Executive Summary

Over the last two decades, cross-border education (through student, programme or institutional mobility) and professional mobility have grown considerably. In parallel, new cross-border providers and delivery modes have appeared, such as for-profit providers, campuses abroad and e-learning. These trends challenge existing national frameworks for quality assurance, accreditation and recognition of qualifications, which are often not geared to addressing cross-border and private provision. This may increase the risks that students and learners fall victim to rogue providers offering low-quality educational experience and qualifications of limited value.

This publication gives an overview of how countries and world regions are dealing with these challenges. It analyses existing international frameworks for recognition of qualifications, including UNESCO's Regional Conventions on recognition and trade agreements. Finally, it suggests initiatives that might be taken by key stakeholders – institutions, quality assurance and accreditation agencies, professional bodies and governments – to enhance the quality of higher education provision across borders.

Need for international framework for quality assurance and accreditation across borders.

In the past 20 years, the number of agencies, networks and initiatives focused on quality assurance at the national level has grown. National quality assurance systems are increasingly necessary to monitor not only quality of higher education nationally but also the delivery of higher education internationally. The case studies show that most OECD member countries have a national quality assurance and accreditation system and an increasing number of non-member economies have or are in the process of establishing such systems. Thus, as more than 60 economies world wide have recognised, an external quality assurance system is essential for the credibility of their national higher education systems.

National quality assurance systems often focus exclusively on assuring the quality of programmes delivered in their country by their domestic institutions. Quality assurance and accreditation arrangements are commonly restricted to state-recognised "public" institutions, so that foreign and for-profit forms of provision are often not covered. The challenge for current systems is how to cover these foreign providers and programmes, by enlarging the scope of existing systems or by establishing new systems specifically for them.

Regarding **external quality assurance and accreditation of cross-border education and new delivery modes**, the arrangements in both the sending and receiving countries have a role to play. Some codes of practice, as in Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States, address this issue. These codes emphasise the role of the quality assurance arrangements of the sending country and try to guarantee that the quality of programmes delivered across borders is at the same level as those delivered in the home country. Another code, at the international level, is the UNESCO/Council of Europe "Code of Good Practice in the Provision of Transnational Education" which gives sound principles regarding transnational education provision for institutions.

Besides the state, **inter-institutional networks and associations, professional bodies and specialised agencies** have been active in establishing external quality assurance and accreditation systems, nationally and internationally. A system of "multiple accreditation", in which there are several accreditation procedures for different purposes, is a probable (and maybe desirable) outcome.

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. It makes students and other stakeholders more vulnerable to low-quality provision of cross-border higher education.

The issue is even more complex for **online delivery across borders**. Because the Internet has no physical borders, control of electronic communication on a geographical basis is difficult. The "territorial principle" that governs many quality assurance and accreditation arrangements is irrelevant with regard to Web-based delivery. Students anywhere in the world can register, follow courses and get qualifications from virtual institutions.

These issues will require more national initiatives, strengthened international co-operation and networking, and more transparent information on quality assurance and accreditation procedures and systems. In many

developing countries, the issue of capacity building in quality assurance and accreditation is very important as they may not have not sufficient skills and/or resources to establish comprehensive quality assurance and accreditation systems. Given these challenges, **there is a need for guiding principles to better ensure quality cross-border provision, taking into account the interests of both receiving and sending countries**.

Need to facilitate fair and transparent recognition for foreign qualifications.

Closely related to the issue of quality assurance and accreditation of institutions and programmes is the issue of **recognition of academic and professional qualifications**. National systems for awarding qualifications as well as the character of these qualifications are very diverse. One of the most important implications is that when students or employees move to another country, their qualifications often have to be recognised anew. Owing to the internationalisation of skilled labour markets and growing professional mobility, there has been a significant increase in the demand for academic and professional recognition of qualifications.

The **international frameworks for facilitating the recognition of academic foreign qualifications** are largely in place with the UNESCO Regional Conventions on recognition of qualifications. UNESCO has begun to update many of these to take account of the new developments in cross-border higher education. The Council of Europe/UNESCO Lisbon Convention is the most recent example. The Regional Conventions are ratified by an increasing number of countries, but a rather large number have yet to ratify it.

Assessing the value of a particular qualification has become more complicated. Evaluators, employers and professional bodies are more interested in determining the "quality" of an institution, programme or qualification. Many of the problems have to do with determining whether a programme or an institution delivering a certain qualification meets the standards of basic quality. Therefore, recognition and credential evaluation agencies increasingly appeal to quality assurance agencies to inform them of the quality status of an institution or programme. **Cross-border co-operation between quality assurance agencies and recognition and credential evaluation centres has become increasingly important**.

