

DRAFT**ANNEX
GUIDELINES¹ FOR QUALITY PROVISION IN CROSS-BORDER HIGHER EDUCATION²
JOINTLY ELABORATED BETWEEN THE OECD AND UNESCO****Preface**

1. Over the last two decades, cross-border higher education through student, academic staff, 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 in order to benefit the human, social and economic development of the receiving country.

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, create 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 procedures and systems to cover foreign providers and programmes in addition to national 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, academic staff, 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 and put emphasis on supporting the needs of developing countries in the process of establishing robust higher education systems. Given that some countries lack comprehensive frameworks for quality assurance, accreditation and the recognition of qualifications, capacity building will need to form an important part of the overall strengthening and co-ordination of national and international initiatives. In this light, 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*”). The implementation³ of these Joint Guidelines could serve as a first step of the capacity building process.

¹ These Guidelines are not legally binding and member countries are expected to implement the Joint Guidelines as appropriate in their national context.

² Include in explanatory note on key terms.

³ A possible mechanism to facilitate the co-ordination of the implementation process (including the dissemination and review of the Joint Guidelines), such as having one or several national co-ordinator (s) needs to be explored further. Such national co-ordinators will be associated with all the stakeholders concerned and facilitate close co-operation and co-ordination of the efforts of the various stakeholders to implement these Joint Guidelines, whether governmental or non-governmental.

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 cross-border mobility of students, academic staff, 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 described hereunder:

1) 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.

2) 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.

3) 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.

4) 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 could harm the professions themselves, and might in the long run undermine consumers' confidence in professional qualifications.

Scope of Joint Guidelines

6. The Joint Guidelines aim to provide an international framework for quality provision in cross-border higher education that respond to these challenges. The purpose of the Joint Guidelines is to encourage those forms of cross-border delivery of higher education that respond to human and social development needs, provide new opportunities, widen access and increase the possibilities for improving the skills of individual students and to encourage initiatives to ensure that the quality and relevance of cross-border provision of higher education is managed appropriately to limit low quality provision and rogue providers.

7. The Joint Guidelines are based on the principle of mutual trust and respect among countries, but also recognise the importance of national authority and diversity of higher education systems. Countries attach a high importance to the retention of national sovereignty over higher education. Higher education is a

vital means for expressing and nurturing national identity and its roots in national history, linguistic identity, cultural specificities and diversity, national economic development and social cohesion; it is therefore seen as a field of national policy-making. The Joint Guidelines also acknowledge that in some countries, there are several competent authorities in higher education.

8. 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. Strengthening ongoing capacity building initiatives by UNESCO as well as other multilateral agencies and bilateral donors in this area will sustain and be complementary to the Joint Guidelines. These initiatives should be supported by strong regional and national partners.

9. Furthermore, the Joint Guidelines acknowledge the important role of non-governmental organisations such as higher education associations, student bodies, academic staff associations, 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 encourage the strengthening and co-ordination of existing initiatives by enhancing dialogue and collaboration among various bodies.

10. The Joint Guidelines recommend actions to six stakeholders: governments; higher education institutions/providers including academic staff; student bodies; quality assurance and accreditation agencies; qualification recognition and credential evaluation agencies, advisory and information centres; 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.

Guidelines for governments

Governments can be influential in promoting adequate quality assurance, accreditation and recognition of qualifications in all countries and may have overall policy coordination in most higher education systems. In some countries, however, it is understood that the authority for overseeing quality assurance does not lie with the national government, and sometimes lies with non-governmental organisations.

In this context, it is recommended that governments:

1) Establish or encourage the establishment of a comprehensive and reasonable system of fair and transparent registration, or licensure, based on quality assurance criteria and procedures of the receiving country of all higher education providers including distance higher education.

2) Establish or encourage the establishment of a comprehensive capacity for reliable 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, recognising that quality assurance and accreditation of cross-border higher education provision involves both sending and receiving countries. 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 in place for assuring the quality of higher education. Access to this system, however, should be based on appropriate national regulation.

3) Provide clear and comprehensive information on the criteria and standards for registration, licensure, quality assurance and accreditation of cross-border higher education, their consequences on funding of students, institutions or programs, where applicable 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 equivalence of each country's qualifications based on the procedures and criteria included in reciprocal agreements.

6) Contribute to efforts to improve the accessibility at the international level of information on recognised higher education institutions/providers.

Guidelines for higher education institutions/providers⁴

Commitment to quality by all higher education institutions/providers is essential. To this end, the active and constructive contributions of academic staff are indispensable. Higher education institutions are responsible for the quality and social relevance of education and standards of qualifications provided in their name no matter where or how it is delivered.

In this context, it is recommended that higher education institutions/providers delivering cross-border higher education:

- 1) Ensure that the programme they deliver across borders and in their home country are of comparable quality and include a commitment to that effect in their mission statement.
- 2) Recognise that quality teaching and research is made possible by the quality of faculty and the quality of their working conditions that foster independent and critical inquiry. The UNESCO Recommendation concerning the Status of Higher Education Teaching Personnel⁵ and other relevant instruments to support good working conditions and terms of service, collegial governance and academic freedom need to be respected by all institutions and providers
- 3) Develop, maintain or review current internal quality management systems that make full use of the competencies of stakeholders such as academic staff, administrators, and students and take full responsibility for delivering higher education qualifications comparable in standard in their home country and across borders. Furthermore, when promoting their programmes to potential students through agents, take full responsibility to ensure that the information and guidance provided by the agents are accurate and reliable.
- 4) Consult competent quality assurance and accreditation agencies and respect the quality assurance and accreditation systems of the receiving country when delivering higher education across borders, including distance education.
- 5) Share good practice through participating in sector organisations and inter-institutional networks at national and international levels.

