

Chapter 2

Quality Provision in Cross-border Higher Education: Key Issues Related to Quality Assurance, Accreditation and Recognition of Qualifications

This chapter presents a preliminary consideration of initiatives for quality assurance, accreditation and recognition of qualifications that might be taken by key stake-holders – higher education institutions, quality assurance and accreditation agencies, recognition agencies, professional bodies and governments – to better meet the challenges of growth and diversity of cross-border education provision and the emergence of for-profit providers. Key issues and possible initiatives are discussed, such as: how to enhance the protection of students/learners of higher education from degree mills and qualifications of limited value; the suggested establishment of an international database on recognised higher education institutions; the need for comprehensive quality assurance and accreditation systems at the national level; and strengthening international co-operation and networking of quality assurance and accreditation agencies, recognition and evaluation agencies and professional bodies.

2.1. Introduction

Changes and challenges

At the beginning of the 21st century, the worlds of education and learning are changing rapidly. Higher education in a more globalised world brings new realities and challenges. The knowledge economy/society, innovations in information and communication technology, emphasis on market economy and trade liberalisation have important implications for higher education. Massification of education provision and participation continues to challenge existing institutions, policies, funding arrangements and regulatory frameworks in many countries. New opportunities and possibilities such as online delivery of educational services, cross-border delivery and consumption of educational services, skills development outside formal learning arrangements, new types of qualifications and for-profit provision of teaching and learning challenge and stimulate the

reform of existing educational values. These developments also pose new questions for the regulatory capacities and boundaries of existing national or regional policy frameworks. Furthermore, new rules in other sectors, such as those related to trade in educational services in the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS), are seen by many stakeholders in education as only partially helpful or even harmful.

This chapter focuses on the issues and challenges associated with the growth and diversity of cross-border education provision as a response to the increasing demand for higher education. Key issues are discussed in terms of how institutions, agencies and policy makers in the fields of quality assurance, accreditation and recognition of qualifications can enhance protection for students/learners of higher education and assure quality provision in cross-border higher education. While students/learners are at the centre of the discussion, employers and the education community itself, as well as the general public are included as important players and stakeholders.

New opportunities and potential risks

The changes outlined above challenge existing policy frameworks and their consequences may be perceived by many as threatening, but it is very important to also see the new potential opportunities and benefits lying behind them. Under the right conditions, non-traditional delivery modes including cross-border and for-profit provision of education services can open up learning opportunities and enlarge educational participation. In the global growth of knowledge-based economies, higher qualifications can improve the opportunities of individuals and the prosperity of communities and nations. The movement of skilled labour across national borders and new competencies produced by student mobility and internationally oriented qualifications can produce huge benefits for the internationalising professional labour market. Cross-border education and the diversification of teaching and learning modes may contribute to the improvement and innovations in higher education systems. For-profit provision of educational services in itself creates new economic activity as well. These economic opportunities and benefits are testimony to the growing economic importance of higher education in the global knowledge society and can provide added value to the more familiar but still relevant advantages of academic cooperation, intercultural exchange and international understanding. New policy frameworks should try to create conditions under which these potential benefits can be maximised and the risks minimised.

Of course, risks do exist. The national and regional case studies of quality assurance, accreditation and recognition of qualifications systems and other recent expert papers point to a number of risks associated with cross-border and for-profit delivery of higher education:

- National systems for the recognition of qualifications may have limited experience to deal with for-profit and cross-border providers. Thus, graduates of those institutions and programmes –even when they are of good quality – are faced with qualifications of limited validity and usefulness.
- The increasing need to get national recognition of foreign or private qualifications may put a great pressure on the existing systems leading to unnecessary bureaucratic problems and personal difficulties for the individuals and families concerned.
- The high probability that cross-border and for-profit provision is not covered by national systems for quality assurance, accreditation and recognition of qualifications may increase the risk that students/learners are victim of rogue providers (“degree mills”), offering low quality educational experiences and qualifications of limited validity.
- An additional risk is the emergence of non-trustworthy accreditation systems (“accreditation mills”), which can provide misleading approval to educational providers, students, employers and the public.
- The professions and the skilled segments of the economy largely depend on trustworthy and high quality qualifications. Consumers of professional services want to have full confidence in the knowledge and skills of qualified professionals. Increasing risks to obtain low-quality credentials in the long run may affect the confidence in professional qualifications and in the quality of professional labour as such.
- As education is still largely a cultural process embedded in diverse national, ethnic, religious, linguistic settings, there are risks that cross-border provision does not acknowledge and respect cultural sensitivities.
- Finally, the growing divide between the new realities and the scope of existing national policies and frameworks may lead to the growing importance of other regulatory systems that are outside the educational system. Trade agreements and ISO standards for industry are seen by many in education as such examples. Another trend is the assessment of skills and competencies by professions and employers.

