

DRAFT

ITEM CONCERNING UNESCO/OECD GUIDELINES FOR QUALITY PROVISION IN CROSS-BORDER HIGHER EDUCATION

The Executive Board of UNESCO,

Recalling the Universal Declaration of Human Rights The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Article 26.1) states that ‘Higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit’;

Recalling the 1998 Declaration on Higher Education in the 21st Century, adopted by the UNESCO World Conference on Higher Education;

Building on of the six conventions on the recognition of qualifications in higher education, including the Council of Europe/UNESCO Lisbon Recognition Convention Recommendation on the Recognition of Studies and Qualifications in Higher Education;

Referring to The Resolution of the 32nd session of the General Conference of UNESCO on “Higher Education and Globalization: promoting quality and access to the knowledge society as a means for sustainable development

Recognising that cross-border provision of higher education offer students/learners new opportunities such as increased access to higher education, improvement and innovations in higher education systems and contribute to the building of international co-operation, which are essential to academic knowledge as well as more generally, to national social and economic wealth;

Recognising that the quality of cross-border provision of higher education has to be managed appropriately in order to limit low-quality provision and rogue providers, and that it is increasingly important for students/learners and relevant stakeholders to be better informed of the quality of higher education programmes;

Recognising that some Member countries have many competent bodies, some of which are non-governmental, responsible for quality assurance, accreditation and recognition of qualifications, that can take or initiate action in the field of higher education;

Suggests that member states adopt the guidelines on quality in cross-border higher education developed jointly by UNESCO and the OECD, as provided in Annex, in the most appropriate form so as to have a joint equitable process for all UNESCO Member States, whether they are members of OECD or not;

24/09/2004

Invites the Director-General of UNESCO to gather information on progress made and obstacles encountered with respect to the implementation of these guidelines and report it to the Executive Board of UNESCO at its 175th session in Spring 2008 and thereafter as appropriate.

DRAFT

RECOMMENDATION CONCERNING GUIDELINES FOR QUALITY PROVISION IN CROSS-BORDER HIGHER EDUCATION JOINTLY ELABORATED WITH UNESCO

THE COUNCIL,

Having regard to Article 5 b) of the Convention establishing the OECD of 14 December 1960;

Having regard to Rule 18 (b) of the OECD Rules of Procedure;

Recognising that cross-border provision of higher education offer students/learners new opportunities such as increased access to higher education, improvement and innovations in higher education systems and contribute to the building of international co-operation, which are essential to academic knowledge as well as more generally, to national social and economic wealth;

Recognising that cross-border provision of higher education has to be managed appropriately in order to limit low-quality provision and rogue providers, and that it is increasingly important for students/learners and relevant stakeholders to be better informed of the quality of higher education programmes;

Recognising that an international framework is needed in order to minimise the risk of misleading guidance and information, low-quality provision including rogue providers, degree mills that offer low-quality educational experience and qualifications of limited validity and accreditation mills;

Recognising the importance of national sovereignty over higher education and the unevenness and diversity of stages of development of domestic systems to assure the quality of higher education among countries;

Recognising that some Member countries have many competent bodies and relevant frameworks, some of which are non-governmental, responsible for quality assurance, accreditation and recognition of qualifications, that can take or initiate action in the field of higher education;

ON THE PROPOSAL OF THE EDUCATION COMMITTEE,

RECOMMENDS THAT MEMBER COUNTRIES:

