



**UNESCO/OECD guidelines on “Quality Provision in Cross-border Higher Education”  
Drafting Meeting 1  
5-6 April 2004**

**UNESCO Headquarters, Paris**

**Proposed policy objectives, timeline and process of the UNESCO/OECD work on guidelines for  
quality provision in cross-border higher education**

***The need for international guidelines***

In the context of new and ever increasing forms of cross-border provision of higher education, there is a need for new international initiatives to enhance quality provision in cross-border higher education at a global level by further strengthening quality assurance, accreditation and recognition of qualification schemes that already exist at the national level through the development of non-binding international guidelines. Such guidelines would not supersede individual countries’ authority to regulate the quality assurance and accreditation of their own higher education system. The endeavour needs to involve the collaboration of both sending and receiving countries of education services in order to attain global coverage.

UNESCO and OECD have been asked by their respective constituencies to work on the development of such guidelines according to the resolution of the 32<sup>nd</sup> session of the General Conference of UNESCO “Higher Education and Globalisation: Assuring Quality of Global Higher Education and Promoting Access to the Knowledge Society as a Means for Sustainable Development”, on 15 October 2003, and to the decisions taken at the OECD/CERI Governing Board meeting on the 29-30 October 2003 under item 6 of the agenda: “Enhancing consumer protection in cross-border higher education”.

The UNESCO and OECD Secretariats have therefore decided to invite their respective Member States to nominate a representative to be involved in the elaboration of the guidelines. Furthermore, stakeholders including university associations, student associations, quality assurance and accreditation agencies, information centres on academic recognition, professional associations and private education providers have been invited to take part in the discussion.

Such guidelines will list principles concerning actions to be recommended to governments, higher education providers, quality assurance and accreditation agencies, information centres of recognition and professional bodies, etc. These would be based on the assumption that countries prefer to have national authority over quality assurance and accreditation issues, as well as recognition of qualifications. The guidelines will be based on mutual trust and respect between the diverse stakeholders involved in such decisions.

***Policy objectives***

The 1998 World Conference on Higher Education through the World Declaration on Higher Education for the Twenty-first Century and the Framework for Priority Action for Change and Development in Higher

Education – set the agenda for UNESCO’s action in the field of higher education worldwide.

Within this framework, the UNESCO 1st Global Forum on International Quality Assurance, Accreditation and the Recognition of Qualifications (October 2002) and the UNESCO/Norway Forum on Globalisation and Higher Education (May 2003) placed a special focus on empowering the learners and developing information tools for students.<sup>1</sup>

The OECD/Norway Forum on “Trade in educational services: Managing the internationalisation of post-secondary education”, on 3-4 November 2003 elaborated further the issue of consumer or learner protection in cross-border higher education. The Forum brought together a wide range of stakeholders such as university and student associations; quality assurance, accreditation and professional organisations; private education providers; and education policy-makers. There was a large consensus at the Forum that it would be useful to seek consensus between stakeholders on UNESCO/OECD guidelines to address the following policy objectives:

- Learners need to be protected from the risks of misinformation, low-quality provision and qualifications of limited validity. The terms ‘*consumer protection*’ or ‘*learner protection*’ can be used as an appropriate label for this policy objective. Strong approval, quality assurance and accreditation systems which extend their coverage to cross-border and commercial provision and non-traditional delivery modes, should guarantee that learners are safeguarded from rogue providers and are acquiring qualifications that are meaningful, valid and fairly assessed.
- Qualifications should be readable and transparent in order to increase their international validity and portability and to ease the work of recognition arrangements and credential evaluators. Reliable and user-friendly information sources on national education systems and qualification frameworks should enhance the transparency of qualifications and inform their holders of their academic and professional validity in the various national systems.
- In an increasingly international professional labour market, qualifications should be recognised internationally with as few difficulties as possible. Given the national and cultural embedding of education, national control over qualifications will remain necessary, making systems of recognition of foreign qualifications indispensable. Recognition procedures should be transparent, coherent, fair and reliable and impose as little burden as possible to mobile professionals.
- National quality assurance and accreditation agencies need to intensify their international cooperation in order to increase their mutual understanding. By developing principles of good practice and their own standards of professional quality, agencies should guarantee that they themselves are trustworthy, that rogue accreditors can be identified and that in doing so, an international network of quality assurance can be constructed to safeguard academic standards of provision and qualifications.

### ***Diversity and challenges***

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<sup>1</sup> More information on the 1<sup>st</sup> Global Forum Action Plan and the UNESCO/Norway Forum on Globalization and Higher Education are available on the following web-site

[http://portal.unesco.org/education/ev.php?URL\\_ID=12516&URL\\_DO=DO\\_TOPIC&URL\\_SECTION=201](http://portal.unesco.org/education/ev.php?URL_ID=12516&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201)

Work in the OECD/CERI experts' group on mapping international quality assurance, accreditation and recognition of qualifications<sup>2</sup> has shown that the regulatory environments differ across countries. Some countries have established sound regulatory frameworks to guide and control local and foreign providers, others have limited mechanisms to differentiate between recognised and non-recognised providers and provision. Such diversity in regulatory environments implies that it is easier for degree mills and rogue providers to operate.

The joint UNESCO/OECD effort to draft guidelines that promote quality provision in cross-border higher education and establish fairer and more transparent recognition systems of foreign academic degrees and professional qualifications is therefore a very complicated matter and will involve action and collaboration from governments as well as a whole range of different stakeholders in national and international quality assurance, accreditation and recognition of qualifications.