⁴ 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.

⁵ available at http://portal.unesco.org/en/ev.php-URL_ID=13144&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html

- 6) Develop and maintain networks and partnership as tools and systems to facilitate the process of recognition by acknowledging each other's qualifications as equivalent or comparable
- 7) Where relevant, use codes of good practice such as the UNESCO/Council of Europe '*Code of good practice in the provision of transnational education*'⁶ and other relevant codes such as the Council of Europe/UNESCO *Recommendation on Criteria and Procedures for the Assessment of Foreign Qualifications*⁷.
- 8) Provide accurate, reliable and easily accessible information on the criteria and procedures of external and internal quality assurance and the academic and professional recognition of qualifications they deliver and provide complete descriptions of programmes and qualifications setting out details of the knowledge, understanding and skills that a successful student should acquire. Higher education institutions/providers may collaborate especially with quality assurance and accreditation agencies and student bodies could facilitate the dissemination of information.
- 9) Ensure that cross-border higher education meet accepted national accounting and reporting standards in order to maintain transparency of the financial condition of the institution and/or educational programme offered.

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 the emergence of autonomous local, national and international student bodies be encouraged and that the student bodies:

- 1) Be involved as active partners at international, national and institutional levels in the development and maintenance of a quality provision of cross-border higher education.
- 2) Take active part in promoting quality provision, by increasing the 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. This could be done by increasing the awareness of the existence of these guidelines as well as taking an active part in their implementation.
- 3) Encourage students to ask appropriate questions when enrolling in cross-border higher education programmes. A list of relevant questions could be established by student bodies, including foreign students where possible, 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 a 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.

⁶ Available at the following:
http://www.coe.int/T/E/Cultural_Cooperation/education/Higher_education/Activities/Bologna_Process/Code_TNE.asp#TopofPage

⁷ Available at the following:
http://www.coe.int/T/E/Cultural_Cooperation/education/Higher_education/ENIC_Network/Recom_Criteria_Procedures.asp

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. Quality assurance and accreditation agencies are responsible for assuring the quality provision of higher education. 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 among the agencies of sending and receiving countries is needed at regional and global level, in order to tackle the challenges raised by the growth of cross-border delivery of higher education, especially in new forms.

In this context, 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 new 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 including cross-border provision.
- 2) Sustain and strengthen the existing regional and international networks or establish regional networks in regions that do not already have one 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 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) Establish links to strengthen the collaboration between the agencies of sending country and receiving country and enhance the mutual understanding of different systems of quality assurance and accreditation. This may facilitate the process of assuring the quality of programmes delivered across borders and institutions operating across borders, including respecting the quality assurance and accreditation systems of the receiving countries.
- 4) Provide accurate and reliable information on the assessment standards and procedures as well as the effects of the quality assurance mechanism on the funding of students, institutions or programs where applicable. Quality assurance and accreditation agencies may Collaborate with other actors, especially higher education institutions/providers, academic staff, student bodies and qualifications recognition and credential evaluation agencies, advisory and information centres to facilitate the dissemination of such information.
- 5) Apply the principles reflected in current international documents on cross-border higher education such as the UNESCO/Council of Europe *‘Code of Good Practice in the Provision of Transnational Education’*.
- 6) Reach mutual recognition agreements with other agencies on the basis of trust in and understanding of 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.

7) Adopt procedures for the international composition of peer review panels, international benchmarking of standards, criteria and assessment procedures and undertake joint assessment projects to increase the comparability of evaluation activities of different quality assurance and accreditation agencies

Guidelines for qualifications recognition and credential evaluation agencies, advisory and information Centres

The UNESCO regional conventions on recognition of qualifications are the most significant instruments for the international higher education community and governments to facilitate the fair recognition of higher education qualifications, including the assessment of foreign qualifications resulting from cross-border mobility of students and skilled professionals and cross-border provision of 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.

In this context, it is recommended that qualifications recognition and credential evaluation agencies, 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 agencies. This cooperation should be pursued both at regional and cross-regional level.

3) Establish and maintain contacts with higher education institutions, student bodies, professional bodies and employers to share the information and improve the links between academic and professional qualification assessment methodologies.

4) Where possible, address the professional recognition of qualifications in the labour market and provide necessary information on professional recognition, both to those who have a foreign qualification and 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 this purpose.

5) Use codes of practice such as the Council of Europe/UNESCO *Recommendation on Criteria and Procedures for the Assessment of Foreign Qualifications* and other relevant codes of practice to increase the public's 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 the criteria for the assessment of qualifications, including qualifications resulting from cross-border provision.

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.

In this context, 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 qualifications recognition and credential evaluation agencies and advisory and information centres 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 covered by trade agreements.