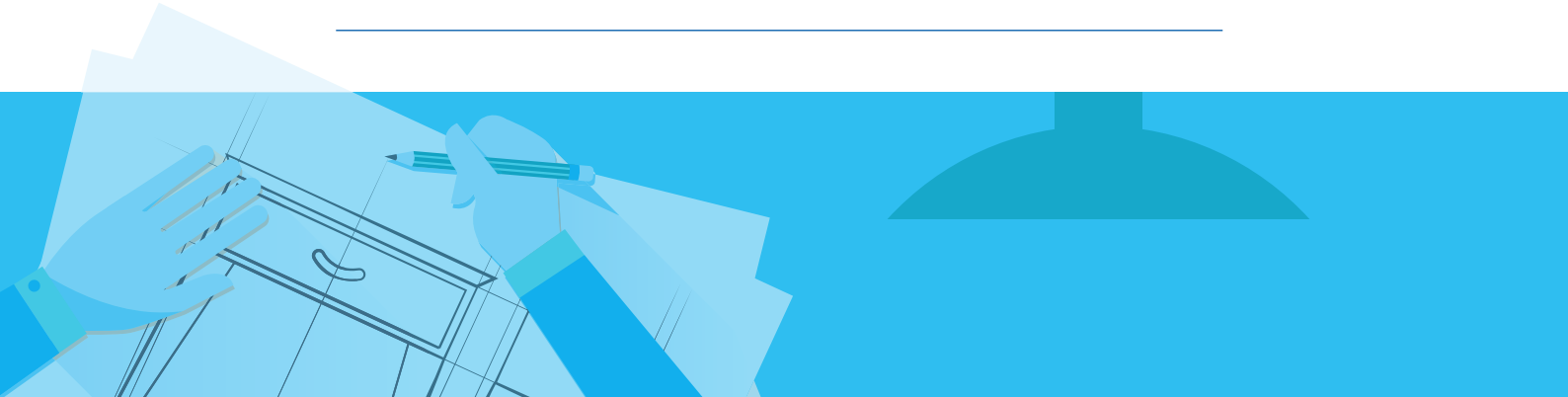
COOPERATION IN CROSS-BORDER HIGHER EDUCATION

A TOOLKIT FOR QUALITY ASSURANCE AGENCIES



COOPERATION IN CROSS-BORDER HIGHER EDUCATION:

A TOOLKIT FOR QUALITY ASSURANCE AGENCIES

This Toolkit is the result of a project co-financed by the Erasmus Mundus Programme of the European Union and coordinated by the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA). The project, called Quality Assurance of Cross-Border Higher Education (QACHE), aimed at enhancing the quality assurance of higher education provided across national borders. In the context of the QACHE project, cross-border higher education (CBHE) refers to any learning activity in which the students are based in a different country from the country in which the institution providing the education is located. This includes the cross-border mobility of study programmes and higher education providers, such as branch campuses overseas, collaborative partnerships in the form of joint-programmes, validation or franchising arrangements, and distance learning provision, but excludes international student mobility.

The project consortium comprised the Asia-Pacific Quality Network (APQN) and the Arab Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ANQAHE), as well as a number of national quality assurance agencies with different experience with CBHE: the National Agency for Quality Assessment and Accreditation of Spain (ANECA), the French High Council for the Evaluation of Research and Higher Education (HCERES), the German Accreditation Council (GAC), the United Kingdom's Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA), and the Australian Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA).

By completing a number of activities during the project's lifespan, the partners were able to identify two key needs:

- to address the current lack of information and policy dialogue on national approaches to CBHE, with a view to improving mutual understanding and building mutual trust amongst agencies.
- to find practical ways in which agencies in sending and receiving countries can cooperate and share responsibility, with a view to facilitating the quality assurance of CBHE, while avoiding duplication of efforts and lessening the burden on cross-border providers.

The present Toolkit aims at addressing these needs. It aims to provide practical guidance to quality assurance agencies ("agencies" henceforth) on how they can improve the sharing of information relating to CBHE and enhance cooperation in its quality assurance.[1] It can be seen as a response to the call made in the *UNESCO/APQN Toolkit: Regulating the Quality of Cross-border Education*[2] to support the implementation of the *UNESCO/OECD Guidelines for Quality Provision in Cross-border Higher Education*[3] through "additional national initiatives, strengthened international cooperation, and more transparent information on cross-border education and its quality assurance."