It is therefore very important that the process of drafting the guidelines is very inclusive and that stakeholders are fully involved in the process from the beginning. A sense of "ownership" of the guidelines by all the relevant stakeholders is essential in order to ensure that the objectives of the guidelines will actually be implemented by the various stakeholders.

### ***Drawing on existing initiatives***

The UNESCO/OECD guidelines on quality provision across borders should not replace but build on existing national and international initiatives aiming at addressing the policy objectives mentioned above. This implies that the guidelines will build on e.g. UNESCO Conventions on the Recognition of Qualifications; UNESCO-CEPES/Council of Europe 'Code of good practice in the provision of transnational education'; and trade agreements in as far as they directly or indirectly promote the mutual recognition of professions. Furthermore, the guidelines should build on initiatives such as the UNESCO Global Forum on Quality Assurance, Accreditation and Recognition of Qualifications; initiatives on these issues taken within the European Bologna process and in the MERCOSUR countries. Finally, the guidelines should build on the initiatives taken by a large range of international bodies such as university and student associations, quality assurance and accreditation bodies, academic recognition information centres, professional associations etc. to improve international cooperation, exchange of best practices, establish mutual agreements etc.

There is however, as mentioned earlier, a large consensus that these initiatives need to be coordinated and strengthened to meet the policy objectives of learner protection, greater transparency of qualifications, fair and transparent recognition procedures of professions, and increasing international cooperation of national quality assurance and accreditation agencies.

### ***Timeline for the work on the guidelines***

[Drafting sessions]

April 5-6, 2004      Drafting meeting (1), Paris, France

October 14-15, 2004      Drafting session (2), Tokyo, Japan

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<sup>2</sup> More information on the work of the OECD/CERI experts' group is available at the following web-site [http://www.flyspesialisten.no/vfs\\_trd/ufd/confdoc.php](http://www.flyspesialisten.no/vfs_trd/ufd/confdoc.php).

January 2004                      Drafting session (3), Paris, France

\* After the third drafting session, the draft guidelines will be discussed by relevant UNESCO and OECD Committees. The final adoption of the guidelines by the UNESCO General Conference and the OECD Council is foreseen in the second half of 2005.

[Some other relevant events]

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| June 7-9, 2004      | 11th Joint Meeting of the ENIC and NARIC Networks and 3rd Meeting of the Lisbon Recognition Convention Committee, Strasbourg, France |
| June 10-11, 2004    | Forum on Professional Accreditation and Certification: Gateways to Quality and Mobility in the Americas, Mexico City, Mexico         |
| June 28-29, 2004    | UNESCO's Global Forum on International Quality Assurance, Accreditation and the Recognition of Qualifications, Paris, France         |
| July 25-29, 2004    | IAU General Assembly, Sao Paolo, Brazil  |
| October 11-12, 2004 | UNESCO/OECD/Australia Forum on Trade in Educational Services   |

### **Process of developing the guidelines**

For the development of the guidelines, three meetings will be convened as suggested above.

At the *first* Drafting Group session, it is suggested that the work on the guidelines will be divided into five themes:

- 1) Guidelines for higher education providers;
- 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.

The report made available for the OECD/Norway Forum on trade in educational services entitled "Enhancing consumer protection in cross-border higher education: Key issues related to quality recognition of qualifications"<sup>3</sup> will provide a catalogue of ideas which might be useful in the development of the guidelines.

Following the first drafting session, 2-3 experts for each of the three themes will be identified and they will work closely with the UNESCO and OECD Secretariats in drafting the guidelines. All the participants in the drafting session will be involved in the drafting process through electronic discussion groups between the Drafting Group sessions.

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/11/38/20196012.pdf>

In addition, for the international database, it is suggested a small experts group be entrusted to explore further issues such as the structure, terminology, technical and managerial issues concerning the international database. (See note on “Proposal on an international database on recognised higher education providers”)

At the *second* drafting session in Tokyo on the 14-15 October 2004, a first draft of the guidelines will be presented and discussed. In addition, the report from the experts’ group on the proposal of an international database on recognised higher education institutions will be presented and discussed.

Based on the discussions at the second drafting session, the draft guidelines will be revised by the UNESCO and OECD Secretariats together with the experts. Participants will be consulted through an electronic discussion. The experts’ group on the international database will further elaborate the proposal based on the discussions in the sessions.

At the *third* drafting session in Paris in the second half of January 2005, the revised draft guidelines and the proposed international database will be presented and discussed. The aim would be to agree on a draft proposal of the guidelines that can be presented to the relevant UNESCO and OECD Committees. There will also be a discussion on implementation of the guidelines and possible future revisions of the guidelines.

Electronic discussion groups on the key issues in the guidelines will be established in order to facilitate the discussion between members of the “Drafting Group” for the guidelines between the drafting sessions (see the separate information note on the electronic discussion groups and how to sign up to it).

The UNESCO and OECD secretariats have furthermore created a web-page specifically for the project of drafting the guidelines where information on the purpose of the project and meeting documents for the three sessions will be available:

[http://portal.unesco.org/education/ev.php?URL\\_ID=29228&URL\\_DO=DO\\_TOPIC&URL\\_S](http://portal.unesco.org/education/ev.php?URL_ID=29228&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_S)

[www.oecd.org/edu/internationalisation/guidelines](http://www.oecd.org/edu/internationalisation/guidelines)