Policy objectives

This review of new opportunities and potential risks often associated with cross-border and for-profit delivery of education services raises a number of policy objectives:

- Learners need to be protected from the risks of misinformation, low-quality provision and qualifications of limited validity. The term “*student/learner protection*” can be used as an appropriate label for this policy objective. Strong approval, quality assurance and accreditation systems which extend their coverage to non-traditional delivery modes, including cross-border and for-profit provision, should guarantee that learners are safeguarded from rogue providers and are acquiring qualifications that are meaningful and valid.
- Qualifications should be readable and transparent in order to increase their international validity and portability and to ease the work of recognition arrangements and credential evaluators. Reliable and user-friendly information sources on national education systems and qualification frameworks should enhance the transparency of qualifications and inform their holders of their academic and professional validity in the various national systems.
- In an increasingly international professional labour market, qualifications should be recognised internationally with as few difficulties as possible. Given the national and cultural embedding of education, national control over qualifications will remain necessary, making systems of recognition of foreign qualifications indispensable. Recognition procedures should be transparent, coherent, fair and reliable and impose as little burden as possible to mobile professionals.
- National quality assurance and accreditation agencies need to intensify their international cooperation in order to increase their mutual understanding. By developing principles of good practice and their own standards of professional quality, agencies should guarantee that they themselves are trustworthy, that rogue accreditors can be identified. In doing so, an international network of quality assurance can be constructed to safeguard academic standards of provision and qualifications.

Of course, all this is not new and during the past decades, several measures, policies and regulatory frameworks have been developed to cope with these issues and policy objectives. Most of these measures have been taken at the national level, but also at the international level, principles have been adopted and binding conventions have been approved. In some areas,

the legal and administrative frameworks are largely in place; in other fields, more action is needed to realise the objectives mentioned above.

Respect for diverse policy context

In any case, future policies and actions will have to respect diversity in policy contexts including the following:

- Most countries, if not all, attach a high importance to the national sovereignty over education. 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. International policies will thus have to be based on international consensus among sovereign states.
- Policy-making and regulation in education in most countries are largely the responsibility of national and regional governments and the systems vary from country to country. Institutional autonomy, decentralisation, deregulation, and the increasing involvement of external stakeholders are features of contemporary changes in policy environments in many countries. But seldom do these trends affect the governmental authority over education in a fundamental way. The impact of globalisation on higher education is stimulating many governments to seek international debate and cooperation to converge their own policies with international trends and thus to increase the regulative capacity of their own policies.
- This being said, it is also important to acknowledge the role of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) at the international level in policy development. NGOs such as university associations, institutional networks, students' organisations, professional associations, and networks of quality assurance, accreditation and recognition agencies. These groups are not merely representative bodies of their constituencies, but also provide valuable professional expertise and knowledge that can support policy-making processes.
- Because of national sovereignty, cultural diversity and the prevalence of governmental authority, international framework in education has to be based on cooperation and confidence-building initiatives. Standard-setting regulations are an important policy instrument, as is shown by the UNESCO conventions on the recognition of qualifications. Normative standard-setting in quality assurance of higher education by external bodies to which national governments or agencies have to comply is not a realistic policy option. Non-binding guidelines for policy development, principles of good practice and policy benchmarking, based on trust and free commitment of all stakeholders

involved, are far more realistic options for international policy development. Information networks and databases, hosted by respected and recognised bodies acting as clearing-houses can support these approaches.

The next sections of the chapter address issues and trends and introduce some existing initiatives related to quality assurance, accreditation and recognition of qualifications that could facilitate achieving the policy objectives listed above, while taking into account the different policy contexts. Given that the focus of this chapter is on enhancing student/learner protection and assuring quality provision in cross-border higher education, these sections are oriented to *i*) institutions and programmes, *ii*) quality assurance and accreditation agencies and *iii*) actions and issues related to the recognition of qualifications.

2.2. Institutions and programmes

Recognition of institutions and programmes

The national and regional case studies show that systems for the recognition (the use of terms vary and have divergent meanings in different national systems. Approval, registration, accreditation, authorisation or licensure are terms that were used in the case studies.) of institutions and/or programmes are in place in many countries. In most cases, the national or sub-national authority grants approval to institutions or programmes, thus authorising them to operate within their territorial jurisdiction and to award qualifications that are recognised by the national or sub-national authority. These arrangements are often based on a priori decisions, allowing operation under a certain number of conditions. The case studies show that very different systems exist regarding the approval, authorisation or licensure of private, non-public, non-national or for-profit providers. In many countries the system is state-controlled, leading to a legally defined list of “publicly recognised” institutions. In such systems, access by private or foreign institutions to the system can be difficult. In other systems, such as in the United States, opportunities to operate non-profit and for-profit private institutions have been in place for a long time.

