

Quality Assurance in Transnational Higher Education: From Words to Action
London, 1-2 December 2008

MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE BOLOGNA FOLLOW-UP GROUP

THE CONFERENCE

The ENQA conference on Quality Assurance in Transnational Higher Education: From Words to Action, organised by QAA in London on 1-2 December 2008, examined aspects of quality assurance in respect of cross border higher education activities. It took as a central reference point the UNESCO-OECD Guidelines on Quality provision in cross-border higher education, and focused on responsibilities, principles, and practicalities.

MAIN FINDINGS

Three main findings were identified during the discussions at the seminar:

1. Responsibility for QA in TNE

The conference concluded that it was important that QA systems for TNE should be developed collaboratively. The relevant authorities in the country in which the education is actually offered, and those in the country in which the provider is based, had a joint responsibility to assure the quality of the education offered. In respect of education provided within the EHEA, the E4 (ENQA, EUA, EURASHE, ESU) should survey current arrangements for QA of TNE and promote good practice in their implementation.

Most countries now have relatively comprehensive regulatory and policy frameworks for assuring the quality of higher education offered by their own HEIs within their national jurisdiction – but sometimes TNE activities are excluded from these frameworks. There is no obvious reason why this should be so and all higher education provided by a country's HEIs should be subject to its national regulatory framework, irrespective of where the students actually undertake their study. HEIs should also recognise that the same rigour should be applied to the QA arrangements used for all their programmes, no matter how they are delivered (i.e. including TNE). The same factors which apply to the QA of national higher education should also be applied to the QA of TNE, even though it is being offered in another country (while taking into account the need for relevance to and respect for, the cultural context in which the TNE is being delivered) . As in all higher education, the final responsibility for the quality and standards of TNE lies with the HEIs.

It would be helpful to consider carefully the implications of the phrases "education system" and "institution belonging to a national education

system". For institutions that belong to a national system, there are fairly clear arrangements for QA, at least if the system in question is that of a country which has adequate QA provision. TNE can either belong to a national system while operating in a country different from the one to which it belongs (e.g. branch campuses of a UK university operating in Malaysia, unless the branch campus is (also) formally a part of the Malaysian HE system), or is detached from a national system and does not belong to one. In some cases, it may be difficult to determine whether provision belongs to a national HE system or not, and if it does, whether it belongs to the national system of the provider or the receiver country.

The Conference expressed the view that resources for assessing quality should be built into the planning and delivery of all programmes from the very beginning. There is a clear need for close co-operation and networking between agencies responsible for QA in both countries, given the large number of programmes which can be involved. Enhanced communication, involving both the sending and receiving QA bodies, is particularly important for ensuring the quality of TNE. In addition, there needs to be open and constructive debate about the extent to which governments should be expected to intervene in matters related to the QA of TNE and the recognition of study programmes.

It is not enough to state a requirement that TNE should be subject to QA processes; steps must be taken to ensure that that the requirement is fulfilled. At the same time, an institution should not be required to undergo QA when this is not practicably possible. It would be most undesirable to make such a requirement if the agencies were unable to cope with the total demand for QA within a reasonable time frame. QA agencies, whatever their formal status, operate under a public mandate, and it is a public responsibility to make sure that they have sufficient capacity and resources to allow them to meet the responsibilities placed upon them.

2. Relationship between the ESG, INQAAHE GGP and UNESCO-OECD Guidelines

The Conference agreed that the UNESCO-OECD guidelines provide a comprehensive frame for building institutional and national QA cultures for TNE. They are compatible and can function well with the ESG and the INQAAHE GGP. There was broad agreement that because the UNESCO-OECD guidelines were created using a process that included extensive consultations with stakeholders, there was a sufficient degree of ownership by the key participants to ensure that their implementation was beneficial. But there remained a need for a greater awareness of (and engagement with) the issues surrounding TNE, which the guidelines highlighted. No additional guidelines were needed, but more emphasis should be put on the implementation of those already existing. The guidelines could be used to spur governments and HEIs to consider the significance of TNE and its effects

and impacts on their HE systems. Once EQAR was fully operational, it could assist in making QA for TNE within the EHEA easier, since the agencies in EQAR might undertake QA outside their own countries and have their QA assessment recognised by other countries of the EHEA. It would be important that public authorities in the EHEA accepted the validity of such statements in their own system.

3. Significance and use of information about TNE

The extent of TNE in Europe (and indeed outside) remains unclear - there is no information on how many European countries are involved in exporting and importing TNE. There are problems with capturing data about such activities, as there is no common register of those offering TNE, not all are licensed with the host country government (or are required to be), and many are privately financed, etc. There is clearly a need for better information, to enable a broader understanding of the TNE phenomenon at the societal level. UNESCO and OECD could with benefit include on their respective websites relevant information on TNE providers, existing QA mechanisms, and good practice, thereby making this information more widely and easily available. UNESCO could use its existing portal on recognised higher education institutions for this purpose. This portal could feature guidelines for prospective applicants into TNE programmes. The Conference also concluded that these portals could be further developed, with the involvement of the stakeholders.

The further mapping of TNE in the EHEA could be linked to the ESG, developed by ENQA in collaboration with its E4 partners (EUA, ESU, EURASHE). The E4, that has been asked to take general oversight of quality matters in the EHEA, could be asked to undertake such a mapping exercise liaising with other organisations as appropriate. This would provide an opportunity for agencies, students and HEIs to work together to identify TNE questions in the EHEA and to develop solutions in a way that was consistent with European processes.

MAIN RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE BFUG:

- 1. A general mapping study of TNE provision being offered within the EHEA should be considered. This kind of a mapping exercise could increase understanding of the different kinds of provision involved, how quality is assured, how TNE relates to national education systems, etc. The study could be undertaken by the E4 group in collaboration with other stakeholders.**

There is an assumption that Europe is 'clean' of fraudulent TNE activity but in reality some problem pockets do exist within the region. There is also a lack of knowledge about the scale and types of TNE provision within Europe. A mapping study would address these and help to understand how arising questions are dealt with (i.e. questions such as whether some governments turn a blind eye, the lack of awareness, lack of power, too much/too little regulation etc). Asking governments, HE ministries and other stakeholders how they track the TNE which takes place within their jurisdiction, and how they monitor it for quality would also give a valuable insight into the different structures that currently exist, and how these might be able to work together better.

2. A sentence should be inserted into the Leuven communiqué of the Bologna Process which states that TNE should be considered as 'education' and, as such, should be subject to the same guidelines as are applied to any other educational programmes.

Hence, TNE is subject to the same principles of public good and public responsibility that constitute the basis for all higher education.

It should be made clear in the Leuven communiqué that while inclusion of TNE was implicit in previous ministerial statements, it is now explicit – all the guidance, aims, etc (such as the ESG) apply to TNE, as it is included within the definition of 'education'.