THE TOOLKIT

Ensuring the quality of CBHE provision is the joint responsibility of all its stakeholders, including governments, higher education providers, quality assurance agencies, and academic, professional, and student bodies of sending and receiving countries. The UNESCO/OECD Guidelines were developed to provide an international framework setting out how all these stakeholders could share responsibilities for the quality assurance of CBHE. The UNESCO/APQN Toolkit was developed to support the implementation of the UNESCO/OECD Guidelines through the provision of practical advice to national-level policy makers, in sending and receiving countries, on how to develop national regulatory frameworks for quality assurance in cross-border education.

Building on these previous documents, and taking into account existing national and regional guidance (such as INQAAHE's *Guidelines of Good Practice in Quality Assurance*[4], the *Standards and guidelines for quality assurance in the European Higher Education Area*[5] and the so-called Chiba Principles[6]), the Toolkit is directed specifically at agencies,

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1 For the purpose of this document "quality assurance" is intended to cover all types of external review activity, including accreditation.

2 UNESCO (2009): The UNESCO/APQN Toolkit: Regulating the Quality of Cross-Border Education. Available at: http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0014/001464/146428e.pdf

3 UNESCO (2005): Guidelines for Quality Provision in Cross-border Higher Education. Available at: http://www.unesco.org/education/guidelines_E.indd.pdf

4 INQAAHE (2007): The Guidelines of Good Practice in Quality Assurance. Available at: http://www.inqaahe.org/admin/files/assets/subsites/1/documenten/1231430767_inqaahe---guidelines-of-good-practice%5B1%5D.pdf

5 Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (2015). Available at: http://www.enqa.eu/index.php/home/esg/

6 APQN (2008): Higher Education Quality Assurance Principles for the Asia-Pacific Region. The need for quality assurance principles for the Asia-Pacific Region. Available at: http://www.apqn.org/files/virtual_library/other_reports/higher_education_quality_assurance_principles_for_the_asia_pacific_region_chiba_principles.pdf

with the aim to provide practical advice on how they can strengthen cooperation in the quality assurance of CBHE. It sets out general principles and recommendations for enhanced inter-agency engagement, filling a gap in existing international guidance on CBHE. These principles and recommendations are supported by explanatory text and examples of how they could be implemented in practice. Since networks of agencies can play an important role in facilitating information sharing and cooperation amongst agencies across national and regional borders, recommendations are also included on how networks can support the implementation of this Toolkit. The Toolkit document is thus composed of three sections: "Information sharing", "Cooperation in quality assurance", and "Networks of agencies".

The Toolkit has been developed with respect to the diversity and autonomy of national systems and their agencies. It recognises that different countries and agencies have different approaches to the quality assurance or regulation of CBHE, and that the precise extent and way in which agencies may be able to engage and cooperate in overseeing CBHE will depend on the different national and regional regulatory frameworks within which they operate and their different approaches to CBHE. The Toolkit therefore does not provide recommendations on how CBHE should be quality assured, nor are its guidelines for enhanced inter-agency cooperation intended to provide prescriptive recommendations. Rather, the Toolkit is intended as a reference tool offering practical advice to agencies, regardless of their specific approach to quality assuring CBHE, on how they may be able to realise the mutual understanding, trust, and cooperation required to facilitate the quality assurance of cross-border provision. It should thus be taken as an additional and complementary tool to existing national, regional, and international reference points and guidelines.

INFORMATION SHARING

Principle

Quality assurance agencies of sending and receiving countries should share information about their respective quality assurance systems, and about providers operating across borders, with a view to facilitating mutual understanding and building mutual trust.

To this aim agencies are recommended to:

1.1. have clear and easily accessible policies for the quality assurance of inbound and outbound CBHE.

A commonly reported challenge for agencies is the lack of information or difficulty experienced when attempting to access comprehensive and up-to-date information about the approach adopted by either sending or receiving countries to quality assure or regulate CBHE. To enhance transparency and facilitate mutual understanding, agencies are recommended to clearly articulate and make easily accessible on their websites their approach to inbound and outbound CBHE, referring to their country's broader regulatory framework for CBHE when applicable.

It may be useful for agencies to:

- develop a dedicated webpage providing information about their approach to CBHE
- include reference to the broader country's regulatory framework for CBHE
- signpost, if applicable, to other actors playing a role in the regulation or quality assurance of CBHE in the country, who may be able to provide further information
- provide contact points for further inquiries.

