

UNESCO-OECD Guidelines for Quality Provision in CBE: Role of the QA Agencies and their Networks

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Cross-border education through movement of students across borders is an age-old phenomenon. But cross-border education (CBE) through mobility of programs and institutions is of recent origin (except for some traditional forms of distance education using print media) and it has increased significantly during the last two decades. With the developments in ICT, the cross-border educational delivery has become more complex, thereby increasing the risk of stakeholders falling victim to low-quality provisions and qualifications of limited value. Further, in the globalised era, mobility of professionals has also grown considerably which demands recognition of qualifications across borders. All these developments pose new challenges to the national policies and quality assurance frameworks. In many countries the national capacity to face these challenges is limited. Even in nations where there are well-established quality assurance frameworks, there are instances where CBE providers are not adequately covered. The uneven development in the national capacity has also resulted in gaps in international cooperation that is very essential for quality assurance of CBE.

A survey conducted by the Asia-Pacific Quality Network (APQN) in 2004 by the Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA) and the New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA) indicates that (among the Asia-Pacific countries that responded to the survey) only Australia, India, Malaysia and New Zealand have some mechanism in place to ensure the quality of the exports of their higher education institutions. For the import of educational services, there are mechanisms only in Australia, Hong Kong, Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia, Mongolia, New Zealand and Philippines. But the extent to which the quality assurance agencies has a central role in these mechanisms is not very clear. In many countries it is the ministries that have a regulatory role in CBE services. In other words, the national frameworks for quality assurance of CBE in higher education is not well developed. It should also be noted that the national policy frameworks in respect of CBE vary from country to country, and often they are driven by considerations other than educational.

Thus, there is a need to strengthen the approach to quality-related issues of CBE. The effort of UNESCO-OECD to develop guidelines for quality assurance of CBE is an educational response to this need.

UNESCO-OECD Guidelines

Both UNESCO and OECD have been working on the issue of quality assurance of cross-border higher education for some years. UNESCO Global Forum on International Quality Assurance, Accreditation and the recognition of Qualifications (since October 2002); UNESCO/Norway Forum on Globalisation and Higher Education (May 2003) ; OECD/CERI experts' group on mapping international quality assurance, accreditation and recognition of qualifications [OECD (2004); and Quality and Recognition in Higher Education: The Cross-border Challenge are a few to mention.

Resolution of the 32nd session of the UNESCO General Conference "Higher Education and Globalisation: Assuring Quality of Global Higher Education and Promoting Access to the Knowledge Society as a Means for Sustainable Development" (15 October 2003) and OECD/CERI Governing Board meeting (29-30 October 2003) agreed to work on Guidelines. In the OECD/UNESCO/Norway Forum on "Trade in Educational Services: Managing the internationalisation of post-secondary education", Trondheim (3-4 November 2003) the project was launched officially.

The First drafting meeting was held in Paris-UNESCO during 5-6 April 2004 and it was followed by consultations with experts. The Second drafting meeting was held in Tokyo during 14-15 October 2004 and there were further consultations. The Third and final drafting meeting was held in Paris-OECD during 17-18 January 2005. After further feedback from member countries and following the resolution of the 33rd session of the General Conference held in October 2005, the Guidelines have been issued as a Secretariat document on 'Quality Provision in Cross-border Higher Education' elaborated in cooperation with OECD.

From the beginning, the drafting of the guidelines was carried out as an inclusive process where all 190 Member States were invited to participate by sending in their nominees. National and international NGOs directly participated in the drafting meetings. It was a participative process where official representatives from 94 Member States, 28 observers from Member States and 22 NGOs participated in addition to a group of experts. INQAAHE participated in the discussions.

The guidelines do not have trade objectives (furthering trade in services and international investment liberalisation) and the following need to be noted :

- They have been developed with an education perspective
- The guidelines recognise the importance of national authority.
- They are voluntary and non-binding and are based on the principle of mutual trust
- All countries in the world were invited to participate in the elaboration of Guidelines. National and international NGOs directly participated in the drafting meetings
- The guidelines are expected to serve as a resource for both developed and developing countries
- They provide a framework of cooperation and capacity building
- They recommend responsibilities to both sending and receiving countries
- The guidelines aim to limit low quality provision and low quality providers but encourage quality provisions.
- They aim to encourage those forms of cross-border delivery of higher education that responds to human and social development needs, provides new opportunities, widens access and increases the possibilities for improving the skills of individual students.
- They aim to maximise the benefits and limit the potential downsides of the internationalisation of higher education.
- The guidelines adopt a global perspective and address the governments, higher education institutions, student bodies, quality assurance and accreditation bodies, academic recognition bodies and professional bodies.