Tertiary education systems are affected by two conflicting trends. On the one hand, there is increasing diversification of institutions, programmes, qualifications and delivery modes. On the other hand, a process of comparability and standardisation is taking place in some aspects

of educational systems. Several international initiatives are intended to enhance the convergence of programmes and qualifications. The European Union's Bologna Process, which aims to achieve comparable degree structures in the participating countries, is a good example. A similar process has been launched in MERCOSUR countries.

Furthermore, **professional recognition arrangements**, especially in the regulated professions, can have an important harmonising impact on curricula, learning outcomes and qualifications. Rather than trying to achieve convergence of formal input and the characteristics of programmes, it is much more useful to try to enhance comparability at the level of learning outcomes. **Descriptions of programmes and qualifications in terms of the learning outcomes and competencies may help to determine their correspondence and, hence, contribute to their recognition across countries**.

In many Anglo-Saxon countries, autonomous regulatory bodies exist for a growing number of professions, setting entry requirements and standards. However, because of the decentralised and deregulated nature of such arrangements, professional recognition can be very different in various constituencies. In continental Europe, state recognition of qualifications also traditionally implies professional recognition. Yet professions are becoming more organised at national and international levels and increasingly impose requirements beyond academic degrees for entry into the profession. Moreover, in the areas of non-regulated economic and professional activity, which are far more numerous, a *de facto* decision on the validity of a certain qualification is very often at the discretion of an individual employer. This can lead to "market values" of qualifications that differ from context to context and from country to country.

Increasingly, professional mobility, the development of international professional associations, and free trade agreements dealing with trade in professional services have brought the issue of professional recognition to the international level. However, **trade agreements make a limited contribution to encouraging mutual recognition agreements for professional qualifications, and they do not provide any standard for recognition**. For example, the GATS requires WTO members to notify recognition agreements to which they are a party. It does encourage the development of international standards wherever appropriate, but it is envisaged that these standards will be developed not by the WTO, but elsewhere by members working in co-operation with relevant intergovernmental and non-governmental organisations. So far progress has been slow on developing standards, the Washington Accord for the engineering professions being an exception.

*Need for international guidelines to
enhance the quality of higher education
provision across borders.*

The lack of a coherent international framework for quality assurance and accreditation across borders and the challenges for academic and professional recognition of qualifications across borders have raised awareness of a need for an international initiative to enhance the quality of higher education provision across borders. Such an initiative would:

- **Enhance the protection of students/learners** against the risks of misinformation, low-quality provision and qualifications of limited validity.

- **Increase international validity and portability of qualifications** by increasing their readability and transparency.

- **Increase transparency and coherence of recognition procedures**.

- **Encourage international co-operation among agencies**.

UNESCO and the OECD have therefore recently been asked by their members to work closely together to draft non-binding guidelines on "Quality provision in cross-border higher education". This initiative is most appropriately pursued by the education sector itself, via international educational guidelines. It will adopt a global perspective and will need to involve both sending and receiving countries in order to be effective.

The guidelines will suggest actions for higher education providers, quality assurance and accreditation agencies, recognition agencies, professional bodies and governments to address the four issues mentioned above. They will be based on the assumption that countries prefer to have national authority over quality assurance and accreditation issues in their own higher education system and will thus be based on mutual trust and respect among the diverse stakeholders involved in national quality assurance and accreditation across countries. They will also build upon and aim to strengthen and co-ordinate existing initiatives by encouraging dialogue and enhancing collaboration among various bodies.

Furthermore, it is proposed to establish an international database with a clear set of definitions and a typology of regulatory systems, listing all institutions that are recognised, registered, authorised, licensed, accredited, etc., to operate within each country. On a voluntary basis, countries would provide a list of "bona fide" institutions based on their national arrangements and criteria. To ensure that the database obtains a high level of trust and an authoritative status, it is very important that it is implemented

and managed by an international organisation with high integrity, such as UNESCO.

It is still too early to know whether governments and stakeholders in higher education will reach a consensus on the UNESCO/OECD guidelines initiative. However, such an initiative will contribute to filling in the existing gaps and to "manage" quality provision across borders. **Over the longer term, this would increase the benefits of the internationalisation of higher education** by improving the skills of students and the quality of national higher education systems. **They would also limit the potential downsides of the internationalisation of higher education**, especially for emerging and developing economies.

The companion publication, *Internationalisation and Trade in Higher Education: Opportunities and Challenges*, which analyses the major trends and developments in cross-border post-secondary education in North America, Europe and the Asia Pacific region, is also now available.