1.2. make easily accessible a list of those institutions which they have quality assured, including any eventual list of quality assured CBHE provision, either inbound or outbound, and associated reports.

Agencies, as well as providers, students, and other stakeholders, benefit from being able to know whether a provider of CBHE and its CBHE provision is being overseen by a recognised agency in either the home or host country. Being able to access this information facilitates the due diligence carried out by agencies and institutions, in

either sending or receiving countries, and enables agencies to better coordinate each other's quality assurance activities. Agencies also benefit from having comprehensive and up-to-date data about CBHE, either inbound or outbound, enabling better planning of external quality assurance activity, including through inter-agency cooperation.

It may be useful for agencies to:

- clearly list the providers they quality assure
- indicate for each of these providers whether, how, and which of its CBHE has been quality assured
- signpost, where applicable, to the official repository of information about all bona-fide providers in their country
- work with providers and other relevant national bodies to develop systematic data collection mechanisms for CBHE.

1.3. seek to establish regular channels of communication to facilitate information sharing, strengthen mutual understanding, and explore ways in which to cooperate in the quality assurance of CBHE.

Agencies benefit from being able to regularly share developments in each other's national higher education and quality assurance systems and information about providers operating across jurisdictions. They also benefit from discussing and benchmarking their respective approaches to quality assurance, including reference points and review processes, with a view to encouraging reciprocal acceptance of their quality assurance decisions, and exploring concrete ways in which they can more effectively cooperate in overseeing CBHE. This extent of information sharing requires more regular and proactive engagement between agencies than simply being able to access each other's policies, approaches, and decisions on providers.

It may be useful for agencies to:

- make use of video and teleconferencing technology to meet and discuss in an effective way from a distance
- support staff exchange programmes to gain in-depth understanding of each other's approaches and processes
- support the development of intercultural competences among staff taking part in international activities
- sign and implement bilateral or multilateral memoranda of understanding to facilitate regular communication and information sharing and to strengthen cooperation

- nominate a dedicated person responsible for managing international partnerships, also serving as a liaison
- make accessible available reports of any external review they may have undergone
- regularly engage with international and regional networks of agencies, which can serve as a platform for information sharing and enhanced cooperation (see 3.1 and 3.2).

COOPERATION IN QUALITY ASSURANCE

Principle

Quality assurance agencies of sending and receiving countries should seek to coordinate and cooperate in their review activity of cross-border higher education, with a view to avoiding regulatory gaps and duplication of efforts, and to lessening the regulatory burdens on providers.

To this aim agencies are recommended to:

2.1. contact the counterpart agency whenever undertaking review of inbound or outbound CBHE.

As soon as agencies start considering quality assuring CBHE provision, inbound or outbound, they are recommended to liaise with the relevant counterpart agency in either the sending or receiving country. This will serve to inform them that provision falling under their purview is being examined, and in particular to check whether the provision in question has already been subject to recent review by the other agency or is scheduled to undergo review. This should be the first step leading to coordination of any forthcoming review activity.

2.2. seek ways to make use of or rely on each other's collected information or quality assurance decisions.

When quality assuring CBHE provision, inbound or outbound, agencies should explore ways in which they can take into account, or rely on, the information collected by the counterpart agency in either the sending or receiving countries, or any eventual quality assurance decision. This will help to avoid duplication of efforts and to lessen the burden on cross-border providers and the agencies themselves.

It may be useful for agencies to:

- share data and information about inbound or outbound CBHE which may be used by other agencies to inform their CBHE review activity, such as census data and providers' policies and processes, intelligence about particular providers, and full review reports
- brief each other on their national regulatory frameworks for inbound or outbound CBHE
- compare their respective review processes and reference points, with an aim to understanding the extent to which they overlap, differ, or clash
- agree on terminology used for either quality assurance or data collection purposes.

2.3. seek ways in which review activity of CBHE could be undertaken jointly.

Having to be reviewed by both the home and host country's agency is often a burden on cross-border providers, which may have to duplicate efforts in preparing self-evaluation documents, submitting supporting evidence, hosting two different visits, and following up two review reports. Sending and receiving countries' agencies should therefore seek to explore innovative ways to cooperate in the quality assurance of CBHE, with a view to lessening the burden on cross-border providers and making more efficient use of their own resources. This may include undertaking joint review activity, recognising that under certain national and regional frameworks this may not be a possible nor recommended practice.[7]

It may be useful for agencies to:

- have observers from other agencies in their CBHE review panels
- establish joint review teams to undertake a single review visit, either using a single jointly agreed set of standards leading to a single report, or using both agencies' set of standards leading to two separate reports
- coordinate their follow-up activities
- take into account and rely on each other's quality assurance decisions.

