

The UNESCO/OECD Guidelines for Quality in Cross-Border Higher Education

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Abstract

One of the responses put forward internationally through the UNESCO-OECD Guidelines on Quality Provision in Cross-Border Higher Education, aim to promote mutual trust and international cooperation in quality assurance and the recognition of qualifications, in particular those provided across borders. The objective is to strengthen the notion of sharing responsibility for quality higher education between providers and receivers of higher education and to protect students, through a joint effort of the six stakeholders addressed by the guidelines. Dialogue and sharing, access, transparency and reliability of information remain key notions of this instrument. It also underlines that policy-making in higher education reflects national priorities, and should be an important element in cross-border provision, including e-learning. The Guidelines, launched in 2005, constitute a first step in capacity building and assisting national policy makers develop robust quality assurance systems.

It is against this background that we should explore what can UNESCO do, in partnership with other international organizations, to promote trust and confidence in post-secondary e-learning by empowering learners to assess its quality and assist capacity building for quality assurance of cross-border ICT-assisted higher education.

Global Trends

The 1998 World Conference on Higher Education provided a comprehensive forum for policy debate, bringing together four thousand participants from 182 countries, education ministers but also other stakeholders, and proposed a Declaration with basic principles for higher education reforms worldwide, based on equity of access, relevance and quality and acknowledging that governments could no longer do it alone in proceeding to the most radical change and renewal of higher education they have ever been required to undertake.

Five years later, The World Conference on Higher Education Partners Meeting (Paris, June 2003), while reasserting the 1998 Declaration on Higher Education in the 21st Century, proposed UNESCO declarations and legal instruments as relevant educational frameworks that should guide development of national policy frameworks related to globalization and higher education. The Conference further illustrated the new dynamics in higher education that are increasing at an accelerated pace: enrolment rates around 40 to 50 % of the relevant population group are needed to allow a country to function well in a competitive interdependent world; some developed countries reach this percentage while in developing countries they are far lower. In Sub-Saharan Africa the gross enrolment rate was below 5% in 2004, in some countries. A massive increase in the demand for higher education can be expected with a view to development.

Added to this is the challenge of demographic expansion. Even though the 1.9 % growth rate in developing countries between 1995-2000 is expected to fall to 1.7 % for 2000-2005, we can expect that developing countries, which totalled 4 billion people in 1990, will have between 7 and 8 billion people in 2025. By definition the young form a large share of this population, more than 50% in many developing countries. In Asia alone about 1.5 billion people are children under 15 years of age.

Globally, in 2004, 132 million students (including part time students) were enrolled in tertiary education, up from 68 million in 1991.

China has doubled higher education enrolments in the five-year period between 1999 and 2004 and had some 19,4 million students in 2004, pulling ahead of the USA (16,9 million in 2004) as the largest national higher education system in the world.

The start of the 21st century also marked a dramatic rise in the global number of mobile students. In 2004, at least 2.5 million tertiary students studied outside of their home countries and 194,000 of them come from sub-Saharan Africa. In sub-Saharan Africa, 1 out of 16 tertiary students studies abroad, which tells us that students from sub-Saharan Africa are the most mobile in the world.

The issue of globalization of higher education, student mobility, quality assurance and recognition has risen high on the agenda for all major stakeholders in the global economy. For instance, at the latest G-8 Ministerial meeting on education (Moscow, 1-2 June 2006), ministers agreed to promote innovative cross-border education delivery and intensify cooperation on quality assurance and accreditation. They emphasized the importance of international educational mobility and encouraged the promotion of information sharing and the understanding of different national academic practices and traditions.

The issue of access and equity are further reinforced in a quest to provide means for the sustainable development of higher education systems faced with growing demands for enrolments and demographic pressures as illustrated above. Higher education is more and more acknowledged as an element of sustainable development, and lifelong learning becomes a prerogative of societal changes. New providers of higher education, such as those enhanced by ICTs, and new dilemmas posed by a growing commercialisation of higher education, places a renewed focus on quality and the portability of higher education qualifications.

Many now question the survival of the University as the traditional institution known since the Middle Ages. Some state that the "Walls of Academia are Tumbling Down" (Werner Z. Hirsch, 2002). Others illustrate similar developments from a positive perspective by writing about the "tectonic shift in global higher education" (Daniel et al, 2006). The 'brick and mortar' university is opposed to the 'click and mouse' university highlighting the powerful potential of distance education and E-Learning.

The growing perception of higher education as a market becomes a threat to the traditional values of higher education, such as higher education as a public good and a public responsibility, and higher education based on merit as one of the basic human rights.

The changing role of the nation-state in higher education as it loses its monopoly over higher education policy, is another growing concern as is the quest for social inclusion in the context of the increasing commercialization of higher education.

All these issues place quality and evaluation in higher education, through quality assurance mechanisms and accreditation at the heart of national endeavours and regulation, in the context of reinforced claims for national sovereignty, generating heated political debate.

International organizations' perspectives

International organizations have positioned themselves in that regard, particularly as related to the heated worldwide debate about the General Agreement on Trade in Services, GATS, under the World Trade Organization (WTO) that includes higher education as one of the 12 tradable services under Education.