Guidelines for Quality Assurance and Accreditation Bodies

The guidelines have taken note of the fact that more and more countries are establishing external quality assurance and accreditation systems. The variation found among the quality assurance systems has been acknowledged. While respecting this diversity, the guidelines suggest that a coordinated effort among the bodies of both sending and receiving countries is needed at both the regional and global levels, in order to tackle the challenges raised by the growth of cross-border provision of higher education, especially in its new forms. The guidelines recommend the following to the quality assurance agencies:

“(a) Ensure that their quality assurance and accreditation arrangements include cross-border education provision in its various modes. This can mean giving attention to assessment guidelines, ensuring that standards and processes are transparent, consistent and appropriate to take account of the shape and scope of the national higher education system, and adaptability to changes and developments in cross-border provision;

(b) Sustain and strengthen the existing regional and international networks or establish regional networks in regions that do not already have one. These networks can serve as platforms to exchange information and good practice, disseminate knowledge, increase the understanding of international developments and challenges as well as to improve the professional expertise of their staff and quality assessors. These networks could also be used to improve awareness of disreputable providers and dubious quality assurance and accreditation bodies, and to develop monitoring and reporting systems that can lead to their identification;

(c) Establish links to strengthen the collaboration between the bodies of the sending country and the receiving country and enhance the mutual understanding of different systems of quality assurance and accreditation. This may facilitate the process of assuring the quality of programmes delivered across borders and institutions operating across borders while respecting the quality assurance and accreditation systems of the receiving countries;

(d) Provide accurate and easily accessible information on the assessment standards, procedures, and effects of the quality assurance mechanisms on the funding of students, institutions or programmes where applicable as well as the results of the assessment. Quality assurance and accreditation bodies should collaborate with other actors, especially higher education institutions/providers, academic staff, student bodies and academic recognition bodies to facilitate the dissemination of such information;

(e) Apply the principles reflected in current international documents on cross-border higher education such as the UNESCO/Council of Europe ‘Code of Good Practice in the Provision of Transnational Education’;

(f) Reach mutual recognition agreements with other bodies on the basis of trust in and understanding of each other’s professional practice, develop systems of internal quality assurance and regularly undergo external evaluations, making full use of competencies of stakeholders. Where feasible, consider undertaking experiments in international evaluation or peer reviews of quality assurance and accreditation bodies;

(g) Consider adoption of procedures for the international composition of peer review panels, international benchmarking of standards, criteria and assessment procedures and undertake joint assessment projects to increase the comparability of evaluation activities of different quality assurance and accreditation bodies.” (www.unesco.org/education/hed/guidelines)

Thus, the key recommendations are about including CBE in all its modes in the scope of quality assurance, strengthening the network initiatives for the quality assurance agencies to discuss cross-border education issues, information dissemination on the quality assurance mechanism and its implications, adherence to ‘Code of Good Practice’, mutual recognition agreements with other agencies, and strengthening the international orientation of the quality assurance processes. This raises two questions: 1. How can the quality assurance agencies benefit from the guidelines? 2. What is the role of networks of quality assurance agencies like INQAAHE and APQN in promoting these guidelines?

The first question will be analysed by the two presenters – Dr. David Woodhouse from the sending country’s perspective and Mr. Peter Cheung from the receiving country’s perspective. Although the line between the receiving country and sending country is very thin, Australia has been one of the major exporters of educational services in the world and Hong Kong is known for import of educational services. Both countries have a rich experience in addressing the QA related issues of CBE.

The second question needs to be addressed here.

Role of the Networks

INQAAHE has participated in the drafting of the guidelines and the on-going discussions will contribute to raise the awareness level of the guidelines among the membership. The European region has taken note of the guidelines while elaborating the guidelines for the quality assurance framework for the European region. The African region has extended its support to the guidelines during a conference held at Nairobi in 2005. What has been done by APQN membership needs an elaboration here.

APQN worked with UNESCO-Bangkok that resulted in the development of ‘UNESCO/APQN Toolkit: Regulating the Quality of Cross-Border Education’. The toolkit complements the OECD/UNESCO Guidelines and is intended to act as an aid to regulating quality assurance for countries who are involved in providing and receiving cross-border education. It discusses a range of the key issues involved and some of the approaches that have been used to address them.

On 4 March 2006 a draft of the Toolkit was presented at the Second Annual General Meeting and Conference of the Asia Pacific Quality Network (APQN) held in Shanghai, People’s Republic of China. Incorporating comments and suggestions made by participants at that meeting the toolkit has been revised further.

The Toolkit has separate sections on Regulatory Frameworks for Receiver Countries, and Regulatory Frameworks for Provider Countries. It is important to acknowledge that most countries both provide and receive cross-border education. However, the two sections are presented separately, because there is a need to focus on the different regulatory aspects related to providing and receiving cross-border education. The Toolkit at present tends to focus on governments and policy-makers. Overtime, it is intended that the Toolkit will continue to develop and evolve to cover additional areas.

During the discussions at the conference of the APQN in Shanghai, members were supportive of the Guidelines and noted that three of the sections are particularly pertinent to APQN, namely those relating to quality agencies, recognition bodies, and professional associations. Following that, the APQN Board of APQN has initiated follow-up action. The intention is to assist members in implementing these sections of the Guidelines, by the circulation of ideas and experience from other members. The APQN Board has asked all members to consider the Guidelines, to make an effort to implement the Guidelines, and to identify any practices they already have that are in line with the Guidelines. Contributions likely to be of use to other members will be posted on the APQN website.

It is expected that such efforts will contribute to strengthening the national capacity for quality assurance of CBE in the region and enhance international cooperation on those issues.