1. Develop a framework for quality provision of higher education across border, especially focusing on:

- 1) Providing students/learners with adequate tools for informed decision-making to protect them from the risks of misleading guidance and information, low-quality provision including rogue providers, degree mills that offer low-quality educational experience and qualifications of limited validity and accreditation mills.
 - 2) Making qualifications readable and transparent in order to increase their international validity and portability and to ease the work of recognition and credential evaluators. This objective should be facilitated by reliable and user-friendly information sources and needs to be combined with the commitment of institutions/providers to provide cross-border higher education of comparable quality to that offered in the home country.
 - 3) Making procedures for the recognition of qualifications more transparent, coherent, fair and reliable imposing as little burden as possible on mobile students and professionals.
 - 4) Intensifying international co-operation among national quality assurance and accreditation agencies in order to increase their mutual understanding.
2. Take the necessary steps for the implementation of this Recommendation as set forth in greater detail in the guidelines on quality provision in cross-border higher education developed jointly by UNESCO and the OECD (hereafter the “*Joint Guidelines*”) which are contained in Annex to this Recommendation and form an integral part of it;
 3. Assist as appropriate non member economies to implement the Joint Guidelines and in particular, helping them to strengthen their capacities to that effect;
 4. Widely disseminate the Joint Guidelines to all relevant governmental departments and agencies, to higher education institutions/providers, quality assurance and accreditation agencies, recognition and credential evaluation centres, professional bodies, students and to other relevant stakeholders;
 5. Encourage and support higher education institutions/providers, student bodies, quality assurance and accreditation agencies, recognition and credential evaluation centres and professional bodies to take the necessary actions to implement the Joint Guidelines at international, regional and national levels; and

INSTRUCTS the relevant OECD bodies in co-operation with the relevant UNESCO bodies to survey developments in countries regarding implementation of the Recommendation and to assess the Joint Guidelines in light of developments in cross-border higher education, and

REPORT to the Council within three years of the adoption of this Recommendation and thereafter as appropriate.

ANNEX

**GUIDELINES FOR QUALITY PROVISION IN CROSS-BORDER HIGHER EDUCATION
JOINTLY ELABORATED BETWEEN THE OECD AND UNESCO****Preface**

1. Over the last two decades, cross-border higher education through student, programme or institutional mobility and professional mobility has grown considerably. In parallel, new cross-border providers and delivery modes have appeared, such as for-profit providers, campuses abroad and distance education. These new forms of cross-border delivery of higher education provide new opportunities and increase the possibilities for the improvement of the skills of individual students and the quality of national higher education systems, provided that they are managed appropriately.

2. However, national frameworks for quality assurance, accreditation and recognition of qualifications in many countries are not geared to addressing the quality of cross-border and private for-profit provision. Furthermore, the lack of comprehensive frameworks for co-ordinating various initiatives at the international level, together with the diversity and unevenness of the quality assurance and accreditation systems at the national level, creates gaps in the quality assurance of higher education delivered across borders and makes students and other stakeholders more vulnerable to low-quality provision, rogue providers of cross-border higher education and degree mills. The challenge for the current quality assurance and accreditation systems is to develop appropriate methodologies and mechanisms to cover foreign providers and programmes in order to maximise the benefits and limit the potential downsides of the internationalisation of higher education. At the same time, the increase in cross-border student, researcher and professional mobility has put the issue of recognition of academic and professional qualifications high on the international agenda.

3. There is a need for additional national initiatives, strengthened international co-operation and networking, and more transparent information on quality assurance, accreditation and recognition of qualifications procedures and systems. These initiatives should have a global range. Therefore, UNESCO and the OECD have worked closely together in the development of these Guidelines for quality provision in cross-border higher education (the "*Joint Guidelines*"). Given that some countries lack comprehensive frameworks for quality assurance, accreditation and the recognition of qualifications, capacity building is a key issue. Capacity building will need to form an important part of the overall co-ordination and strengthening of national and international initiatives.

4. The quality of a country's higher education sector and its assessment and monitoring is key not only to its social and economic well-being but is also a determining factor in the status of that higher education system at the international level. The establishment of quality assurance systems has become a necessity, not only for monitoring quality in higher education delivered within the country, but also for engaging in delivery of higher education internationally. As a consequence, there has been an impressive

rise in the number of quality assurance and accreditation agencies for higher education in the past two decades. However, existing national quality assurance capacity often focuses exclusively on domestic delivery by domestic institutions.