It can be argued that it is in the national educational interest to establish systems of registration or licensure of such educational providers, even if a country is not inclined to recognise their qualifications or to provide public resources. Registration can be a base-line requirement, which does not automatically grant rights to recognition of qualifications or access to public subsidies. Providers wishing to be registered as educational entities in a country where they are active should have the opportunity to do so in a fair

manner without being subjected to unnecessary administrative or financial burdens.

At the moment, there is no authoritative list of institutions/providers at the international level that in one way or another has been recognised by competent authorities to operate in their territory. Such a listing would be a useful student/learner protection tool and resource for stakeholders and consumers including credential evaluators, employers, professional bodies, educational institutions and the general public. The need to list “bona fide” institutions has increased due to the emergence of less trustworthy, fraudulent and corrupt providers of educational services.

The establishment of an international database based on 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 would be useful step forward. On a voluntary basis, each country could provide a list of “bona fide” institutions according to their national arrangements and criteria. The list would not aim to establish general international criteria; each country would provide information about which institutions are on the list and on what basis accreditation is granted under its system. In order to ensure that the database gets a high level of trust and an authoritative status, it is very important that the database is implemented and run by an international organisation with a high integrity and which is well known. UNESCO is well placed to collect these data from governments of member countries and make them publicly accessible and available.

The commitment of institutions to deliver quality service and to award recognised qualifications

Any system of quality control or student/learner protection in higher education will fall short if it is not backed up by the commitment of institutions to deliver educational services of the highest quality possible. Approaches and definitions of quality may differ among institutions and contexts, but the institutional responsibility towards quality in itself is fundamental. While external quality assurance and accreditation will be an important feature of international and national regulation, the institutions’ public responsibility, accountability and internalised “quality culture” will always need to be the basis of any effective system of quality control. The rationales, motives and sanctions for quality or quality deficit may differ between public and for-profit institutions. However, both types of institutions should demonstrate an institutional commitment to quality and develop effective internal quality management systems, delivering

educational services up to the standards that student/learners, employers, the general public and society at large expect.

Sector organisations and inter-institutional networks play a critical role in fostering their member's commitment to quality as part of the self-regulatory capacity of their sector. It is important for new cross-border for-profit providers and for-profit institutions to be part of and/or develop organisations and self-regulatory incentives at the sector level.

Codes of good practice for the delivery of education across national borders are being developed by individual and groups of countries. One example is the UNESCO-CEPES/Council of Europe "Code of good practice in the provision of transnational education" which was adopted in 2001 by the Lisbon Recognition Convention Committee. It includes a number of principles regarding transnational education provision, where the learner is situated in a different country than the provider issuing the award. The principles are sound and serve as good examples for institutions that provide this type of cross-border education.

Of particular interest to students is whether the qualifications delivered by institutions are recognised or have validity in the outside world. There are several gradations of academic and professional, "de jure" and "de facto" recognition of qualifications. It is an important element of student/learner protection and an institution's commitment to quality to give full transparency on the level and extent of validity and recognition of any of its qualifications.

In some countries, institutional awareness of the issues and systems of recognition of foreign qualifications is generally low. National information and credential evaluation systems are less effective, if they are not backed up by institutions' commitment to deliver qualifications which gain the widest recognition possible. There are also cases where institutions, especially in the private, for-profit, cross-border fields of educational activity, give little or even misleading information on the scale to which its qualifications are recognised. It can be argued that it is part of the institution's obligation to guarantee that its qualifications have the widest validity possible and to inform the students/learners as completely as possible on the status of recognition of its qualifications as important elements of student/learner protection.

External quality assurance and accreditation of institutions and programmes

During the last quarter of a century, external quality assurance and accreditation systems have been established in all regions of the world. The

national and regional case studies show that almost every OECD country now has arrangements for the external evaluation of institutions and/or programmes, sometimes leading to formal accreditation or recognition systems which give approval to institutions or programmes to operate on the basis of quality assessments. A more recent trend demonstrates that the field of quality assurance itself is being liberalised, allowing several agencies to enter the system, as the examples of Japan and Germany illustrate. Public regulation in these cases, involves procedures for the recognition of quality assurance or accreditation agencies. In many countries, the government has a very strong position in the field of quality assurance, either by directly establishing agencies and arrangements or in a more indirect way by being the main source of legitimacy of quality assurance and accreditation agencies. In other countries, such as the United States, the accreditation system is, in principle, voluntary and organised outside the state purview, but with strong links to the public regulatory system and in a partnership with state and federal governments. It is desirable that each country establishes a comprehensive system of quality assurance and accreditation in higher education at the national level.

