



Summary
UNESCO/OECD Guidelines on “Quality Provision in Cross-border Higher Education”
Drafting Meeting 1
5-6 April 2004-04-21
UNESCO Headquarters, Paris

The first UNESCO/OECD drafting session on Guidelines on “Quality provision in cross-border higher education” took place at UNESCO Headquarters, Paris, on 5-6 April 2004. There were 123 participants including participants from 64 countries, non-governmental organisations and inter-governmental organisations.

It was approved that Jan Levy, Norway would be the Chair, and Mala Singh, South Africa would be the Vice-Chair of the drafting sessions.

During the meeting, participants were asked to express their general views and comment on the guidelines with focus on the timeline and the process of developing the guidelines and the four objectives. Furthermore, in the workshops and the discussion in plenary that followed, and following on from the discussion paper prepared in advance, participants were asked to discuss the content of the guidelines as well as the proposal on the international database on recognised higher education institutions.

Following the opening remarks of John Daniel, Assistant Director-General, UNESCO and Barry McGaw, Director of Education, OECD, the discussion was opened by perspectives on international quality assurance, accreditation and recognition of qualifications given by Teiichi Sato, Ambassador, Permanent Delegation of Japan to UNESCO and Michael Omolewa, Ambassador, Permanent Delegation of Nigeria to UNESCO and President of the UNESCO General Conference. Ambassador Sato acknowledged the opportunities that new modes of higher education provided across borders, but also emphasised the importance of quality assurance and the need for more information about the quality of the programmes in order to take advantage of these opportunities. He stressed the need for an international initiative that involves both receiving countries and sending countries of higher education provision in order to encourage good practices in the quality assurance of cross-border higher education. Ambassador Omolewa referred to the need of cross-border delivery of higher education in order to improve access. However, the higher education provided needs to be relevant for the receiving country and of sufficient quality. He also mentioned his expectation that this joint activity between OECD and UNESCO would facilitate the sharing of knowledge between countries and stressed the need for capacity building through UNESCO to achieve targeted results.

The opening remarks and the speeches are available on the following websites:

OECD: www.oecd.org/edu/internationalisation/guidelines

UNESCO: <http://www.unesco.org/education/amq/guidelines/qualityprovision.html>

General discussion on the guidelines

On the first day (April 5), participants were asked to express their views on international quality assurance, accreditation and recognition of qualifications and on how best to develop UNESCO/OECD Guidelines on “quality provision in cross-border higher education”, with a special focus on the policy objectives of the guidelines. The initiative to develop the UNESCO/OECD Guidelines on “quality provision in cross-border higher education”, as well as the effort to develop an international database on recognised higher education institutions, was well received and there was a consensus to move forward. There was also a consensus that there is a need for a “soft, non-binding” international framework for cross-border provision of higher

education. One participant welcomed the initiative to provide a platform for sharing good practices. Furthermore, there was agreement on the proposed timeline and process of drafting the guidelines.

Objectives of the guidelines

- There was an overall consensus on the four objectives of the guidelines: student/learner protection; greater transparency of qualifications; fair and transparent recognition procedure; and increased international co-operation in quality assurance and accreditation.
- It was stressed that it should not only be the students/learners that need to be protected from programmes of questionable quality, but also employers and governments as well.
- A comment was made that the term “consumer” should not be used when referring to students.
- There was a consensus that there is a need for sufficient and reliable information on the quality of cross-border higher education provision.

Other general comments

- The initiative should not re-invent the existing initiatives but should build on them.
- The guidelines should not supersede national frameworks.
- The need to recognise and respect the sovereignty of nations and local culture, as well as local needs, was emphasised. Furthermore, institutional autonomy should be respected and the public mission of universities needs to be recognised. In addition, the need to take into account the differences of national versus federal systems of education was addressed.
- The need for shared responsibility between exporting countries and importing countries was acknowledged.
- The initiative should focus on co-operation rather than competition. Co-operation should be promoted both between countries as well as between different areas, such as quality assurance and recognition of qualifications.
- Capacity building for countries that do not have any quality assurance mechanisms was emphasised as a very important issue and as a pre-requisite for achieving the policy objectives.
- A question about the implementation of the guidelines was raised: the binding or non-binding nature of the guidelines. It was clarified that the issue of implementation will be discussed at the third drafting meeting in January 2005. Concerning the nature of the guidelines, given that having binding principles implies that national legislation would need to be amended accordingly, it is not very feasible to develop binding instruments. Rather, developing communities of good practice was put forward as a more effective and realistic objective.
- The issue of the diversity in the use of terminology was addressed. The UNESCO-CEPES glossary of basic terms and definitions in relation to quality assurance and accreditation was introduced as a useful initiative.
- Several argued that there is a need to acknowledge that new forms of providers in higher education exist and to grant them a right to be subject to quality assurance, accreditation and recognition mechanisms.
- There is a need to acknowledge the fact that in some cases not being recognised does not necessarily mean that it is of low quality.
- Internal quality control of the higher education institutions and programmes is important as well as external quality assurance.
- Several argued that the guidelines should also address the role of agents who provide information on institutions/programmes to students, and their relation with the governments and institutions.
- The issue of GATS was raised, but the consensus was that the meeting and the whole initiative should concentrate on the task of developing an educational response to cross-border provision of higher education.