5. The increased mobility of students, professionals, programmes and providers presents challenges for existing national quality assurance and accreditation frameworks and agencies as well as for the systems for recognising foreign qualifications. Some of these challenges are:

6. National capacity for quality assurance, accreditation and recognition of qualifications often do not cover cross-border and new modes of provision and/or providers of higher education such as distance education and for-profit providers. This increases the risk of students falling victims to misleading guidance and information, low-quality provision including rogue providers, degree mills that offer low-quality educational experience and qualifications of limited validity and accreditation mills.

7. National systems and agencies for the recognition of qualifications may have limited knowledge and experience in dealing with cross-border and for-profit providers. In some cases, the challenge becomes more complicated due to foreign higher education providers that deliver qualifications that are not of comparable quality to those in their home country.

8. The increasing need to obtain national recognition of foreign or private for-profit qualifications may put greater pressure on national recognition agencies and systems and in turn may lead to administrative and legal problems and difficulties for the individuals concerned.

9. The professions depend on trustworthy, high-quality qualifications. It is essential that users of professional services have full confidence in the skills of qualified professionals. The increasing possibility of obtaining low-quality credentials might in the long run undermine consumers' confidence in professional qualifications.

10. The Joint Guidelines aim to provide an international framework for quality provision in cross-border higher education that respond to these challenges.

Scope of Joint Guidelines

11. The Joint Guidelines are based on the principle of mutual trust and respect among countries, but also recognise the importance of national authority. Countries attach a high importance to the retention of national sovereignty over higher education. Higher education is strongly linked to national history, linguistic identity, cultural specificities, national economic development and social cohesion, and is therefore seen as a field of national policy-making.

12. The effectiveness of the Joint Guidelines strongly depends on the possibility of strengthening the capacity of national systems to assure the quality of higher education in developing countries. Strengthened ongoing capacity building initiatives by UNESCO and the World Bank in this area will sustain and be complementary to the Joint Guidelines.

13. Furthermore, the Joint Guidelines acknowledge the important role of non-governmental organisations such as higher education associations, student bodies, networks of quality assurance and accreditation agencies, recognition and credential evaluation bodies and professional bodies in strengthening international co-operation for quality provision in cross-border higher education. The Joint Guidelines aim to strengthen and co-ordinate existing initiatives by encouraging dialogue and enhancing collaboration among various bodies.

14. The Joint Guidelines recommend actions to six stakeholders: governments, higher education institutions/providers, student bodies, quality assurance and accreditation agencies, recognition and credential evaluation bodies and professional bodies. Central to the Joint Guidelines is the belief that quality provision is a key means to protect students seeking to receive cross-border higher education.

15. The purpose of the Joint Guidelines is to support initiatives to ensure that the quality of cross-border provision of higher education is managed appropriately to limit low quality provision and rogue providers and to encourage those forms of cross-border delivery of higher education that provides new opportunities, wide access and increases the possibilities for improving the skills of individual students.

Guidelines for governments

Governments are either responsible for or can strongly influence 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.

In this context, it is recommended that governments:

- 1) Establish or encourage the establishment of a system of fair, transparent and not administratively burdensome registration or licensure of all higher education providers operating in their territory including distance higher education.
- 2) Establish or encourage the establishment of a comprehensive capacity for quality assurance and accreditation of higher education provided not only in the country, but also overseas, including consultation and coordination amongst the various competent bodies. All higher education institutions or providers be they public or private, not-for-profit or for-profit, or national or foreign should have access to the system.
- 3) Provide clear and comprehensive information on the criteria and standard for registration, licensure, quality assurance and accreditation of cross-border higher education, including their effects on funding of students and their voluntary or mandatory nature.
- 4) Ratify and contribute to the development and/or updating of the appropriate UNESCO regional conventions on recognition of qualifications and establish national information centres as stipulated by the Conventions.
- 5) Where appropriate develop or encourage bilateral or multilateral recognition agreements, facilitating the recognition or legal equivalence of each country's qualifications.
- 6) Participate in the development of an international information tool on recognised higher education institutions/providers. This information tool should be i) free of charge, easy to access, simple, user friendly, provided online and searchable, ii) hosted by UNESCO, iii) include a comprehensive list of all higher education institutions recognised by a competent body, and iv) build on existing relevant initiatives at the national and international level. Once established, provide up-to-date, reliable and comprehensive information to UNESCO for the information tool. This information tool constitutes an important part of the implementation process to the Joint Guidelines as a concrete and efficient tool.