External quality assurance and accreditation arrangements now have become full features of modern regulation systems in higher education. Besides the national state, inter-institutional networks and associations, professional bodies and specialised agencies have also been active in establishing external quality assurance and accreditation systems. A system of “multiple accreditation”, where there are several accreditation procedures for different purposes is seen by some experts as a probably and desirable outcome of development. Although its application in countries is still limited, elements of it are expanding rapidly.

The movements of students, programmes and providers across national borders and the emergence of new delivery modes such as e-learning and for-profit providers pose specific challenges for quality assurance and accreditation procedures. The quality assurance and accreditation arrangements are commonly restricted to the state recognised (functionally) “public” institutions thereby often leaving private, non-national and for-profit forms of provision not covered by these schemes. The challenge for the current quality assurance and accreditation systems is how they can cover public, non-national and for-profit forms of provision by enlarging their scope or by establishing specific systems for these forms.

Regarding external quality assurance and accreditation of cross-border activities, both arrangements in the sending and the receiving country have a role to play. There are very good examples of codes of practice that address this issue such as the UK, US and Australian codes. These codes emphasise the role of quality assurance and accreditation arrangements of the sending

country and try to guarantee that the institution assures the quality of programmes delivered across borders at the same level as those delivered in the home country. A criticism of this approach is that it has a homogenising impact and thus could contribute to “educational imperialism” by not taking into account cultural sensitivities and particular needs and possibilities of students in the receiving countries. The authority of the receiving country over the quality of education needs to be maintained. The key issue is to promote closer cooperation between quality assurance and accreditation agencies of both sending and receiving countries. This could involve mixed assessment teams in order to ensure that the different perspectives are taken into account or enquiries from receiving countries to sending ones regarding the quality status of transnational providers.

The growth of distance learning, especially, new delivery and learning modes such as web-based delivery, e-learning, virtual universities has raised challenges for conventional educational approaches and practices, and furthermore, for quality assurance and accreditation arrangements. In the last years, several initiatives have been taken to adapt existing quality assurance and accreditation arrangements to new delivery modes or to develop new quality assurance systems. These developments are not only relevant to new delivery modes, but are also leading to a general argument questioning traditional input-oriented approaches to quality assurance and accreditation and placing more attention to outcomes-oriented and competency-based approaches.

The dominant attitude of governments and quality assurance agencies today is that new delivery modes should be quality assured and accredited by the same procedures and agencies as traditional teaching and learning modes. In 1998, the US Department of Education took the decision that distance education, including e-learning, is considered to be included in the scope of existing accreditation agencies.

This inclusive approach seems to be appropriate, given the fact that new delivery modes rarely exist in their purest form. In most cases mixed delivery modes are practiced. There is no clear divide between old and new delivery modes, but only a continuum with face-to-face, brick-and-mortar type of institutions on the one hand and full “virtual” universities on the other. Therefore, it is desirable that quality assurance and accreditation arrangements, which are established for conventional teaching and learning modes, also cover new delivery modes. Furthermore, it is preferable that existing codes of practice are further elaborated and adopted by providers and quality assurance and accreditation agencies.

Nevertheless, web-based delivery of programmes and qualifications, e-learning and virtual universities imply a specific challenge regarding the

transnational nature of their activities. The Internet has no physical borders and geographical control of electronic communication is very difficult. Therefore, the “territorial principle” that governs many of the regulation systems, including quality assurance and accreditation arrangements, becomes irrelevant with regards to web-based delivery. Students anywhere in the world can register, follow courses and obtain qualifications from virtual institutions operating with no physical campus.

This makes these kinds of programmes and delivery modes particularly vulnerable to fraudulent activity. The following two aspects could help preventing fraudulent activities. First, it is the responsibility of the provider to guarantee that these programmes are quality assured by a trustworthy quality assurance or accreditation agency. In order to safeguard the seriousness of their own business, these providers need to be fully aware of, and responsible for, meeting the demand for quality assurance at the highest possible level of scrutiny. Furthermore, the providing institution, wherever its legal or operational base is located, also needs to be completely transparent to student/learners about the way in which, and by whom, its operations are subject to external quality assurance and accreditation. Secondly, the recognition of qualifications through web-based delivery, e-learning or virtual universities by any government or professional body should be addressed in the review of the programme by a trustworthy external quality assurance and accreditation agency. To assist in this, quality assurance and accreditation standards, criteria and protocols should be adapted to the specific characteristics and demands of these forms of delivery and moreover with innovative approaches in general, for example, by focusing more on outcomes-oriented and competency-based assessment techniques.

