



Quality Assurance and Global Tertiary Education: Navigating Challenges and Embracing Innovation

26th–29th September 2024
St. Petersburg, Russia

QA for Cross-Border Higher Education: International Standards, Challenges, and Solutions

This section explores the complexities of quality assurance (QA) in transnational education, highlighting accreditation frameworks, qualification recognition, and cross-border collaboration. Articles explore case studies of international partnerships, the impact of accreditation on qualification recognition, and the role of double degree programs in ensuring academic excellence. Discussions address regulatory challenges, institutional cooperation, and the evolving landscape of international education, emphasizing strategies for maintaining high-quality standards across borders.

How accreditation impacts qualification recognition

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Abstract:

The article considers the issue of accreditation influence on qualification recognition. Accreditation and qualification recognition are seen as two inseparable processes that help to promote quality assurance of higher education, international academic mobility and cooperation in higher education on the national and international levels. The author talks about the history of qualification recognition, as well as the measures and tools that facilitate this process nowadays.

1. Introduction

Education plays a key role in the development of societies and economies. The rapid development of the modern world led to the increased demand for highly-skilled employees. According to UNESCO, in 2022 the overall number of students enrolled in higher education was 256 million people around the globe. The world leader is the Asia-Pacific region with more than 50% of the total amount of students involved in higher education. In 2021 the number of students studying abroad reached 6.4 million people worldwide. This amount has tripled in comparison with 2.1 million students in 2000. In the context of globalization and international academic mobility, recognition of foreign qualifications assumes ever greater importance. For the last decades the higher education society has developed several tools that facilitate the recognition process, and accreditation becomes one of these instruments.

2. What is accreditation and why do we need it?

In terms of education quality assurance, accreditation is a review process that helps to learn whether a study programme or higher educational institution meet certain standards of quality developed by regional quality associations or quality assurance agencies. Accreditation originated from the Latin word «credo» that means «to believe, to trust in, to give credence to», and it does help to build trust in the education system for all stakeholders — students, teachers, employers, governments and the society. Besides, accreditation helps to guarantee that graduates receive knowledge, skills and competences necessary for the successful career and professional advancement. Accreditation becomes an independent mechanism that takes into account the needs and requirements of all stakeholders and serves the basis of confidence in education that graduates receive.

The key players in the field of accreditation are quality assurance agencies. Their performance in carrying out independent evaluation is essential for recognition of study programmes which contributes to global cooperation and exchange of the best practices in the sphere of higher education. They act as guides that connect higher education institutions, students, employers and the society and contribute to cooperation between all of them. However, the existence of a quality assurance agency by itself and its accreditation activities do not always provide confidence in accredited study programmes and HEIs. As a consequence, a process called «accreditation of accreditors» appeared, when the agency undergoes an external review by independent experts identical to accreditation of study programmes. Correspondingly, the registers of quality assurance agencies that were reviewed against agreed and internationally approved standards (Standards and guidelines for quality assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG), Chiba Principles, etc.) were established. Such registers exist on the national level — Directory of CHEA-Recognized Accrediting Organizations (USA), on the regional level — European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR) and Asia-Pacific Quality Register (APQR), and globally — INQAAHE Aligned Agencies Database.

There was a variety of causes that led to the development of such registers. Firstly, the increasing number of accreditors, and as a result, the matter of trust to these institutions and their performance. Secondly, availability of information for the public and knowledge where one can find information about accredited programmes and HEIs. Far from every HEI or agency publish the results of their external reviews due to different reasons whether that be the legislation of a country that makes it impossible to publish such information, confidentiality, or the performance of an agency is not transparent enough. Needless to say that the information is not always available for stakeholders who do not speak the national language of an accrediting organisation. Meanwhile, openness of an agency, publication of external review outcomes, certificates of accreditation and other documents are evidence of the agency's performance that also enhance confidence in the accrediting organisation.

3. Recognition of qualifications

The international academic society has been striving to mutual recognition of qualifications for quite a while now as this is a time-consuming journey. The history of qualification recognition dates back to 1970s, when the first regional convention on the recognition of studies, diplomas and degrees in higher education was adopted (Latin America and the Caribbean, 1974). Later on, five more regional conventions in the Mediterranean, the Arab States, Europe, Africa and the Asia-Pacific region were adopted. To this date, all of them except for the Mediterranean Convention have been revised, and in November, 2019 the first Global Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education was adopted. As of March 2024, 28 States have ratified it.

The concept and purposes of all these Conventions is to promote and strengthen international cooperation in higher education, facilitate mobility, give access to higher education worldwide, and to recognise higher education qualifications «in fair, transparent and non-discriminatory manner» (Global Convention, 2019). In the 2012 Bucharest Communiqué the automatic recognition of comparable academic degrees was mentioned for the first time. Nowadays, not every country recognises foreign qualifications automatically, but in Europe some states signed agreements or declarations of intent on the automatic mutual recognition of qualifications. For example, Baltic intergovernmental agreement on automatic recognition (2018), Declaration of Intent by the Baltic States and the Benelux Member States on the Automatic Mutual Recognition of Higher Education Degrees (2019), Nordic Declaration on the Recognition of Qualifications Concerning Higher Education (the Reykjavik Declaration, revised in 2022).

According to the Global Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education, «Each State Party, to the extent feasible based on its constitutional, legislative and regulatory situation and structure, shall put in place an objective and reliable system for the approval, recognition and quality assurance of its higher-education institutions in order to promote confidence and trust in its higher-education system». From this it follows that the processes of recognition and accreditation are indissolubly tied to each other, and qualifications cannot be recognized if they are not quality assured.

