

Presentation to the OECD/UNESCO conference to discuss the “Guidelines for Quality Provision in Cross border Higher Education” Tokyo October 14-15, 2004.

by

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Mr. Chairperson, Mme Vice-Chair, members of the OECD/UNESCO secretariat, fellow delegates and observers,

Thank you very much for inviting me to this conference and asking me to present a few points on the World Bank’s initiatives in capacity building for quality assurance and the implications that the Bank’s experience might have for these guidelines.

In my talk, I will deal with three broad topics:

1. what has the Bank done in the area of quality assurance
2. what have we learnt
3. what relevance do the activities of the Bank and what we have learnt have for the on-going work on developing the guidelines on cross-border education

1. What has the Bank done in the area of quality assurance?

The Bank has been lending to tertiary education since the 1960s. In the 1990s, lending averaged US \$ 500 million a year. The Bank is currently implementing tertiary education projects, or projects with tertiary education components, in 28 countries.

Over this period, we see a shift away from projects financing new university programs/courses or specific teaching activities, which were characteristic of Bank efforts up to the 1990s to more comprehensive and long-term support for tertiary education. It was recognized that many of the earlier projects created “academic oases”. Reflecting this trend towards a more comprehensive approach was the publication in 2002 of the Bank’s report on higher education, Constructing Knowledge Societies.² The report not only reviews and analyses World Bank experience in tertiary education; it also analyses the trends, issues and new challenges in tertiary education outside the framework of Bank activities in the sub-sector. The report emphasizes the need to encourage improvements in the tertiary education sub-sector irrespective of the country’s income level.

¹ The views expressed here do not necessarily reflect those of the Board of Executive Directors of the World Bank or the governments they represent.

² World Bank (2002). Constructing Knowledge Societies – New Challenges for Tertiary Education. Washington D.C.

Capacity building components in quality assurance and accreditation are to be found in an increasing number of Bank higher education projects. Several approaches have been adopted:

- (i) *where improvement of quality has been considered the major objective of the project, the quality assurance component, while not large in monetary terms, has received an important focus as part of the efforts to improve overall governance and system management.* Examples of these are the tertiary education loans to Chile, Indonesia, Jordan, Egypt, Sri Lanka. In Egypt, as part of the project component aimed at restructuring system governance, legislation and mechanisms for allocating resources, funds are provided for the establishment of an independent national quality assurance council, including technical assistance required for this; in Jordan, the establishment of a Higher Education Accreditation Council is also aimed at improving overall governance of the higher education system.³ The higher education project in Chile has the objective of improving the quality and relevance of higher education by consolidating the national system for quality assurance and establishing a qualification framework for study programs.⁴

In many cases, such projects have built on the achievements of prior loans to expand access or improve quality in selected areas. For example, the Sri Lanka project⁵ has a \$ 1.0 million allocation out of a \$ 40.3 million loan for establishing a Board for Quality Assurance at the University Grants Council. The new project aims to strengthen the quality assurance system established under the earlier Second General Education Project. It is expected that the Board for Quality Assurance would eventually become an independent organization and would expand its accreditation and quality assurance activities to foreign universities operating in Sri Lanka. The component funds the development of procedures for quality monitoring and accreditation as well as the implementation of these activities.

Indonesia provides another example of gradually going to scale over a series of loans.⁶ The quality assurance mechanism in tertiary education began as a pilot program in a project to enhance the training of primary school teachers through a new tertiary level teacher diploma course. The pilot aimed to set standards for public teacher training institutions and only five institutions participated initially on a voluntary basis. Small planning grants were made available to enable

³ Egypt: Higher Education Enhancement Project; Jordan: Higher Education Development.

⁴ Chile: Higher Education Improvement Project.

⁵ Sri Lanka: Improving the Relevance and Quality of Undergraduate Education .

⁶ Indonesia: Primary School Teacher Development Project and Indonesia: Higher Education Support Project (Development of Undergraduate Education).

these institutions to conduct a self-study, which was then externally evaluated and validated. This led to a general acceptance for accreditation in all teacher training institutions. Eventually, the Bank supported the setting up of a National Accreditation Board for Higher Education for the whole of tertiary education.

