



THE 14th ARSO CONTINENTAL ESSAY COMPETITION 2026-2027

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"

1. BACKGROUND

The African Organization for Standardization (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 harmonization, 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 standardization 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 standardization, 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 standardization professionals, and for generating fresh, youth-driven perspectives on practical pathways to accelerate intra-African trade.

To promote the standardization culture and ensure youth are engaged and enlightened in all continental initiatives where ARSO plays an important role, ARSO organises Essay competitions on Standardisation on an annual basis. This essay competition serves as a platform for the youth to provide innovative ideas in the area of standardization which may support industrial development in Africa and consumer safety.

The First Continental Essay Competition was held in 2013-2014, and since 2014 up to now, Rwanda has consistently joined other African member states in raising standardization culture among the educated youth through essay competition. It is against this background that RSB, in collaboration with ARSO, is entrusted to organise this competition at national level and RSB is hereby inviting university and higher learning institutions' students to participate in the 14th Continental Essay Competition under the 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***".

The best five winners will proceed to compete at continental level for re-evaluation and selection of the final winners at the continental level.

2. RATIONALE OF THE THEME

Intra-African trade remains constrained by non-tariff barriers, foremost among them the lack of harmonized 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 realize 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 recognized 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 industrialization. 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 industrialization, value addition, job creation, and inclusive economic growth across the continent, in direct support of the AfCFTA's objectives.

3. RESPONSIBILITIES OF RWANDA STANDARDS BOARD (RSB)

In the running of this competition, RSB is responsible for:

- Engaging and sharing out the relevant documents to Colleges/ Universities or any other eligible higher learning institution having candidates with an interest to participate in the competition,
- Conducting awareness focusing on the theme of concern,
- Providing any information needed to facilitate competition contestants,
- Receiving, assessing and marking the essays from the participants at national level, and
- Awarding or giving recognition to the winners as appropriate.

For better and improved organization of the competition at national level, RSB works closely with all interested higher learning institutions through their offices for students or career guidance in order to engage and direct all interested students to attend this competition.

4. ELIGIBILITY AT NATIONAL LEVEL

The following criteria are considered for the essay to be eligible for the competition:

- Student 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;
- Submission of only one essay for consideration; group or co-authored submissions are not eligible.

5. ENTRY RULES AND CONDITIONS

Basic Essay Requirements:

- I. Length - 1,000 – 1,200 words, excluding references, cover page, and appendices.
- II. English or French
- III. Essays must be original, unpublished works. Plagiarized or substantially AI-generated submissions will be disqualified upon detection; sources must be properly referenced using a consistent citation style (e.g., APA).
- IV. 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.
- V. 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.

6. Judging criteria

Criterion	Weight
Relevance and responsiveness to the competition theme	25%
Depth of understanding of standardization, 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%
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7. SUBMISSION TIMEFRAME

Deadline for submission of Essay at national level is **31st January 2027**, essay submitted after the deadline will be excluded from the competition.

Deadline for submitting the five winners by National Standards Bodies (NSBs) to ARSO is not later than **30th March 2027**.

8. COPYRIGHT

Dear Contestant, please note that by entering the competition; you have assigned copyright of your essay to the organizers of this event who may publish it in whole or in part on their respective websites, websites of national standards bodies, a wide range of publications for circulation both inside and outside Africa.

9. SELECTION OF WINNERS

Winners will be selected through a fair and impartial selection process by the organizer. The decision of the judges shall be final, on the awarding procedures and process.

8.1 SELECTION OF WINNERS AT NATIONAL LEVEL

The roadmap of activities related to the selection of winners at the national level is hereto attached as Annex I.

8.2 SELECTION OF CONTINENTAL WINNERS

The exercise of selecting winners at Continental level is exclusively entrusted to the African Organization of Standardization (ARSO) secretariat and it is the organ on charge of provision of the awards to the winners.

10. PRIZES AND RECOGNITION

- **1st Place:** Cash award, certificate of excellence, and public recognition at the ARSO Awards Ceremony – 33rd ARSO General Assembly – ***July 2027***
- **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

Annex I: Proposed competition roadmap at NATIONAL LEVEL (RWANDA)

S/NO	Activity to be done	Description	Timeframe	Responsible
1	Publishing the competition documents on RSB website and X platform and other RSB Social accounts	Prepare announcement and flyer to be posted on the website and X platform	23 rd October 2026	PR & C Specialist /Standards publication & marketing Officer
2	Consulting Universities and Higher Learning Institutions other relevant institutions	Explain to the institutions the purpose of the competition and request their commitment to its organization and collaboration to engage as many competent students as possible	By 30 th October 2026	Standards publication & marketing Officer in collaboration with other relevant assigned staff
	Fill in registration forms and their submission	-The contestants fill the forms and send them back via arsocompetition@rsb.gov.rw	By 20 th November 2026	Contestants
3	Organizing sessions for raising awareness on the theme of the competition	Online sessions will be organized to ensure the relevant students willing to attend the competition understand the theme and will be directed on how to write an essay	10 th & 12 th November 2026	-Standards publication & marketing Officer In collaboration with relevant assigned staff with expertise in the theme

5	Writing essays	Interested students from universities/higher learning institutions write essays in accordance with the provided guidance and assisted by the relevant RSB assigned staff	By 20 th February 2026	-Essay writers -Standards publication & marketing Officer -Students affairs offices
6	Submission of essays	The essays are sent via the provided email: arsocompetition@rsb.gov.rw	By 31 st January 2027	Standards publication & marketing Officer
7	Marking of submitted essays and selection of national contestants	The RSB-assigned team will mark submitted essays as per the ARSO guidelines and select the five`first contestants to be recognized as national winners	By 15 th February 2027	Standards publication & marketing Officer/Assigned team of markers
8	Report of the competition (at national level)	Prepare the report with the list of winners and submit it to the RSB DG Office for approval.	By 28 th February 2027	Standards publication & marketing Officer Director of SPTTA
9	Submit the report to ARSO secretariat	The approved report will be submitted to ARSO highlighting the list of 5 contestants selected to represent Rwanda at Regional level.	By 30 th March 2027	Standards publication & marketing Officer Director of SPTTA

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