2.3. Quality assurance and accreditation agencies

International cooperation, networking and convergence in quality assurance

Quality assurance and accreditation agencies need to have greater capacity to handle the demands and challenges of increased cross-border mobility of students, programmes and providers. A first step is to exchange experiences and good practice and contribute to the professional development of their staff members through international cooperation and professional networks. This is happening at an international level through organisations such as the International Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE) and through the gradual establishment of regional networks.

Recent surveys have shown that while there still is a huge variety in fundamental principles, types of evaluation, focus and scope of evaluation and methodological approaches, there are also processes of coordination at work. Relatively simple measures such as improving the international composition of review teams, exchanging qualified personnel among agencies, engaging in cross-border joint assessment projects help to share good practice and promote collaboration.

Despite the diversity, there are some shared principles and methodological approaches in quality assurance or accreditation among national quality assurance and accreditation agencies. For instance, most agencies organise their evaluation activities on the basis of the following four principles: *i)* they stress the crucial importance of autonomy and independence of quality assessments both from governments and institutions and make use of external experts; *ii)* they start with the self-evaluation by institutions or programmes; *iii)* they conduct an external assessment by a peer-review group and site-visits; and *iv)* they publish the reports. On this basis, bottom-up consensus building and voluntary acceptance of shared principles could be the best and seems to be the preferred way to proceed among national quality assurance and accreditation agencies. Of course, any move towards the development of such shared international principles would be a very sensitive step and would require acknowledgement and respect for differences in contexts, cultures and regulatory systems.

Recognition and evaluation of agencies

In many countries, procedures exist for the recognition of quality assurance and accreditation agencies by governments or governmental agencies, especially in those systems where the state is not directly involved in the ownership of such agencies. The US Department of Education has established a system of recognition of accreditors of institutions or programmes. And accredited institutions or programmes seek eligibility for federal student aid funds. In Japan, the deregulation of governmental authorisation of institutions and programmes and the introduction of the third party evaluation system are accompanied by a system of governmental recognition of such evaluation agencies. Similar developments of deregulating the quality assurance and accreditation field and establishing systems of recognition can also be seen in other countries.

The quality assurance and accreditation communities have also set up procedures for the recognition of agencies. Soft types of recognition can be identified in the membership criteria applied by professional networks such as the European Network of Quality Assurance Agencies (ENQA).

National quality assurance and accreditation agencies engage more and more in forms of mutual recognition. An interesting experiment by the quality assurance network in the Nordic countries showed that mutual recognition involves rather detailed discussion of evaluation protocols, standards and criteria and other methodological issues. Trying to reach consensus on the strict equivalence of evaluation standards and procedures does not seem to be very fruitful. Building mutual recognition agreements on the basis of confidence in each other's approaches under the conditions that differences between approaches are not "substantial" seems to be more appropriate.

There is also the model of recognition of agencies by an umbrella organisation in the quality assurance field. An interesting model is that of the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) in the United States, in which recognition is given to accrediting organisations on the basis of the evidence that they accept a set of recognition standards. An even stronger model is the German one in which quality assurance and accreditation agencies can be set up freely, but have to be recognised by a central body, the *Akkreditierungsrat*, on the basis of an assessment against predefined standards.

There is a growing consensus in the field that quality assurance and accreditation agencies must also be subject to external evaluation in which their performance is assessed against agreed standards and principles of professional practice in the field. Yet, for many agencies, an international scheme of standards-based external evaluation or meta-accreditation is not yet acceptable. The idea of a Worldwide Quality Register (WQR) proposed by the International Association of University Presidents (IAUP) met resistance among quality assurance and accreditation agencies. The arguments against this proposal include that it would interfere with nationally based legitimacy of agencies, that it is not yet possible to define an universal set of professional quality standards, that it would impose one dominant model upon a still highly diversified field of practice, that the potential negative outcomes are counter-productive in a field still in development, especially in vulnerable higher education systems, and that it would involve a big bureaucracy in order to be operational at a global level. These are clearly valid arguments, but they do not disclaim the necessity of external evaluation of quality assurance and accreditation agencies against agreed professional standards and the need for international public reporting on this. Experiments in voluntary standards-based international evaluation and meta-accreditation could indicate whether this would be a fruitful and acceptable scenario for the future.

