

## DRAFT PROPOSAL

### PROPOSED NEXT STEPS FOR AN INTERNATIONAL INFORMATION TOOL ON RECOGNISED HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

*This note proposes a further process and timeline to determine the scope, content and the form of an international information tool on recognised higher education institutions. It proposes to separate the timeline of establishing an international information tool on recognised higher education institutions from that of the development and decision process of the UNESCO/OECD Guidelines on quality provision in cross-border higher education, and to place it as an important part of the implementation process of the Guidelines. This note is based on the discussions at the first drafting session of the UNESCO/OECD Guidelines on quality provision in cross-border higher education and the two experts meetings.*

*It has been prepared for the second drafting session of the UNESCO/OECD Guidelines on quality provision in cross-border higher education on 14-15 October 2004 in Tokyo, Japan. At the meeting, participants are asked to:*

- *NOTE the outcome of the discussions at the first drafting session on 5-6 April 2004 and the two experts meetings and DISCUSS the key issues raised in section 3.*
- *DECIDE on separating of the timelines of the UNESCO/OECD Guidelines on quality provision in cross-border higher education and an international information tool on recognised higher education institutions.*
- *DECIDE on the scope of work, timelines and processes for phase one of the development of an international information tool on recognised higher education institutions.*
- *ADVISE on the scope of work, timeline and process for possible phase two.*

#### 1. Introduction

Cross-border higher education through student, programme or institutional mobility and professional mobility has grown considerably over the last two decades. In addition to the traditional modes of higher education provision, new providers and modes such as for-profit providers, campuses abroad and e-

learning have appeared. Such developments may provide further 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. In this context, UNESCO and the OECD are working jointly on developing Guidelines on quality provision in cross-border higher education.

One of the important challenges that needs to be tackled in order to maximise the benefits and minimise the risks of cross-border provision of higher education is to provide students with adequate tools for informed decision-making to protect them from the risks of misleading information, inadequate or inappropriate guidance, low-quality provision, rogue providers, bogus institutions, degree mills and qualifications of limited validity. At the first drafting session of the UNESCO/OECD Guidelines on quality provision in cross-border higher education that was held in Paris on 5-6 April 2004, it was suggested to establish “an international database on recognised higher education institutions” listing all degree-granting higher education institutions. There was a consensus on the need for sufficient and reliable information on the quality of cross-border higher education provision and on having an experts group to explore this possibility in more detail, including possible forms of provision of information (database or portal).

## **2. Basic Principles**

Following the first drafting session, two experts meetings (7 April 2004 and 30 June 2004) were held in order to prepare a proposal on an international information tool on recognised higher education institutions for the Drafting session on 14-15 October 2004. (The summaries and list of participants of these experts meetings are attached.)

At these meetings, there was an agreement on the following general principles:

- 1) The international information tool should be free of charge, easy to access, simple, user friendly, provided online, and searchable.
- 2) The international information tool should be under the responsibility of the competent national authorities of the co-operating countries and the reliability of information should be guaranteed by each country. It should be the responsibility of each country to provide accurate and appropriate information and no information would be modified or added at the international level. In this regard, it is necessary to strengthen the capacity of some developing countries to compile and provide the appropriate information.
- 3) The international information tool will be hosted by UNESCO. This could be done in collaboration with other partners who have expertise in this field.
- 4) The international information tool should include a comprehensive list of all higher education institutions recognised by a competent body. The information to be included in the list should be provided voluntarily by countries.
- 5) A simple list of recognised higher education institutions/programmes is not enough. Supplementary information to the list is necessary to make the information tool effective.
- 6) The primary purpose of the international information tool should be to protect students from misleading guidance and information, low-quality provision, rogue providers, bogus institutions, degree mills and qualifications of limited validity by helping their informed decision making. However, it was suggested that there are other possible functions that the tool could serve such as facilitating the recognition of qualifications.

- 7) The international information tool should build on existing relevant initiatives both at the national and international level (see ANNEX: Initiatives of listing recognised higher education institutions.).

### **3. Issues to be further explored**

Several issues concerning the list of recognised higher education institutions were explored in more detail at the experts meetings. The two meetings were very informative and brought together different expertise. The discussion revealed the complexity of the issues and it was agreed that further discussion is needed to clarify the purpose, scope, and content of this international information tool. The following section summarises the discussions that took place in the experts meetings.

#### ***1) Types and levels of higher education institutions that should be included in the list of recognised higher education institutions***

It was agreed that at least all recognised degree-granting institutions would be listed. However, there was no further consensus on types and levels of higher education institutions to be included in the list. Some experts suggested that it should be left to each country to make this decision.

A related issue is how to categorise the institutions. The main challenge is to take into account the diversity of higher education systems. Some experts suggested the use of ISCED (International Standard Classification of Education) 1997<sup>1</sup> as a common structure on categorising the types of higher education institutions, noting however, that ISCED was designed to classify programmes rather than institution.