Thus the World Bank launched a new strategy: "Constructing Knowledge Societies: New Challenges for Tertiary Education" (2002), which stresses how tertiary education contributes to building up a country's capacity for participation in an increasingly knowledge-based world economy and underlines the importance of preserving quality while responding to increased demand for enrolments.

The May 2002 "OECD/US Forum on Trade in educational Services" in Washington marked a particular landmark in international discussions on higher education, globalisation and trade in education. Some ministers called for trade and education to be perceived in a common and wider perspective, maximizing its benefits and minimizing possible disadvantages. More importantly they made a strong plea for

OECD and UNESCO to work together. In the same context, the significance of quality assurance and the recognition of qualifications and the necessity of creating an international information network for cross-border higher education were underlined.

As an education response to the above debates, UNESCO launched a Global Forum on International Quality Assurance, Accreditation and the Recognition of Qualifications, in October 2002 in Paris. Conceived as a response to the ethical challenges and dilemmas facing higher education in an era of globalization, its mission was to provide a platform for exchange between different partners and initiate debate on the social, political, economic and cultural dimensions underpinning globalization and higher education.

While the OECD Forum in Washington generated some frustration from civil society, and academia, the UNESCO Global Forum launch appeared to be a success. It brought together a wide range of stakeholders ranging from for-profit providers such as Phoenix University from the Apollo Group, corporate universities such as Cap Gemini Ernst & Young or the private sector such as the University Relations of Hewlett-Packard, to the traditional partners of UNESCO such as public higher education institutions, teachers' and students' associations, from developed and developing countries,

The Forum ended with unanimous support for the Action Plan proposed. The participants agreed that there was a need to build bridges between education (i.e. academic values and principles) and trade in higher education services and that UNESCO, the WTO and the OECD could act as complementary organizations providing a joint forum of both the cultural and commercial aspects of trade in higher education. Existing instruments such as the Regional conventions could adapt to new challenges, while basing themselves on values put forward in the Declaration of the World Conference on Higher Education. Research on the concept of the global public good and empirical evidence of the impact of borderless higher education on widening access to higher education was also highlighted as being needed to support policy.

The Global Forum was followed by resolution adopted by the 32nd session of the General Conference of UNESCO (Paris, October 2003), entitled "Higher Education and Globalization: Promoting quality and access to the knowledge society as a means for sustainable development". It gave UNESCO the mandate to promote capacity building for quality assurance, qualifications recognition and accreditation in all regions of the world, in close cooperation with other international organizations.

Following the UNESCO General Conference, an OECD/CERI Board meeting, and an UNESCO-OECD Inter-Secretariat meeting (October 2003) agreement was reached for the two organizations to work together on developing the Guidelines for Quality Provision in Cross-border Higher Education over a period of 18 months.

There were mixed feelings within UNESCO about the partnership with OECD and UNESCO's overall approach to globalization and higher education.

To make the UNESCO position clear an Education Sector Position Paper on Higher Education in a Globalized Society, was prepared as one in a series of position papers to give the Organization's views on key issues relevant to contemporary education. Based on a review of trends, issues, worldwide debates, regional reviews through case studies, as well as UN and UNESCO standard-setting instruments and principles, UNESCO's position was stated in the following way:

"Higher education in a globalized society should assure equity of access and respect cultural diversity as well as national sovereignty. In addition, UNESCO is committed to assuring the quality of global provision of higher education in an increasingly diverse higher education arena and raising the awareness of stakeholders, especially students, on emerging issues in this field. This position aims to establish the conditions under which the globalization of higher education benefits all."

GUIDELINES FOR QUALITY PROVISION IN CROSS-BORDER HIGHER EDUCATION: ARE INTERNATIONAL STANDARDS FOR QUALITY ASSURANCE POSSIBLE?

The preparation of Guidelines for Quality Provision in Cross-Border Higher Education became one of the outcomes of the policy debates generated by the Global Forum and the subsequent resolution adopted by the 32nd session of the UNESCO General Conference. The aim was an internationally agreed framework.

UNESCO and OECD jointly organised three drafting meetings (April 2004, UNESCO, Paris; October 2004, MEXT, Tokyo, Japan; January 2005, OECD, Paris). All UNESCO and OECD Member States were invited to participate. Official representatives from 94 Member States took part in the meetings, as did observers from countries, experts and NGOs, including student representatives.

UNESCO sought an inclusive process that would allow the least developed countries to be active contributors and express their concerns and this was made possible through extra-budgetary funds.

While the guidelines do address the specific issue of cross-border higher education and its quality, its primary objectives are to support and encourage international cooperation and understanding in quality assurance in general, to protect students and other stakeholders from disreputable providers and to encourage the development of quality cross-border higher education that meets human, social, economic and cultural needs.

Although voluntary and non-binding, the guidelines, bearing the stamp of two organizations, UNESCO and the OECD have already gained high visibility. They address governments but also other stakeholders, higher education institutions and academic staff, students' bodies, quality assurance and accreditation bodies, academic recognition bodies, and professional bodies.