Unfortunately, the growing importance of international quality assurance and accreditation and the internationalisation of the systems have

opened up opportunities for not very trustworthy agencies. In the same way as cross-border education has given way to rogue providers and “diploma mills”, there is the risk that “accreditation mills” are entering the field, offering sub-standard accreditation services to educational providers. Such rogue accreditors easily can mislead the student/learners and the public at large, given the assumption that accreditation stands for official recognition of institutions, programmes and qualifications. It is therefore very important that accreditation mills be detected. Fairly simple measures and actions can be of great use. Governments, agencies and their professional networks need to increase their awareness on the issue of accreditation mills and seek to develop monitoring and reporting systems that can lead to the identification of misleading quality assurance and accreditation agencies. CHEA has produced an information sheet on the subject, containing some very basic questions that help determine whether or not an agency might be an accreditation mill. Furthermore, agencies and their networks could inform each other about agencies of disputable quality. Quality assurance and accreditation agencies could publicly demonstrate their trustworthiness by participating in professional networks, complying to good practices, regular external evaluation and recognition by legitimate bodies.

Internationalisation of quality assurance and accreditation

As the higher education landscape itself is diversifying, also the quality assurance and accreditation systems are in a process of increasingly diversifying. National quality assurance and accreditation agencies still occupy an important place in the system. However, subject-specific evaluation and accreditation schemes, such as in business education, veterinary sciences, engineering or accounting, are undertaken by institutions and programmes. Specialised accreditors such as the US based Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) or Accreditation Board for Engineering and Technology (ABET) and the European Quality Improvement System (EQUIS) are becoming active in other regions of the world. As already mentioned, cross-border delivery of programmes is an important area in which international evaluation and accreditation schemes are important, but institutions are also interested in international accreditation for domestically provided programmes and qualifications.

2.4. Qualifications

Diversity of national qualification systems

In general, recognised institutions and programmes can award qualifications to successful students that are almost automatically recognised

by the national state. However there are many exceptions to this rule. In some countries, the state legally prescribes the degree structures institutions have to adopt. There are other cases where institutions have full degree-awarding powers, but are in practice following the basic guidelines of national qualification structures. These scenarios illustrate the diversity of national systems to award qualifications and the national character of these qualifications. One of the most important implications is that when a student or employee is moving to another country, these qualifications have to be recognised again in the new host country. The internationalisation of skilled labour markets and growing professional mobility has therefore resulted in a significant increase in the demand for academic and professional recognition of foreign qualifications. The complexity of national qualifications and credentials and their lack of comparability increase the difficulties for qualified professionals and for credential evaluators in the recognition process. This leads to the importance for each institution to assume responsibility to award easily readable and transparent qualifications.

Academic recognition of qualifications and equivalence arrangements

The case studies show that there are different systems for the academic recognition of foreign qualifications. In the United States, Australia, Canada and the United Kingdom there is no legal authority for the evaluation of credentials and formal recognition of foreign qualifications and such recognition decisions are taken by individual institutions. In countries where qualifications are based on law and recognition by the state, governments have set up or mandated agencies and procedures for the recognition of foreign qualifications and/or have decentralised decisions to the institutional level. In many countries, especially in Europe, advisory and information agencies have been established to assist credential evaluators and recognition officers and to provide information to students and foreign graduates. The joint network of European Network of Information Centres and National Academic Recognition Information Centres (ENIC/NARIC network) is a well-known example, but similar bodies exist in other countries as well.

The establishment of procedures and agencies for recognising foreign qualifications has been stimulated and facilitated by the work of UNESCO. The UNESCO Regional Conventions on recognition are the most significant instruments for the international higher education community and governments to cope with the issues of recognition resulting from international mobility of students and skilled labour. These conventions have shifted the focus of the recognition process in favour of the applicant and by laying the burden of proof upon the host country, thus facilitating

decisions of recognition. With the UNESCO recognition conventions, the international legal framework for recognition of academic foreign qualifications is largely in place. UNESCO has furthermore started a comprehensive process to update many of the Regional Conventions to take into account the new developments in cross-border higher education.

The UNESCO regional recognition conventions are ratified by an increasing number of countries. However, there are still a rather high number of countries that have not yet ratified them or are still in the process of doing so. Ratification by these countries of the “appropriate” UNESCO regional recognition conventions could yield real benefits in terms of recognition of academic qualifications. The UNESCO regional recognition conventions are important tools to deal with the challenges of cross-border education and internationalisation of labour markets and professions.

