



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

UNESCO Headquarters, Paris

**DISCUSSION PAPER
FOR THE WORKSHOPS**

Introduction

The purpose of the discussion paper is to guide the discussions on the UNESCO/OECD guidelines on “Quality provision in cross-border higher education” in the four parallel workshops.

The UNESCO/OECD guidelines will list principles and guide actions recommended to higher education institutions/providers, quality assurance and accreditation agencies, recognition and credential evaluation agencies including advisory and information centres, professional bodies and governments. The guidelines are aimed at addressing the following four policy objectives, which should be discussed in the morning of the first day of the meeting (under the session “Discussion on the Guidelines on “quality provision in cross-border higher education”).

- Students/learners should be better protected from the risks of misinformation, low-quality provision, rogue providers, bogus institutions, diploma mills and qualifications of limited validity ;
- Qualifications should be readable and transparent in order to increase their international validity and portability. This should be facilitated by reliable and user-friendly information sources;
- Recognition procedures of qualifications should be transparent, coherent, fair and reliable and impose as little burden as possible to mobile professionals; and
- National quality assurance and accreditation agencies should intensify their international cooperation in order to increase their mutual understanding.

Further, the guidelines will 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 decisions.

Work in the OECD/CERI experts’ group on mapping international quality assurance, accreditation and recognition of qualifications¹ 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. This unevenness in regulatory environments implies that it is easier for degree mills and rogue providers to operate.

¹ 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.

Given that some countries lack comprehensive regulatory frameworks in quality assurance, accreditation and recognition of qualifications, capacity building is a key issue. Capacity building will need to form an important part of the overall coordination and strengthening of national and international initiatives to meet the policy objectives outlined above.

This paper lists some preliminary ideas and questions for discussion based on the background document “Quality Provision in Cross-Border Higher Education: Key Issues Related to Quality Assurance, Accreditation and Recognition of Qualifications” that is designed to lead to recommendations of actions by various actors, which could be included in the UNESCO/OECD guidelines on quality provision in cross-border higher education.

There are five main actors who need to interact nationally and internationally in order to better meet the four policy objectives:

- Higher education institutions/providers
- Quality assurance and accreditation agencies
- Recognition and credential evaluation agencies
- Professional bodies
- Governments

It is suggested that the guidelines would have a bottom-up approach starting with guidelines for higher education institutions/providers as they are essential in any attempt to improve the quality of cross-border delivery and student/learner protection. The guidelines will furthermore rely and, where necessary, build upon relevant existing quality assurance, accreditation and recognition of qualifications initiatives taken by the various actors.

The aim of the workshops is to discuss the content of the UNESCO/OECD guidelines by highlighting possible actions taken by these five actors in order to better meet the above mentioned policy objectives.

1. Guidelines for higher education institutions/providers

Commitment to quality by all higher education institutions/providers, whether public/private or not-for-profit/for-profit, is essential for meeting the policy objectives. Furthermore, as part of their commitment to quality provision, it is important that higher education institutions/providers acknowledge the importance of granting qualifications that have the widest validity and portability possible especially in the context of student/learner protection.

The following questions seek to guide the discussion on possible guidelines for institutions and providers:

- 1) Would it be helpful to encourage institutions/providers to have a strong commitment towards quality for higher education delivered abroad as well as in their home country as part of the institution’s/provider’s mission? Furthermore, would it be helpful to encourage institutions/providers to develop effective internal quality management systems and to take responsibility to deliver higher education of the highest quality possible for delivery both in their home country and off-shore?
- 2) Would it be helpful to encourage sector organisations and inter-institutional networks to foster the commitment of their institutions/providers to quality both at national and international levels? It might be important for new cross-border for-profit providers and for-profit institutions to be part of

these networks and/or to develop their own organisations and self-regulatory incentives at the sector level to ensure quality.

- 3) UNESCO-CEPES/Council of Europe have developed a ‘Code of good practice in the provision of transnational education’². Would it be helpful for the guidelines to encourage institutions and countries in other parts of the world to adopt a similar code?
- 4) Would it be helpful to encourage institutions/providers to continuously take action to enlarge the recognition of their qualifications?
- 5) Would it be helpful to recommend that institutions/providers provide complete, fair and transparent information on the level and extent to which their qualifications are recognised both academically and professionally, as well as informing students about the process of getting their qualifications recognised when moving to another country? Would it be helpful to encourage the use of codes of practice such as UNESCO/Council of Europe Recommendation on Criteria and Procedures for the Assessment of Foreign Qualifications³ and similar or additional codes of practice?
- 6) Would it be helpful to recommend that when institutions/providers engage in networks, partnerships or joint degrees, they would acknowledge each other’s qualifications as equivalent in order to facilitate the process of recognition?
- 7) Would it be helpful to ask institutions/providers to review the way in which they describe programmes and qualifications in order to ensure that the descriptions give an accurate account of the learning outcomes and competencies obtained?
- 8) Would it be helpful to encourage institutions and providers that are delivering e-learning across borders to subject themselves voluntarily to trustworthy quality assurance and accreditation agencies?
- 9) What are the actions of other actors that could facilitate the efforts of higher education institutions/providers?