In both cases, it was agreed that there is a need for a description of the country's higher education systems (levels of higher education, institutional types, etc.) that supplements the list in order to accommodate the diversity of domestic systems.

#### ***2) Types of quality assurance mechanisms that would allow for an institution to be listed in the country list***

In order to make the list of recognised higher education institutions reliable and highly trustworthy internationally, it is important to come to a consensus on the types of quality assurance processes and mechanisms that would allow for an institution to be listed in the country list. The terms recognised, registered, authorised, licensed, accredited, etc. have different meanings in different countries. Quality assurance mechanisms vary between countries and have different consequences (in terms of degree-granting power, access to funding, etc.) Again, the challenge is how to respect the diversity of these national regulatory systems while keeping the list reliable and as simple as possible.

Some suggestions were made such as to draw a line between institutions that are legally recognised by national/local government and those that are not. Some suggested that each country should decide on its own list and include all institutions that have been reviewed for quality by a competent body. A competent body could be governmental and non-governmental. A challenge that was raised by several experts concerns how best to deal with cases where the integrity/validity of the information is challenged. For

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<sup>1</sup> The relevant ISCED categories are: post secondary, non-tertiary level (ISCED 4); programmes at the tertiary level equivalent to university programmes (ISCED 5A), programmes at the tertiary level that focus on practical, technical or occupational skills for direct entry into the labour market (ISCED 5B); Advanced research programmes at the tertiary level (ISCED 6). For more details, see [http://www.unesco.org/education/information/nfsunesco/doc/isced\\_1997.htm](http://www.unesco.org/education/information/nfsunesco/doc/isced_1997.htm)

example, how should cases where an institution that is considered a degree mill in one country and is listed as a recognised higher education institution in another country be dealt with? Some experts suggested that the issue could be solved by a supplementary set of questions that provides guidance to the users of the list.

### ***3) Whether or not the list should include information at the institution level or programme level***

In several countries, it is not institutions but their programmes which are recognised. There are cases where some degree programmes have been recognised and others, offered in the same institution, have not. The experts discussed how this issue could be tackled when compiling a list of recognised institutions/programmes and combining it with information on who recognised them. On the one hand, simply providing the name of institutions is not enough where review of quality is conducted at the programme level. However, providing information at the programme level requires larger and more frequent updating than providing information at the institution level, which makes the task less feasible.

As a more realistic approach, some suggested that the list should only include information at the institution level, but it should signal where not all programmes offered by the institution are recognised, and the programme level information could be provided at the domestic level. One possibility is to have a list of questions that will guide students to seek for further information at the programme level accompanying the international list of recognised higher education institutions. Others suggested to leave it up to the country, depending on its domestic quality assurance mechanism. In any case, the crucial issue is how to assure the reliability of the information included in the list. This is very much related to the understanding on what is meant by “recognised” higher education institution.

The issue of what information should be included in the list in addition to the names of the institutions and the body that recognised them should be discussed in more detail.

### ***4) Possible information to be added to the list of recognised higher education institutions/programmes***

Experts agreed that in the longer term, supplementary information to the list would be necessary. Additional information that was suggested includes: descriptions of national frameworks of quality assurance and accreditation and a list of the key bodies responsible for these roles and their contact coordinates, glossary/definitions of terms, information on recognition of qualifications including UNESCO Regional conventions on recognition. Furthermore, several suggested a checklist for users to guide them to seek appropriate and sufficient information. It is clear that a decision needs to be made by stakeholders on the scope of the international information tool.

In addition to the four issues above, other important issues were raised during the experts meetings:

- The need to clarify the target users and to understand their needs.
- It was confirmed that the provision of information by countries should be voluntary and it would be the country’s responsibility to provide or not to provide relevant and accurate information. In relation to this responsibility of countries, the need to strengthen the capacity of some developing countries to compile necessary information was raised.
- Further discussion is needed on the language(s) in which the information will be provided.

- Once the scope of the information tool is defined, resources required both human and financial for establishing and maintaining such an international information tool needs to be clarified and further discussion is needed on how to provide the necessary resources; and
- The frequency and scope of updating the information.

#### **4. Proposed next steps**

The experts agreed that further discussion and more dialogue among countries is needed to have a common understanding of the structure and content of the international information tool on recognised higher education institutions as a whole.

The main challenges are to identify the information to be provided in the tool and to decide to what extent a common structure of the provision of information is necessary and possible while taking into account the diverse national tertiary education systems and quality assurance mechanisms.

