6. ESSAY GUIDELINES

- Length - 1,000 – 1,200 words, excluding references, cover page, and appendices.
- English or French
- Essays must be original, unpublished works. Plagiarised or substantially AI-generated submissions will be disqualified upon detection; sources must be properly referenced using a consistent citation style (e.g., APA).
- Submitted as a .docx (Word document), Century Gothic - Size 12 font, 1.5 line spacing, with a separate cover page bearing the student's name, institution, country, and contact details. The essay body itself should not bear the author's name or institution, to support blind judging.
- Essays must be submitted through the National Coordinator in the student's country of study; direct submissions to the ARSO Secretariat will be referred to the relevant National Coordinator.

7. JUDGING CRITERIA

National and Continental Judging Panels will apply the following weighted rubric:

Criterion	Weight
Relevance and responsiveness to the competition theme	**25%**
Depth of understanding of standardisation, conformity assessment, and MRAs	**25%**
Originality, creativity, and independent critical thinking	**20%**
Practical relevance and quality of policy/implementation recommendations	**20%**
Structure, clarity, language, and adherence to submission guidelines	**10%**

Judging proceeds in two stages:

(i) National-level judging conducted by each NSB's National Judging Panel, resulting in the top five (5) entries per country; and

(ii) Continental-level judging conducted by the ARSO Continental Judging Panel, comprising ARSO Secretariat representatives and independent subject-matter experts, to select the overall continental winners.

8. PRIZES AND RECOGNITION

8.1 Continental Prizes

- 1st Place: Cash award, certificate of excellence, and public recognition at the ARSO Awards Ceremony.

- 2nd Place: Cash award and certificate of excellence.
- 3rd Place: Cash award and certificate of excellence.
- All continental finalists will receive certificates of recognition, and winning essays will be published on ARSO's official platforms

8.2 National Recognition

National Coordinators are encouraged, resources permitting, to recognise national top entries through certificates, institutional acknowledgement, or complementary prizes at the discretion of the NSB.

9. PROPOSED TIMELINE

The following continental calendar is proposed to guide the 14th Edition; National Coordinators should align in-country activities to these milestones. Submission to ARSO - 23rd April 2027

Milestone	Date(s)	Responsible
Official launch of the 14th Continental Essay Competition	**3rd September 2026**	ARSO Secretariat
National promotion, mobilisation, and sensitisation of tertiary institutions	**7th September 2026 to 30th March 2027**	National Coordinators
Essay submission window (students to National Coordinators)	**7th September 2026 to 30th March 2027**	Students / National Coordinators
National-level screening, judging, and shortlisting	**1st April to 20th April 2027**	National Coordinators / National Judging Panels
Submission of top 5 national entries to ARSO Secretariat & Report	**23rd April 2027**	National Coordinators
Continental Judging Panel review and scoring	**1st May to 15th May 2027**	ARSO Continental Judging Panel
Notification of continental finalists and winners	**21st May 2027**	ARSO Secretariat
Publication of winning essays	**July 2027**	ARSO Secretariat
Continental Awards Ceremony (World Standards Day)	**July 2027**	ARSO Secretariat / NSBs

10. COMMUNICATION AND PUBLICITY

- ARSO will disseminate official competition materials (poster, guidelines, and registration templates) to all National Coordinators upon launch.
- Promotion will be carried out via the ARSO website and social media platforms, NSB communication channels, and partnerships with tertiary institutions, student bodies, and continental/regional media.
- National Coordinators are encouraged to leverage local media, university notice boards, and student associations to maximise reach, particularly in underrepresented regions and institutions.

11. MONITORING AND REPORTING

- National Coordinators will submit a national participation report to the ARSO Secretariat by **23rd April 2027**, indicating the number of institutions reached, students registered, and essays submitted.
- The ARSO Central Secretariat will compile a Continental Post-Competition Report, capturing participation statistics, key themes emerging from submissions, and recommendations for the 15th Edition.

12. CONCLUSION

The 14th Continental Essay Competition offers a timely platform to channel the energy and insight of Africa's tertiary students toward one of the continent's most pressing trade integration challenges: building the conformity assessment systems and mutual recognition arrangements needed to unlock the cotton-to-clothing value chain under the AfCFTA. ARSO looks forward to the continued partnership of National Standards Bodies and their National Coordinators in making the 14th Edition an impactful success, and invites all AU Member States to actively mobilise their tertiary institutions for full participation.

13. CONTACT — ARSO CONTINENTAL ESSAY COORDINATION UNIT

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ARSO
50th ANNIVERSARY (1977-2027)
WELCOME TO ENGAGE AS WE CELEBRATE THE GOLDEN JUBILEE OF ARSO DURING THE 33RD ARSO GENERAL ASSEMBLY EVENTS
IN ARSO'S FOUNDING CAPITAL
ACCRA, GHANA
JULY 2027
PROUDLY HOSTED BY THE GOVERNMENT OF GHANA THROUGH THE GHANA STANDARDS AUTHORITY
FOR MORE INFO - WWW.ARSO-ORAN.ORG

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