Content of the guidelines

The content of the guidelines as well as the international database on recognised higher education institutions were discussed in the workshops (afternoon of April 5 and morning of April 6) and also in the plenary session that followed (afternoon of April 6). A discussion paper that listed some preliminary ideas of what could be included in the guidelines was prepared in advance to facilitate the discussion.

The five themes for the discussions were:

- 1) Guidelines for higher education institutions
- 2) Guidelines for quality assurance and accreditation agencies
- 3) Guidelines for recognition and credential evaluation agencies
- 4) Guidelines for professional bodies
- 5) International database on recognised higher education providers

In addition to the five themes, the content of the guidelines for governments was also discussed.

The discussions in the workshops were reported to the plenary session by the rapporteurs of the workshops.

Workshop 1: Rapporteur Sjur Bergan

In this workshop, the reactions to the preliminary ideas for the guidelines that were listed in the discussion paper were mostly positive. Some of the additional points discussed in the meeting include the following:

- Need to underline commitment to quality provision and equal opportunities for students and to respect cultural diversity and local conditions
- Guidelines should aim to encourage students/learners to ask the right questions concerning the quality of cross-border higher education provision.
- The guidelines should encourage higher education institutions/providers to make use of Diploma Supplement and credit transcripts (ECTS) in order to enhance the recognition of qualifications.
- The guidelines should encourage higher education institutions/providers to be explicit about their mission and goals by publishing their strategic and operational plans.
- The guidelines should encourage higher education institutions/providers to ensure the quality and reliability of local partners where they have partnerships.
- The guidelines should provide examples of good practices for quality assurance and accreditation agencies.
- The guidelines should encourage quality assurance and accreditation agencies to participate in regional and international networks and also to encourage the publication of network membership criteria.
- The guidelines should encourage having quality assurance and accreditation agencies subject to external assessment.
- There is a need to use existing resources as much as possible in the proposal of the international database. The value added aspect of this database would be its focus on cross-border providers.
- A portal with links to existing websites would be useful. In this case, there will be a need to elaborate guidelines for national websites.
- The database should not only aim at students but also employers.
- There is a need to keep in mind the countries that do not have adequate access to the Internet and the countries that do not have any mechanisms for “recognition”.
- It is important that the database becomes well known, available and accessible.

Workshop 2: Rapporteur Carolyn Campbell

In this workshop, there was strong support for the four objectives of the guidelines. Some of the main issues addressed during the discussion include the following:

- While there was a consensus that students should be the focus, the need to take into account the needs of other stakeholders was raised.
- The guidelines should be minimal and general rather than including prescriptive processes and operational descriptions.
- There is a need to tackle the issues of the diversity of definitions and concepts including the variety of meanings for the term “quality”.
- The guidelines should recognise the institutional autonomy, diversity of missions and the overall importance of higher education, which also means appreciating the entitlements of learners to good quality higher education with valid qualifications.
- The primary responsibility for quality provision should lie in institutions by internal quality assurance mechanisms.
- The implementation of existing instruments is important.
- It is important to draw on the experience of professional bodies in working on international recognition agreements.
- The role of the government on quality assurance, accreditation and recognition of qualifications issues depends on the current state of development of higher education, funding and institutional autonomy.
- There is general support for the establishment of portals or gateways to recognised institutions, rather than to programmes. The key is to be able to search up-to-date information. Also, the language issue needs to be explored.