2. Guidelines for Quality assurance and accreditation agencies

In addition to internal quality management of institutions/providers, external quality assurance and accreditation systems have been adopted widely in more than 60 countries. The existing systems of quality assurance and accreditation often vary from country to country in terms of the definition of “quality”, the purpose and function of the system, the methodologies used in quality assurance and accreditation, the scope and function of the responsible agency or unit, and the voluntary or compulsory nature of participation. While respecting this diversity, a co-ordinated effort of the various agencies is needed in order to tackle the challenges raised by the growth in new forms of cross-border delivery of higher education.

² Available at the following: http://www.coe.int/T/E/Cultural_Co-operation/education/Higher_education/Activities/Bologna_Process/Code_TNE.asp#TopofPage

³ Available at the following: http://www.coe.int/T/E/Cultural_Co-operation/education/Higher_education/ENIC_Network/Recom_Criteria_Procedures.asp

The following questions seek to guide discussion on possible guidelines for quality assurance and accreditation agencies:

- 1) Would it be helpful to recommend that national quality assurance and accreditation agencies cover foreign and for-profit institutions/providers as well as new forms of delivery? This could be done either by existing quality assurance and accreditation arrangements or by establishing specific forms of quality assurance and accreditation for them.
- 2) Should programmes delivered across border be covered as well by the quality assurance and accreditation arrangements of the sending country as by those of the receiving country, according to the principles of the UNESCO-CEPES/Council of Europe 'Code of Good Practice in the Provision of Transnational Education'?
- 3) Would it be helpful to encourage quality assurance and accreditation agencies to participate in regional and international networks that can serve as platforms to exchange information and good practice, disseminate knowledge, increase the understanding of international developments and challenges and improve the professional expertise of the agencies' staff?
- 4) Would it be helpful to encourage quality assurance and accreditation agencies to reach mutual recognition agreements with other agencies on the basis of trust in each other's professional practice? Would it also be helpful to encourage the development of systems of internal quality assurance and to regularly undergo external evaluations? Would it be possible to start experiments in voluntary international evaluation or peer review of quality assurance and accreditation agencies?
- 5) How can quality assurance and accreditation agencies help identifying accreditation mills? Would the networks of agencies be able to increase the awareness of the issue and to develop monitoring and reporting systems? Would it be helpful to encourage the development of monitoring and reporting systems that can lead to the identification of misleading quality assurance and accreditation agencies?
- 6) How can the comparability of evaluation activities by different quality assurance and accreditation agencies be raised? Would it be helpful to encourage international composition of peer review panels, international benchmarking of standards, criteria and assessment procedures, joint assessment projects?
- 7) Would it be helpful to recommend the use of more outcome-oriented and competency-based assessment techniques by quality assurance and accreditation agencies in order to adapt to e-learning and other new forms of delivery as well as to increase the comparability of different quality assurance and accreditation schemes?
- 8) What are the actions of other actors that could facilitate the efforts of quality assurance and accreditation agencies?

3. Guidelines for Qualifications Recognition and credential evaluation agencies, advisory and information centres

The UNESCO conventions on recognition, including the Council of Europe/UNESCO Convention on Recognition of Qualifications (Lisbon Recognition Convention) are the most significant instrument for the international higher education community and governments to cope with the issues of mutual recognition

resulting from cross-border mobility of students and skilled labour. The international legal framework for recognition of academic qualifications is therefore largely in place. The UNESCO General Conference has furthermore mandated UNESCO to adequately update its regional conventions in response to challenges in cross-border higher education.

Building upon existing initiatives, there is a need for further international efforts to facilitate the process of recognition of academic qualifications by making the systems more transparent and comparable.