Guidelines for higher education institutions/providers¹

Commitment to quality by all higher education institutions/providers is essential. Higher education institutions are responsible for the quality of education and standards of qualifications provided in their name no matter wherever or however delivered. It is recommended that higher education institutions/providers delivering cross-border higher education:

- 1) Ensure a strong commitment to quality in higher education programmes delivered across borders as well as in their home country as part of the provider's mission.
- 2) Develop, maintain or review current internal quality management systems and take full responsibility for delivering higher education qualifications comparable in standard in their home country and across borders. Furthermore, when promoting their higher education to potential students through agents, ensure that the information and guidance provided by the agents are accurate and reliable.
- 3) Consult and respect competent quality assurance and accreditation agencies of the receiving country when delivering higher education across borders, including distance education.
- 4) Share good practice through participating in sector organisations and inter-institutional networks at national and international levels.
- 5) Develop and maintain networks and partnership as tools and systems to facilitate the process of recognition by acknowledging each other's qualifications as equivalent.
- 6) Respect the quality assurance, accreditation and recognition of qualifications frameworks of the countries in which they operate and where relevant, use codes of good practice such as the UNESCO/Council of Europe '*Code of good practice in the provision of transnational education*'² and other relevant codes such as the Council of Europe/UNESCO *Recommendation on Criteria and Procedures for the Assessment of Foreign Qualifications*³.
- 7) Provide accurate, reliable and easily accessible information on the criteria and procedures of external quality assessment and the academic and professional recognition of qualifications they deliver and complete descriptions of programmes and qualifications setting out details of the knowledge, understanding and skills that a successful student should acquire. Collaboration especially with quality assurance and accreditation agencies and student bodies could facilitate the dissemination of information.

1 . An important and relevant initiative to this is the statement "Sharing Quality Higher Education Across Borders" by the International Association of Universities, the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada, the American Council on Education and the Council on Higher Education Accreditation on behalf of higher education institutions worldwide.

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

Guidelines for student bodies

As direct recipients of cross-border higher education and as part of the higher education community, students are also responsible for carefully scrutinising the information available and giving sufficient consideration in their decision making process. In this context, it is recommended that student bodies:

- 1) Increase awareness of the students of the potential risks such as misleading guidance and information, low-quality provision including rogue providers, degree mills that offer low-quality educational experience and qualifications of limited validity and accreditation mills and guiding them to accurate and reliable information sources on cross-border higher education.
- 2) Encourage students to ask appropriate questions when enrolling in cross-border higher education programmes. A list of relevant questions to ask when enrolling in cross-border higher education could be established by student bodies in collaboration with e.g. higher education bodies, quality assurance and accreditation agencies and qualifications recognition and credential evaluation agencies and advisory and information centres. Such list should include the following questions: whether the foreign institution/provider is recognised or accredited by a trustworthy body and whether the qualifications delivered by the foreign institution/provider are recognised in the students' home country for both academic and professional purposes.