Workshop 3: Rapporteur Dirk van Damme

In this workshop, there was general support for most of the points raised in the discussion paper, with some exceptions. The discussion included the following:

- It was stressed that guidelines are useful, but need to take into account the differences between the national systems and different cultures.
- It was agreed that the ideas listed in the discussion paper were good, but the difficulty is how to achieve them. In this respect, there was a discussion on whether the guidelines should be binding or non-binding.
- It was agreed that capacity building to establish quality assurance systems in developing countries was necessary.
- The different responsibilities of sending and receiving countries were stressed.
- There is a lack of information, especially on national qualification frameworks.
- Recognition agreements should develop from bilateral to multilateral approaches.
- In general, there was an agreement that the international initiatives should build upon and supplement national initiatives. However, there was a plea for a global accreditation by UNESCO.
- The role of agents who provide information on institutions/programmes to students was mentioned. Sometimes these agents provide low quality information. This issue should maybe be addressed in the guidelines as well.
- There was support for the database, but it was stressed that there is a need to do it properly in terms of reliability, quality, comprehensiveness, make it a database that everyone respects and have sufficient resources to establish and maintain it. In order to do so, the database should be kept simple.
- Providing information for students/learners is not sufficient. The objective should be to provide quality assured information. In order to achieve this, guidelines for what kind of information is necessary should be developed and the providers of information should act in an ethical way.

- The list of institutions/programmes needs to be accompanied by information on qualification frameworks and descriptions of quality standards in each country.
- Concerns were raised about encouraging governments to establish a registration/licensure system for foreign providers if they do not award national degrees or do not receive state funding.
- The guidelines should not go too far into professional recognition.

Workshop 4: Rapporteur Antony Stella

In this workshop, there was overall support for the ideas in the discussion paper.

- Higher education institutions have the main responsibility for internal quality mechanisms.
- Stakeholders' and employers' feedback on the acceptability of qualifications would be helpful.
- The depth of responsibility of quality assurance and accreditation agencies should be different, depending on the modes and whose qualifications the institution is offering.
- It was confirmed that all actors need to be active to enhance quality provision.
- There is a need for a universally accepted glossary.
- The database should have a search tool and there is a need for standardised guidelines for the data collection.
- The database should be accompanied by simple instructions and guidelines for users, with a set of questions that users could ask themselves.
- The issue of capacity building for countries who don't have the information was raised.

Plenary Session following the Workshops

Following the rapporteurs' reports, there was a discussion in plenary. Some of the points raised include the following:

- Several speakers argued that the following points should be acknowledged in the guidelines: respect for diversity and national authority, the need for capacity building, shared responsibility between exporting and importing countries, the importance of collaboration by different actors, transparency (and access to information), institutional autonomy.
- The guidelines should aim to share experiences, especially best practices.
- Guidelines should be kept general in order to make them applicable to the diverse systems.
- Several of the developing countries stressed the importance of the responsibility of exporting countries.
- The importance of the responsibility of higher education institutions was stressed and the need for discussion with higher education institutional leaders.
- The database should be simple and user friendly.
- The database should use existing information and databases, including the World Higher Education database by the International Association of Universities (IAU) and the ENIC-NARIC website, as much as possible.
- It is important that the database becomes a reference point.
- There is a need to clarify the purpose of the database and identify the end users.

Next Steps

- It was announced that the second drafting session will take place on 14-15 October 2004 in Tokyo and the final drafting session will take place on 17-18 January 2005 at the OECD Headquarters in Paris. Participants were encouraged to take part in the second and third drafting meeting in order for the exercise to have continuity. In addition, the UNESCO/OECD/Australia Forum on "Trade in Educational Services-Bridging the Divide: Building capacity for post-secondary education through

cross-border provision”, which will be held in Sydney, Australia on 11-12 October 2004, was announced as a relevant event.

- Based on the discussions at this meeting, the Secretariats, together with a group of experts, will prepare a draft of the guidelines that will also be made available on the Electronic Discussion Group (EDG) before the second drafting meeting in Tokyo. For the database proposal, the Secretariats will work with a small group of experts to come up with a more detailed proposal for the Tokyo meeting. The first expert meeting took place on April 7. Both experts groups will meet on the 30th June back-to-back with the second UNESCO Global Forum on quality assurance, accreditation and recognition of qualifications, which will be held on 28-29 June 2004 in Paris.
- The EDG will be used between the meetings in the process of drafting the guidelines.