Besides the formal conventions, other international tools have been developed to facilitate the work of recognition centres and to inform students and graduates. One important international instrument is the UNESCO/Council of Europe “Recommendation on criteria and procedures for the assessment of foreign qualifications”. Together with the “Code of practice for the provision of transnational education”, this document supplements the Lisbon Recognition Convention and provides additional guidelines on the implementation of the convention. Some individual countries, such as Canada, have elaborated their own complementary codes of practice for the assessment of foreign credentials. These instruments should be disseminated and applied as widely as possible in order to stimulate the accurate and convergent implementation of the conventions. This will increase the confidence of the applicants for recognition of qualifications in the procedure that a fair and consistent processing of their request will be carried out.

Mutual recognition agreements facilitating the acceptance or legal recognition of academic qualifications between countries could be another tool for progress. International networks could also be a vehicle for inter-institutional agreements on the mutual recognition of qualifications and credits.

In several countries, joint degrees are emerging as a method for institutions to agree on curricula and learning outcomes. However, recent surveys indicate that national regulations on qualifications and their recognition still hamper swift procedures for recognition of such degrees in the respective countries. Joint degrees can be an interesting tool in the field of recognition of academic qualifications, if the swift recognition of those degrees in each of the participating countries can be guaranteed. The establishment of joint or multinational quality assurance and accreditation

systems can also facilitate equivalence agreements of qualifications among countries. Initiatives by professional bodies working towards agreed international standards for the profession such as that undertaken by the International Union of Architects can be a useful step. Professional mutual recognition agreements such as the Washington Accord for engineers, pursued via professional networks – including those as part of regional trade agreements – can be equally important instruments. Professional mutual recognition agreements are especially interesting as they represent a focal point where issues of recognition of academic qualifications and recognition of professional qualifications meet.

Recognition of professional qualifications

Recognition of professional qualifications involves a number of different actors, such as professional associations, regulatory bodies and employers' organisations and can therefore be a very complicated matter. The situation may be clearer in a number of regulated professions, due to national and international laws. However, for the non-regulated professions which are far more numerous, the de facto decision on the validity of a certain qualification is at the discretion of an individual employer. This can lead to "market values" of qualifications that can differ from context to context and from country to country.

In many countries, such as the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia and Canada, autonomous professional regulatory bodies exist for a growing number of professions. These bodies set entry requirements and standards to which qualifications and credentials must comply. Because of the decentralised and deregulated nature of such arrangements, professional recognition can be very different among various constituencies. In continental European countries, there is a stronger tradition that state recognition of academic qualifications also implies professional recognition. This therefore, guarantees access to professional practice and may make matters more straightforward. However, professions are becoming more organised and increasingly imposing additional requirements to holders of academic qualifications for entering the profession.

Graduates or professionals who want to enter professional practice in another country need accurate and timely information. They need information on regulations, the professional or labour-market value of their qualifications, and how to have their foreign qualifications assessed in order to have them professionally recognised. Employers also face an increasingly international reality in terms of validity and assessment of qualifications and are also calling for clear information on the value of foreign credentials. In

light of these new realities and complexities, the employers are seeking for recognition statements from competent authorities.

There is a need for information systems that include detailed information on the procedures and criteria for recognition of qualifications used by various professional bodies and the additional requirements set for holders of particular qualifications. Existing information centres at institutional or national level for academic recognition need to devote more attention to professional recognition of qualifications in both regulated and non-regulated professions. Furthermore, communication between higher education institutions and academic recognition information centres on the one hand, and employers, professional bodies and labour market observatories on the other, is required in order to improve the information and methodologies for assessment of qualifications.

Increasing 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. There are now a number of initiatives to develop mutual recognition agreements to address issues of professional recognition and equivalency of standards and procedures. Free trade agreements have contributed to this development by encouraging the development of mutual recognition agreements between the parties to such agreements to facilitate trade in professional services. In general, regional trade agreements including provisions on recognition specify priority professions (*e.g.* accountants) and delegate the negotiation of such agreements to the relevant professional bodies. At the multilateral level, the GATS permits WTO Members to enter into recognition agreements with some Members but not others, as an exception to the Most Favoured Nation requirement which normally requires countries to give to all other WTO Members whatever they give to one Member. The GATS neither requires, nor sets standards for, recognition, but encourages, in appropriate cases, Members to work with relevant intergovernmental and non-governmental organisations towards the development of common international standards and criteria for recognition and common international standards for the practice of relevant services trades and professions.