In order to allow sufficient discussion on the issues, it is suggested that the timeline for developing this international information tool will be separated from that of the guidelines. The timeline for developing the UNESCO/OECD Guidelines on quality provision in cross-border higher education will remain the same (i.e. third and last Drafting session in January 2005 and adoption by competent bodies of UNESCO and the OECD in the second half of 2005), but the initiative on establishing an international information tool will be seen as a longer-term project and as an important part of the implementation of the Guidelines.

This note proposes a further process to determine the scope, content, and the form of an international information tool. It suggests proceeding in two phases. It is proposed that the first phase will focus on the design and consensus building process for the international list of recognised higher education institutions. The possible second phase would concentrate on identifying what supplementary information should be added to the list. The second phase can only be tackled once there is a consensus among countries on the key issues in phase one. It is proposed that the work in phase one will be an important part of the implementation process of the UNESCO/OECD Guidelines on quality provision in cross-border higher education, including strengthening the capacity of some developing countries to provide the appropriate information. Participants are asked to:

- DECIDE on separating the timelines of the UNESCO/OECD Guidelines on quality provision in cross-border higher education and an international information tool on recognised higher education institutions.
- DECIDE on the scope of work, timelines and processes for phase one of the development of an international information tool on recognised higher education institutions.
- ADVISE on the scope of work, timeline and process for possible phase two.

#### ***Phase 1: List of recognised higher education institutions***

As mentioned above in section 2, Basic principles, it was agreed that a list of recognised higher education institutions could be the core of an international information tool. The list should include at least the names of recognised higher education institutions and the body by which each institution was recognised. However, several challenges remain to be tackled in order to agree on the structure and further content of this list.

The first phase would concentrate on building a consensus on what information should be included in the list. Three crucial issues that countries need to have an agreement on are:

- Types of tertiary education institutions to be included.
- Common understanding of “recognised” higher education institutions.
- Procedures, schedule and means for collecting, providing, quality assuring and publishing information.

Countries need to agree on how the list of recognised higher education institutions will be offered to users; i.e. would it be a portal linking to national lists or would it be an international database. Furthermore, funding would be needed for establishing and maintaining the international information tool on recognised higher education institutions.

This is a challenging task and needs more analytical work and discussion among national experts who have expertise on their national higher education system and its quality assurance mechanisms. Discussion with potential users, especially with students will be necessary as well

If countries agree with the suggested two-phase process, they will be asked to nominate a national expert to work on the issues. It is foreseen that three meetings will be required in 2005. Stakeholders such as student bodies will be invited to the meetings.

The tasks of the experts will be to:

- Review and clarify the target users of the information tool and their needs.
- Decide on types of tertiary education institutions to be included, what is meant by “recognised” higher education institutions, and on procedures for collecting, classifying and providing information.
- Decide on the format of the international information tool on recognised higher education institutions (portal or database).
- Analyse the cost for establishing and maintaining the information tool and decide on a funding system.
- Advise on the timeline and process of the possible phase two.

Since this involves a technical discussion such as discussions on definitions, categories and methods of data collection, one possible way could be that several technical working groups of a smaller scale be appointed to work on a specific issue.

It is suggested that UNESCO will be mainly responsible for the planning and organising of the meetings in collaboration with the OECD and the two organisations will form the Secretariat for this task. It is also suggested that the international information tool build on experiences and expertise of existing databases such as that of the International Association of Universities (IAU). It is therefore suggested that IAU be an important partner together with other organisations representing higher education institutions and quality assurance agencies. This process implies additional resources to cover the international overhead costs for organising meetings of national experts, especially to invite experts from developing countries.

### *Proposed timeline for phase 1*

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| October 2004  | Agreement on the process   |
| December 2004 | Nomination of national experts   |
| February 2005 | First national experts meeting   |
| June 2005     | Second national experts meeting  |
| December 2005 | Third national experts meeting and final agreement on phase 1                          |
| June 2006     | Online provision of the international list of recognised higher education institutions |

### *Cost for phase 1*

To implement phase one, additional financial resources are required. This will cover the cost for and the analytical work on the information tool in close collaboration with IAU and other organisations representing higher education institutions and quality assurance agencies as well as the cost for three national experts' meetings.

### ***A possible phase 2: Supplementary information***

At the two recent meetings, experts referred to the need for supplementary information to the list of recognised higher education institutions. In order to accommodate the diversity of higher education systems, it would be good if the list of recognised higher education institutions were accompanied by a description of the national higher education system, quality assurance system and procedures for recognition of qualifications. Furthermore, it was suggested that a list of questions for students to ask before enrolling in a foreign programme should be provided.

It is proposed that the scope and content of supplementary information will be explored in a second phase, once countries have a common understanding during phase one on which information to be provided in the list of recognised higher education institutions and how. The scope and the process of phase two will depend on what will be decided in the first phase concerning the list of recognised higher education institutions. Therefore, the process and tasks to be dealt with in the second phase will be specified further later on and countries will be consulted before any decision is taken on a possible phase 2.