The following questions seek to guide the discussion on possible guidelines for recognition and credential evaluation agencies, advisory and information centres:

- 1) How can recognition agencies increase confidence in their recognition procedures, including that the processing of the request is conducted in a fair and consistent manner? Would it be helpful to encourage the use of codes of practice such as UNESCO/Council of Europe Recommendation on criteria and procedures for the assessment of foreign qualifications and similar or additional codes of practice?
- 2) Given the increasingly international skilled labour markets and growing professional mobility, would it be helpful for existing information centres on recognition of academic qualifications to be encouraged to devote more attention to the professional recognition of qualifications and to provide necessary information on professional recognition, both to those who have a foreign academic qualification as well as to employers in collaboration with professional associations?
- 3) Would it be helpful to increase the contact with higher education institutions/providers, employers and professional bodies to improve the information and qualification assessment methodologies?
- 4) Given the diversity of the characteristics of qualifications in terms of their structure, process, etc. would it be helpful for recognition agencies and credential evaluators to re-examine their assessment criteria and procedures and to accommodate learning outcomes and competences, rather than focusing only on input and process characteristics, in order to increase their comparability?
- 5) Would it be helpful to encourage cross-border cooperation between information and credential evaluators on the one hand and quality assurance and accreditation centres on the other. International networks of both communities could be encouraged to establish joint working groups to determine common challenges, exchange experiences and develop areas of mutual interest. This cooperation would probably best be undertaken at regional level.
- 6) In the process of recognition of qualifications, determining the value of the qualifications is crucial. This is becoming more and more difficult given the variety in qualifications. How can recognition agencies, credential evaluators, employers or professional bodies determine whether a qualification meets the standards of basic quality? Would it be helpful to strengthen the cooperation between recognition and credential evaluation agencies and quality assurance and accreditation agencies?
- 7) What are the actions of other actors that could facilitate the efforts of recognition and credential evaluation agencies?

4. Guidelines for Professional bodies

Professional recognition is the competence of a multitude of professional bodies and employers' organisations. It can be a very complicated issue. Systems of professional recognition differ from country

to country and from profession to profession. For example, in some cases, a recognised academic qualification could be sufficient for entry into professional practice, whereas in other cases, additional requirements are imposed to holders of academic qualifications in order to enter the profession. With the increasing international skilled labour markets and growing professional mobility, the holders of academic qualifications, as well as employers and professional associations are facing challenges. Increasing transparency – i.e., improving availability and quality of information - is crucial.

The following questions seek to guide the discussion on possible guidelines for professional bodies:

- 1) Would it be helpful to encourage the development of information channels available and accessible both to national and foreign holders of qualifications to assist them in gaining professional recognition of their qualifications, and to employers who need advice on the professional recognition of foreign qualifications?
- 2) Would it be helpful to increase the contact between bodies responsible for professional recognition and higher education institutions/providers, recognition and credential evaluation agencies? Could this be useful in helping to improve qualification assessment methodologies?
- 3) Would it be helpful/feasible to recommend that professional bodies re-examine their assessment criteria and procedures for comparing programmes and qualifications in order to accommodate learning outcomes and competences and not only input and process characteristics if they are not already doing so?
- 4) A number of initiatives seek to address issues of professional recognition by encouraging the development of mutual recognition agreements. Would it be helpful to encourage the development of a means of continuously updated and accessible international information on mutual recognition agreements for the professions, including those agreed in the context of trade agreements?
- 5) What are the actions of other actors that could facilitate the efforts of professional bodies?

5. Guidelines for Governments

Governments are responsible for the overall policy coordination of quality assurance, accreditation and recognition of qualifications within their territory and can take new initiatives within these areas. They are however often not directly involved in the management of these regulatory systems.

The following questions seek to guide the discussion on possible guidelines for governments:

- 1) Would it be helpful to encourage countries to establish a system of fair and not administratively burdensome registration or licensure of non-public and non-national educational providers operating on their territory in order to have an overview of all providers operation in their country?
- 2) Would it be helpful to recommend that countries establish a comprehensive system of quality assurance and accreditation in higher education at the national level, or a system of consultation and coordination amongst sub-national bodies, that covers all higher education institutions/providers including public/private, not-for-profit/for-profit, or national/foreign?
- 3) Would it be helpful to recommend that countries that have not already ratified their UNESCO regional convention be encouraged to do so?

- 4) Would it be helpful to encourage countries to come to bilateral or multilateral recognition agreements, facilitating the automatic recognition or legal equivalence of each country's qualifications?
- 5) Would it be helpful that governments make commitments to provide reliable and comprehensive information on higher education institutions/providers including public/private, national/foreign, not-for-profit/for profit, operating in their territory?