An early and very influential example of mutual recognition of professional qualifications is the “Washington Accord” for the engineering profession. It was developed in 1989 and the current signatories are engineering organisations of Australia; Canada; Hong Kong, China; Ireland; New Zealand; South Africa; the United Kingdom; and the United States. In 2001, Japan was accepted as a provisional member of the Accord. Furthermore, Germany, Malaysia and Singapore have been given provisional membership status in June 2003. The accord recognises the

“substantial equivalence” of each other’s programmes in satisfying the academic requirements for the practice of engineering, while not yet formally mutually recognising professional qualifications.

The Washington Accord example could inspire other countries and other professions to develop similar types of far reaching agreements. But to date, this has not been the case. More limited mutual recognition agreements and memoranda of understanding are being developed in other professions, mostly but not necessarily linked to free trade agreements. Some international professional associations are also developing guidelines on recognising standards of professional programmes, usually respecting national sovereignty and denouncing uniformity.

It is also important to ensure maximum availability of information about existing agreements. WTO Members are required to notify any recognition agreements of which they are a part, providing a relatively useful source of information about existing agreements. However, these notifications are subject to some limitations, including in relation to industry-only agreements and agreements concluded as part of regional trade agreements. There is a need for continuously updated and accessible international information on mutual recognition agreements.

Convergence in qualifications and competence-based learning outcomes

Contemporary higher education systems are affected by two conflicting trends. On the one hand, there is increasing diversification in institutions, programmes, qualifications, delivery modes and teaching and learning settings. On the other hand, there is a process of convergence and standardisation occurring in the same aspects of educational systems. The issue of recognition acknowledges the diversity of programmes and qualifications, but is simultaneously trying to arrive at some common understanding of the academic or professional functions of qualifications. This will allow the holder of qualifications to maximise the academic or professional benefits across social and cultural settings and especially across countries.

Several developments have the ambition to go even further and to enhance the convergence of programmes and qualifications themselves. The Bologna process in Europe is a good example of this, trying to arrive at comparable and compatible degree structures in the participating countries. Professional recognition arrangements, especially in the regulated professions, can have an important harmonising impact on curricula, learning outcomes and qualifications. There is increased understanding among experts and policy makers that it is of limited value to try to achieve

convergence in the formal input and process characteristics of programmes. The way programmes are organised, the delivery mode, the specific teaching and learning setting, even the exact amount of time and workload invested in them are increasingly diverging, but this divergence does not intrinsically affect the comparability of outcomes. It is of much more use to try to enhance the comparability on the level of learning outcomes, especially if these are described as competencies that are relevant for academic or professional practice. Description of programmes and qualifications in terms of learning outcomes and competencies may help to determine their commonality and hence, contribute to their recognition across countries. Accordingly, recognition agencies, credential evaluators, employers would need to re-examine their assessment criteria and procedures for comparing programmes and qualifications in order to accommodate learning outcomes and competencies and not focus only on input and process characteristics.

Focusing on learning outcomes and competencies also allows to take into account competencies and qualifications obtained in informal, non-traditional and non-higher education settings, and furthermore, competencies acquired in informal learning outside any educational setting. The multiplication of sites and settings of learning in contemporary society, ranging on a continuum from formal to informal, including for example the workplace, the media and the Internet, leads to the infinite diversification of learning opportunities. These challenge conventional notions on how learning is achieved and how qualifications are earned and recognised. The recognition of prior and experiential learning is becoming a very interesting feature of modern higher education systems whereby recognition is given and credits are awarded for competencies learned in other than formal learning environments. However, the traditional methodology of credential evaluation is not always suitable for assessing competencies and there is still a large gap between the worlds of credential evaluation and the assessment of competencies. This represents a major challenge and conceptual shift both for providers granting qualifications and for recognition agencies and credential evaluators.

The link between recognition of qualifications and quality assurance and accreditation

In the field of recognition of qualifications, it becomes more and more difficult to determine exactly what the value of a foreign qualification is. Diversification of programmes, qualifications, delivery modes, etc., and the acknowledgment of the relevance of informal and non-traditional learning have devalued the confidence in traditional assessment criteria, such as curriculum, length of study and workload. Assessing the value of a qualification has become much more complicated. At the same time,

evaluators, employers, professional bodies, etc., become more and more interested in determining the quality of an institution, programme or qualification. Many of the problems encountered in recognition and credential evaluation practices concern 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. Thus, cross-border cooperation between quality assurance agencies and recognition and credential evaluation centres becomes a pressing need. International networks of both communities are encouraged to establish joint working groups to determine common challenges, exchange experiences and develop areas of mutual interest. Furthermore, a dialogue with the professional associations is encouraged.