They are based on a set of principles, starting with the recognition of national sovereignty over quality assurance and the diversity of systems that this produces around the world.

One of their major features is enhancing responsibility for partnerships, sharing, dialogue and mutual trust and respect between sending and receiving countries in assuring quality and relevance in cross-border higher education.

The guidelines encourage collaboration and exchange both internally, between the six stakeholders targeted by the guidelines, but also externally, between the sending and receiving countries.

Many participants in the development of the Guidelines felt that they provided a good resource for developing countries to use, acknowledging that their value depended on follow-up in the form of capacity-building. The Guidelines are also perceived as relevant for developed countries. Despite the fact that some sixty countries around the world have quality assurance systems in place, most of them are not geared towards cross-border higher education.

The process of elaborating the Guidelines was intense: 94 governments were involved through delegated representatives; civil society was actively present through a number of NGOs such as Education International, the International Association of Universities, Student Unions and Associations. Distance Education, as a major component of cross-border education, staked out its territory through the presence of the Commonwealth of Learning. Non-OECD countries wanted to avoid being victims of new forms of cultural imperialism and defended their claims firmly.

The Guidelines were supported as a Secretariat document through a Resolution asking for their wide dissemination and a report back about their use to the 2007 General Conference on how they have been used in capacity-building.

Finally the Guidelines were jointly launched by UNESCO and the OECD at a Press Conference on 5 December in Paris. Extensive Press coverage followed.

THE WAY FORWARD: SUBSIDIARITY AND PARTNERSHIPS

Following the adoption of the Guidelines, a series of events have contributed to their distribution, dissemination and advocacy: brochures with the text of the Guidelines in the six official languages of UNESCO have been widely distributed; Regional Committees in charge of the application of the Conventions on the Recognition of Qualifications in Higher Education dedicated sessions to promoting the Guidelines. Stakeholder Groups are addressing issues related to the Guidelines from Adelaide to Shanghai, from Nairobi to Bogota, from Beirut to Tallin, from Alexandria to Port of Spain. The list is not exhaustive and keeps on further evolving.

More significant, however, are examples of interest in the Guidelines independent from efforts by UNESCO and OECD Secretariats. Nigeria, for instance, has developed a new Higher Education Bill inspired by the Guidelines in 2005, while the Tanzanian Government regulations for the Tanzanian Commission of Universities dated 26 April 2006 were changed at the last moment to reflect the Guidelines. Other countries seem to find the Guidelines to be an interesting model as well. They are also increasingly used as a reference point for quality in Distance Education and E-Learning, as the most evident forms of cross-border higher education.

The Guidelines, as a set of principles, a code of good practice, as a voluntary, non-binding instrument seem to have generated and animated a community of practitioners that now talk to each other not necessarily within UNESCO or OECD convened frameworks.

This development is particularly interesting in an area that has been so dominated by politics that most prior attempts, reviewed at the beginning of this article, have either failed, or had less impact.

In conclusion, two principles that appear to have been crucial for the acceptance of the Guidelines can be adopted for other endeavours of a similarly sensitive character. These two principles are subsidiarity and partnerships.

Even in this era of internationalization and globalization, the key locus of quality assurance must be at the national level, because each country has the right to legislate for higher education on its territory and has powers of enforcement. However, the increasing phenomenon of cross-border education requires effective coordination between governments in carrying out their responsibilities for QA. The Guidelines, through UNESCO's involvement based on its mission and principles illustrated earlier, has managed to embed the principle of subsidiarity in a highly contentious political debate. Although by no means as powerful an instrument as the GATS, the Guidelines have nevertheless given a stronger voice to the international academic community and provided an educational response to trade in services.

This brings us to the second principle, that of partnerships. A recent paper (Daniel et al, 2005) identifies what makes multilateral collaboration successful in an era when increased competition can weaken commitment to multilateralism. Examining the process of preparing the UNESCO/OECD Guidelines revealed four ingredients of success:

- Clarity about the status of the document being developed
- Iterative preparation of early drafts using a variety of experts
- Genuine consultation with stakeholders
- Commitment to by participants use the Guidelines when completed

While the first three requirements were amply illustrated through the text, the last one - commitment to use the Guidelines - needs to be further strengthened.

The World Bank, a significant player in this arena, has recently focused its interventions in higher education on quality assurance and seems a natural partner in

these endeavours.

The OECD Higher Education Ministers, at their June 2006 meeting in Athens, Greece, put forward the UNESCO/OECD Guidelines as one of the four policy frameworks moving the higher education agendas, alongside with the Bologna Process and Lisbon Strategy in Europe and the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS) under the WTO.

The G8 Summit in July 2006 in St Petersburg noted the Cross-border Guidelines in the context of achieving quality, efficiency and effectiveness and affordability in their education systems.

This brings us to the conclusion for the essential need for partnerships. Just as the partnership between UNESCO and OECD brought together the providers and receivers of cross-border higher education, for a stronger commitment to the Guidelines and their usefulness for the developing countries, it is hoped that other partnerships could be put in motion as well.

Are stronger partnership between UNESCO, the OECD and The World Bank and other developmental partners and donors targeting capacity-building in quality assurance for developing countries feasible and how?

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