- (ii) *Using reforms introduced under the project, such as competitive grants mechanisms- to strengthen the quality assurance mechanisms of the country.* An example of this approach is in the Bank assistance for improving the quality of engineering education in⁷. Under this project, no direct support is provided to the National Board of Accreditation, since the government did not want external financing for this. However, the project provides grants to institutions on a competitive basis and one of the conditions for applying for a grant is the accreditation of programs. Hence, an increase in the pace of accreditation is likely to be induced by the project (currently, only 15 percent of programs are accredited).
- (iii) *For poorer countries, the focus has been on very basic capacity development (training and program development), creating a legal framework for newly established bodies such as the National Accreditation Board/Committee.* This approach has been followed in Mozambique, Ethiopia and Cambodia.⁸ In Ethiopia, the Bank is providing assistance to set up a Quality and Relevance Assurance Agency which will fund some capital expenses, technical assistance, training programs and development of manuals and guidelines. In Cambodia, the Bank assisted in developing a legal framework for management of public and private higher education, including procedures for establishing a university, providing models for autonomous universities and for financial management. It helped in setting up an accreditation committee for Cambodia within the Ministry, but with external peer reviewers.
- (iv) *Setting up regional networks for Quality Assurance* – this has been done only in the Asia-Pacific region, where the Bank is supporting a regional network of quality assurance agencies through a development grant. This is a major regional initiative and the purpose is to link the accreditation agencies of countries in the region so that they can learn from each other, adopt approaches that are similar etc. The grant provides \$ 1 million over a 3 year period and funds regional quality assurance services; a regional pool of external reviewers; information clearing house; staff exchanges; training and development; and liason

⁷ India: the Technical/ Engineering Education Quality Improvement Project.

⁸ Mozambique: Higher Education Project; Ethiopia: Post Secondary Education Project. Cambodia: Legal/Regulatory framework for Higher Education.

with other regional and global accreditation agencies.

2. What are the lessons?

- (i) *it takes times to establish systems of quality assurance* – whether these are domestically financed or with foreign assistance. As pointed out, India’s National Board of Accreditation (which accredits programs in engineering education) was established in 1996, but several years later only 15 percent of programs had been accredited. Similarly, in Indonesia, very few of the programs have been accredited to date. Hence, a long term commitment to the higher education system is required. As the Indonesia example shows, a sequence of projects, building on earlier achievements, can lead to expansion of activities by building consensus and learning from consensus.
- (ii) *developing countries are not one homogeneous group – they display a wide range of capacities and capacity building approaches need to take into account the diversified nature of their tertiary education system.* For countries with large, relatively mature systems (such as in East and South-East Asia, India, Latin America), quality assurance can be the critical factor for attaining international standards. For other countries, the issue is still to develop higher education capacity. You must have something to “quality assure” before you can build sophisticated systems of quality assurance. Besides, an effective quality assurance process depends on the capacity to do institutional self-assessment and peer review; hence strengthening the institutional capacity may be the priority in some countries.
- (iii) *for some small countries, or countries with small/isolated academic communities, setting up elaborate domestic systems of quality assurance may not be relevant* – using a regional approach or drawing on a pool of international reviewers may be more appropriate. Such an approach is followed even in some developed countries, for instance, the Netherlands.
- (iv) *the experience of other developing countries and how countries in similar situations have dealt with similar problems are often the greatest stimulants and motivating factors* – often, the “best practice” models from advanced countries simply cannot be implemented, because they are costly, irrelevant or culturally inappropriate. Many African countries are keen to learn from the experience of Kenya or South Africa, even though these may not be the “best” models.
- (v) *quality assurance is costly* – sometimes, after the completion of the project, the domestic budget for higher education is not able to support on-going activities. The sustainability of quality assurance

mechanisms set up under externally funded projects requires addressing issues of costs. In many cases, the revenues from participating institutions are simply not enough to cover costs, and the additional recurrent costs are not included in the domestic budget. In Indonesia, for example, the cost of air travel makes it difficult to monitor the quality of many institutions on the periphery.