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 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 including its link to funding of students, institutions or programmes, 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 at regional and/or global level, in order to tackle the challenges raised by the growth in new forms of cross-border delivery of higher education. It is recommended that quality assurance and accreditation agencies:

- 1) Ensure that their quality assurance and accreditation arrangements include foreign and for-profit institutions/providers as well as distance education delivery and other non-traditional modes of educational delivery. This includes ensuring that assessment guidelines, standards and processes are transparent, consistent and appropriate to take account of the shape and scope of the national higher education system and adapt to changes and development in modes of provision and providers of higher education.
- 2) Sustain and strengthen the existing regional and international networks or establish 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 and quality assessors. These networks could be used to improve awareness of degree mills and accreditation mills and develop monitoring and reporting systems that can lead to the identification of dubious degrees and dubious quality assurance and accreditation agencies.
- 3) Provide accurate and reliable information on the assessment standards and procedures as well as the effects of the quality assurance mechanism on funding of the students. Collaboration with other actors, especially students bodies and qualifications recognition and credential evaluation agencies, advisory and information centres could facilitate the dissemination of such information.

- 4) Apply the UNESCO/Council of Europe '*Code of Good Practice in the Provision of Transnational Education*' and other relevant codes and establish links between the agencies of sending country and receiving country and share the responsibility of assuring the quality of programmes delivered across borders.
- 5) Reach mutual recognition agreements with other agencies on the basis of trust in each other's professional practice and the development of systems of internal quality assurance and regularly undergo external evaluations. Where feasible, start experiments in international evaluation or peer review of quality assurance and accreditation agencies.
- 6) Adopt procedures for the international composition of peer review panels, international benchmarking of standards, criteria and assessment procedures, joint assessment projects to increase the comparability of evaluation activities by different quality assurance and accreditation agencies.

Guidelines for qualifications recognition and credential evaluation bodies, advisory and information centres

The UNESCO regional conventions on recognition of qualifications, including the Council of Europe/UNESCO *Convention on Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region*⁴ are the most significant instruments for the international higher education community and governments to facilitate the fair recognition of higher education qualifications, including those resulting from cross-border mobility of students and skilled professionals. The international legal framework for recognition of academic qualifications is therefore largely in place.

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. It is recommended that recognition and credential evaluation bodies, advisory and information centres:

- 1) Establish and maintain 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.
- 2) Strengthen the cooperation with quality assurance and accreditation agencies to facilitate the process of determining whether a qualification meets basic quality standards and engage in cross-border cooperation and networking with quality assurance and accreditation centres. This cooperation is probably best undertaken at regional level.
- 3) Establish and maintain contacts with higher education institutions, professional bodies and employers to improve the information and links between academic and professional qualification assessment methodologies.
- 4) Where possible, address the professional recognition of qualifications in the professional labour market and provide necessary information on professional recognition, both to those who have a foreign academic qualification as well as to employers. Given the increasing scope of the international labour markets and growing professional mobility, collaboration and co-ordination with professional associations are recommended for that purpose.

⁴ Available at the following: http://www.cepes.ro/information_services/sources/on_line/lisbon.htm

- 5) Use codes of practice such as the Council of Europe/UNESCO *Recommendation on criteria and procedures for the assessment of foreign qualifications* and similar codes of practice to increase confidence in their recognition procedures, and to reassure stakeholders that the processing of requests is conducted in a fair and consistent manner.
- 6) Provide clear information on criteria for assessment of qualifications.

Guidelines for professional bodies

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 on holders of academic qualifications in order to enter the profession. With increasing international labour markets and growing professional mobility, the holders of academic qualifications, as well as employers and professional associations are facing many challenges. Increasing transparency – i.e., improving the availability and the quality of the information - is crucial. It is recommended that professional bodies responsible for professional recognition:

- 1) Develop information channels that are 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) Establish and maintain contacts with higher education institutions/providers as well as quality assurance and accreditation agencies and recognition and credential evaluation bodies in order to improve qualification assessment methodologies.
- 3) Establish, develop and implement assessment criteria and procedures for comparing programmes and qualifications in order to accommodate learning outcomes and competences in addition to input and process requirements.
- 4) Develop continuously updated and accessible tools providing international information on mutual recognition agreements for the professions, including those agreed on in the context of trade agreements.