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7 For example, within the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) the quality assurance of joint programmes, understood as "an integrated curriculum coordinated and offered jointly by different higher education institutions from EHEA countries, and leading to double/multiple degrees or a joint degree", should follow the European Approach for the Quality Assurance of Joint programmes endorsed by EHEA Ministers at the 2015 Bologna Conference in Yerevan. According to this approach, joint programmes within the EHEA do not require joint review activity, but rather the selection of a suitable agency from the list of European Quality Assurance Register, whose decision should be recognised in all EHEA countries (see http://www.enqa.eu/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/European-Approach-QA-of-Joint-Programmes_Yerevan-2015.pdf)

NETWORKS OF AGENCIES

Principle

Networks of quality assurance agencies should facilitate inter-agency cooperation and the implementation of the QACHE Toolkit.

To this aim networks of agencies are recommended to:

3.1. facilitate information sharing about quality assurance and higher education systems in their member agencies' countries.

Networks of agencies, and in particular regional networks, are ideally placed to provide a one-stop information service about the quality assurance and higher education systems of their constituent members' countries. They should therefore consider ways in which they will be able to offer such information.

It may be useful for agencies to:

- work with their constituent agencies to maintain an up-to-date central depository of information on national quality assurance and reviewed institutions. This may just consist of providing links to information available on agencies' websites.

3.2. strengthen cooperation with other networks to promote policy dialogue, information sharing, and dissemination of good practice on the quality assurance of CBHE.

Networks of agencies are ideally placed to facilitate cross-border policy dialogue and sharing of information and good practice on the quality assurance of CBHE.

It may be useful for agencies to:

- organise events, such as international conferences and workshops, or coordinate joint projects aimed at facilitating policy dialogue, promoting mutual understanding, building reciprocal trust, and advancing the practice of quality assuring CBHE
- contribute in developing shared terminology to help reciprocal understanding and comparable data collection
- work together to facilitate the alignment of regional quality assurance and higher education systems.

3.3. undertake projects and initiatives aimed at supporting agencies in implementing the recommendations included in this Toolkit.

Networks of agencies are ideally placed to encourage and support the implementation of their constituent agencies of the recommendations included in this Toolkit. In particular, It may be useful for agencies to:

- undertake awareness-raising initiatives, facilitate regional and inter-regional policy dialogues, and support capacity-building projects.

THE TOOLKIT: PRINCIPLES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

INFORMATION SHARING

Quality assurance agencies of sending and receiving countries should share information about their respective quality assurance systems and about providers operating across borders, with a view to facilitating mutual understanding and building mutual trust.

To this aim agencies are recommended to:

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1.2 make easily accessible a list of those institutions which they have quality assured, including any eventual list of quality assured CBHE provision, either inbound or outbound, and associated reports.

1.3 seek to establish regular channels of communication to facilitate information sharing, strengthen mutual understanding, and explore ways in which to cooperate in the quality assurance of CBHE.

COOPERATION IN QUALITY ASSURANCE

Quality assurance agencies of sending and receiving countries should seek to coordinate and cooperate in their review activity of CBHE, with a view to avoiding regulatory gaps and duplication of efforts and lessening the regulatory burdens on providers.

To this aim agencies are recommended to:

2.1 contact the counterpart agency whenever undertaking review of inbound or outbound CBHE.

2.2 seek ways to make use of or rely on each other's collected information or quality assurance decisions.

2.3 seek ways in which review activity of CBHE could be undertaken jointly.

NETWORKS OF AGENCIES

Networks of quality assurance agencies should facilitate inter-agency cooperation and the implementation of this Toolkit.

To this aim networks of agencies are recommended to:

3.1 facilitate information sharing about quality assurance and higher education systems in their member agencies' countries.

3.2 strengthen cooperation with other networks to promote policy dialogue, information sharing, and dissemination of good practice on the quality assurance of CBHE.

3.3 undertake projects and initiatives aimed at supporting agencies in implementing the recommendation included in this Toolkit.

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