- (vi) *quality assurance is politically sensitive* – this applies to both private and public institutions. Creating an arm’s length organization, which is both operationally meaningful and politically acceptable, is a challenging task – what is especially challenging is determining the appropriate length of the arm! The organizational location and accountability of the accrediting mechanism are tricky issues to resolve. In many cases, the accrediting mechanisms have to be placed in the Ministry of Education, simply because, otherwise, they would not have any authority vis-à-vis the institutions. The issue, here, is how to protect the integrity of the quality assurance process.
- (vii) *Accreditation of foreign providers may require changes in regulations outside the education sector* – this is sometimes not taken into account, of even if it is known, the regulations are difficult to change since they involve other ministries. For example, in Sri Lanka, foreign education providers are given authority to operate by the Board of Investment and the authority of the Board of Accreditation to accredit these institutions requires changes in regulations.
- (viii) *While we build a credible system of quality assurance, interim measures are required to protect learners.* Many countries are concerned to develop relatively simple and easy to implement safeguard measures and rules of conduct to protect students against gross fraud and abuse – even if the regulatory system cannot at this stage provide detailed information that could enable students to compare the quality of programs and institutions.

3. What are the implications of the above for the Guidelines on Cross Border Provision?

- (i) *the guidelines are useful as a framework to guide operational decisions:* for example, Bank task team leaders working on education would gain considerably from understanding the general principles to be followed. Even though these guidelines focus on cross-border provision, they have a general relevance. With this perspective in mind, there would be a clear preference for more focused guidelines, although some of the issues mentioned by participants are undoubtedly relevant – for instance, the broader purpose of higher education, independent of immediate labour market needs, needs to be taken into

account.

- (ii) *Countries which have weak domestic higher education capacity are sometimes at the greatest threat from rogue foreign providers* – therefore, the emphasis has to be on developing the appropriate policy framework to use foreign provision of higher education to reinforce domestic capacity . That is to say, developing the overall goals for higher education for the country is important, and determining where cross-border provision fits within these goals, paying attention to issues of sustainability and the long-term development of the sector. One of the concerns voiced by policy makers is that foreign providers may help to create access, but they do so only in limited areas (for example, in business studies or IT), which is not sufficient to create a diversified higher education system, or research-based capacity. Hence, the issue is to develop a holistic approach and judiciously decide where foreign provision would be most appropriate – since the latter can allow domestic public resources to be freed up for the long-term development where private financing is not forthcoming. We may wish to say that countries should articulate their higher education policy framework with their national goals in mind, within which framework, cross-border provision plays a role.
- (iii) *The best should not be the enemy of the good* –countries with weak capacity are at greatest risk (students can end up with worthless degrees) but they may also be the least able to set up the ideal quality assurance system because of the high costs involved, the lack of professional expertise etc. In such cases, developing simple but clear licensing/registration regulations to ensure minimum safety and educational standards could be enacted to evaluate foreign providers who are not yet accredited by an acceptable regional/international accrediting body. As mentioned here by some participants, countries such as Afghanistan and the Democratic Republic of Congo, which have seen a collapse of public financing of tertiary education sustained over several decades, are now flooded by foreign and domestic private providers offering low quality education programs (and degrees for sale). Such countries are not few in number. While moving to a quality assurance system, the immediate priority should be ensure that some key regulations are followed by the foreign providers such as: minimum infrastructure, facilities and staffing requirements; provision of transparent and accurate information on study programs and policies; partnership with a local institution (in order to build long-term commitment); acceptance of the program provided in the developing country by the host country. Provided such regulations are accepted, accreditation itself could be a voluntary process.

- (iv) *Greater sharing of experiences across developing countries in similar situations would be very useful.* For instance, how Vietnam, Cambodia and Malaysia may be very relevant for some African countries. Further, using reviewers from regional and developing countries may be less expensive and can help to build capacity through sustaining collaboration.

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