4. Tools for qualification recognition

When we talk about qualification recognition, first of all, we talk about demonstration of evidence that the study programme is quality assured, and prior learning and qualifications received in the homeland comply with the requirements of a foreign state necessary to continue studies in this country. These evidence should be transparent, fair and available to all stakeholders. For the last decades several tools have appeared that help to facilitate the process of qualification recognition and present evidence concerning quality of study programmes and higher education institutions.

Qualification frameworks serve as one of the instruments necessary for qualification recognition. It is «a system for the classification, publication and organization of quality-assured qualifications according to a set of criteria» (Global Convention, 2019). The first «prototypes» similar to these organized systems existed even in ancient times, however, the concept of the first National Qualification Framework appeared in the 1980s in the United Kingdom. Nowadays, qualification frameworks are developed on the national, regional or international levels (EQF, ASEAN RQF, etc.).

In 2013 the Committee of the Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region (the Lisbon Recognition Convention) designed the Subsidiary Text to the Convention: «Recommendation on the Use of Qualifications Frameworks in the Recognition of Foreign Qualifications». According to this document, «qualifications frameworks should be used while considering the five key elements in recognition: level, learning outcomes, quality, workload and profile». Regarding quality, the document says that qualifications included by the competent authority in the National Qualification Framework that is self-certified or referenced are assumed quality assured. Therefore, these qualifications can be considered credible in general. However, qualifications of different educational systems are not always fully identical, even on the same level of education. Moreover, far from every country has a national qualification framework, and it raises questions about how to check quality of qualifications received in these states. It should also be noted that quality assurance practices should be harmonized with the national qualification frameworks. Given this context, in 2016 the Member States of the Asia-Pacific region adopted the Sydney Statement at the 14th Session of the Regional Committee on the Recognition of Qualifications in Higher Education in Asia and the Pacific. In this document the participants stressed the importance of interdependence between qualification recognition, quality assurance and qualification frameworks.

The establishment of qualification frameworks was followed by appearance of the national information centres (NICs). The information about qualifications, higher education systems, qualification frameworks, quality assurance, recognition and assessment is provided by NICs. The Global Convention outlines that each state party shall establish and maintain such information networks in order to facilitate access to the aforementioned information. In Europe there is the ENIC-NARIC Network of 54 national information centres established in compliance with the Lisbon Convention; in the Asia-Pacific it is the APNNIC Network of 12 national information centres established in line with the Tokyo Convention. The establishment of such centres is an ongoing process, however, the existing national information centres has already made contribution to qualification recognition by providing transparent data on higher education systems and quality assurance in different countries.

Qualification frameworks cannot exist without quality assurance systems. Today almost every country has its own quality assurance system, unique but at the same time having common aspects at the core. As a rule, QA systems are developed in compliance with the national legislation and/or international quality assurance standards, such as the Standards and guidelines for quality assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG), Chiba Principles, International

Standards and Guidelines (ISGs), etc. The forms of QA can be accreditation, audits, reviews, etc. The general procedure of quality assurance consists of four stages: self-evaluation, site-visit, external review report, and follow-up. If a programme or an institution are quality assured, it means that they comply with certain agreed quality assurance standards. It is one more evidence that qualification that graduates of these programmes or HEIs receive are worthy of recognition. However, to every rule there is an exception. Even in the sphere of quality assurance there are frauds that are usually called degree and accreditation mills. They mislead stakeholders about the quality of a study programme or HEI and usually just give out the certificates of accreditation and diplomas without any review. Hence, «accreditation of accreditors» and availability of open and transparent information about accredited programmes and institutions are greatly important to reduce the number of such mills and enhance confidence in quality of education.

The tools that provide this transparent information are databases of accredited study programmes and higher education institutions. Today such databases exist in different regions. In the USA there is a Database of Institutions and Programs Accredited by Recognized U.S. Accrediting Organizations maintained by the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA). As of June 2024, there are over 8,200 accredited colleges, universities, and higher education institutions and over 44,000 accredited programs. In Europe there is a Database of External Quality Assurance Results (DEQAR) maintained by the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR). Today the database presents information about 99,813 external review reports on 4,069 institutions. In the Asia-Pacific region there is a Database of External Quality Assurance Results in the Asia-Pacific Region (DAQAR) maintained by the Asia-Pacific Quality Network (APQN) and the Asia-Pacific Quality Register (APQR). Nowadays, there are 4838 reports on 247 HEIs. These databases became single storage systems that provide evidence that study programmes and HEIs were accredited against an agreed set of standards by recognised quality assurance agencies, thus, adding to the process of qualification recognition. However, there are certain issues that prevent stakeholders from presenting information in the databases. Firstly, it is the legislation of some countries that does not allow HEIs and QAAs to disclose information regarding accreditation of their programmes or the institution itself. Secondly, even if the databases are considered international and are available to the whole world, the information uploaded is sometimes in the national language, which makes it difficult to read for people who do not know this language. Thirdly, lack of technical and human resources in some QAAs that hinders them in continuous maintenance of the database.

National qualification frameworks, quality assurance systems and databases of accredited study programmes and higher education institutions are independent tools, but it is important to mention that in the process of qualification recognition they cannot be considered as the only reliable source, they should be regarded together. All these tools are not completely perfect but they have a common goal — to facilitate qualification recognition and enhance international academic mobility.

5. Conclusion.

Today in the rapidly growing and developing world recognition of qualifications plays an important role as it eases the access to quality education. The quality of study programmes and qualifications is critical to promote competitiveness on the labour market and enhance academic mobility. In this regard accreditation serves as an important tool of education quality assurance and qualification recognition on the national and international levels. It becomes clear that recognition of qualifications is impossible if quality of study programmes and higher education institutions is not assured. For today the higher education community has already put in great efforts on the way to facilitate the recognition process, but a lot of work still lies ahead.

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