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Theme

Quality Assurance, Qualifications, and Recognition: Fostering Trust in a Globalised World

Sub-Theme

Sub theme 4: Challenges and Solutions to Recognition Issues: new opportunities for a QA contribution to recognition within the frame of global developments.

Topic

Collaborative Cross-border Joint Quality Assurance: Good Practices and Challenges

Authors and Organisation

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Audio-visual Requirements

Use of PPT

Abstract:

This paper aims to share with the international quality assurance community the successful experience of the UK's Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) and the Hong Kong Council for Accreditation of Academic and Vocational Qualifications (HKCAAVQ) in conducting a joint quality assurance exercise of UK higher education delivered in Hong Kong, which resulted in QAA's recognition of HKCAAVQ's accreditation decisions for UK provision in Hong Kong. The intention of the paper is therefore that of contributing to promote recognition of quality assurance outcomes internationally by looking at a concrete example of inter-agency cooperation, discussing challenges and best practices, and identifying prerequisite elements and factors for recognition. This case study in inter-agency cooperation will be set in the context of recent international initiatives aimed at strengthening cross-border cooperation in the quality assurance of transnational education (TNE).

(136 words)

Collaborative Cross-border Joint Quality Assurance: Good Practices and Challenges

Introduction

Quality assurance bodies have little choice today but to work together to address the challenges and seize the opportunities associated with the internationalisation of higher education and growing cross-border higher education. A number of recent international initiatives have called for and tried to facilitate strengthened cross-border cooperation in the quality assurance of transnational education (TNE). These include the Toolkit for quality assurance agencies ‘Cooperation in Cross-Border Education’, developed as part of the European Union funded project Quality Assurance of Cross-Border Higher Education (QACHE), as well as the QACHE follow-up study carried out by the QAA with INQAAHE funding aimed at looking at the obstacles and facilitating factors for cross-border cooperation. The 2005 UNESCO/OECD Guidelines for Quality Provision in Cross-Border Higher Education already stressed how a coordinated effort among quality assurance bodies is needed to tackle the challenges brought about by the growth of TNE. Two recent networks have also been created to focus specifically on facilitating inter-agency cooperation, the Cross-Border Quality Assurance Network (CBQAN) and the Quality Beyond Boundaries Group (QBBG).

This paper aims at illustrating the recent successful experience of the UK’s Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) and the Hong Kong Council for Accreditation of Academic and Vocational Qualifications (HKCAAVQ) in carrying out joint quality assurance of UK higher education provision in Hong Kong in the spirit of these recent initiatives. Significantly, this joint exercise has allowed QAA to recognise HKCAAVQ accreditation decisions for the purpose of UK quality assurance, thus avoiding unnecessary duplication of regulation whilst ensuring that learning experience of UK TNE students is safeguarded.

Background

HKCAAVQ and QAA have a long history of cooperation underpinned by a bilateral Memorandum of Understanding, which has been recently renewed in 2016, as well as by participation in international networks such as INQAAHE and APQN, as well as CBQAN and QBBG. Both agencies are committed to establishing a strategic alliance to enhance external quality assurance in both jurisdictions and improve the quality of higher education in the United Kingdom and Hong Kong. This commitment includes seeking to strengthen cooperation in the quality assurance of UK TNE in Hong Kong. To this end, QAA and HKCAAVQ conducted two joint quality assurance exercises as part of QAA’s 2018 review of UK TNE in Hong Kong, and HKCAAVQ’s planned accreditation of a number of UK programmes delivered in Hong Kong.

Approach to joint review

HKCAAVQ and QAA set up a joint panel, with QAA TNE reviewers also acting as full members of the HKCAAVQ accreditation panel. In this way, playing a dual role, the joint reviewers were able to use information collected as part of the HKCAAVQ accreditation process to inform the QAA TNE Review. This allowed the two agencies to reduce information collection burden, and to avoid carrying out two separate site visits. The

following outlines the key aspects of the approach taken by QAA and HKCAAVQ for the joint exercises for the benefit of all stakeholders involved:

Panel formation	The HKCAAVQ accreditation panel included two QAA reviewers who acted as both HKCAAVQ panel members (including acting as Chair) and QAA reviewers.
Information submission before the site visit	The information set submitted for the HKCAAVQ accreditation exercise was also received by QAA to ensure it can be used to inform its TNE Review. Additional information had been submitted to QAA exclusively for the purpose of the QAA TNE Review.
Collection of evidence during site visit meetings	<p>The HKCAAVQ accreditation panel undertook a standard HKCAAVQ accreditation visit, asking providers’ representatives a set of questions with reference to HKCAAVQ standards and criteria. Some of these questions might replicate questions that the QAA reviewers would plan to ask to inform the TNE Review. In this case the QAA reviewers were able to use relevant information collected during the HKCAAVQ accreditation exercise meetings to inform the QAA TNE Review. This allowed them to avoid unnecessary duplication of meetings and questions.</p> <p>QAA reviewers did require some additional information for the QAA TNE Review. This additional information was collected in a range of ways:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) at the end of each HKCAAVQ accreditation exercise meeting, by asking additional questions to participants at the meeting, the responses of which were used only for the QAA TNE Review. b) by setting up an additional meeting at the end of the HKCAAVQ accreditation visit programme to explore with stakeholders not already included in planned HKCAAVQ accreditation exercise meetings any further questions not already asked by the HKCAAVQ accreditation panel. This additional meeting (if required) was only for the QAA TNE Review and did not form part of the formal HKCAAVQ accreditation exercise. <p>NOTE: During HKCAAVQ accreditation meetings, it was made clear to participants which questions were only for the HKCAAVQ accreditation exercise, which questions were asked for both HKCAAVQ accreditation and the QAA TNE Review, and which for QAA TNE Review only.</p>
Outcomes	Separate reports were issued by individual agencies with reference to the relevant standards and criteria.

Challenges and Good Practices

The successful realisation of the joint quality assurance exercises was built on a number of steps aimed at overcoming the challenges associated with the different approaches adopted by QAA and HKCAAVQ.

Quality assurance agencies differ greatly in purpose and scope from one country to another. A particular challenge was represented by the difference in focus and intended outcomes of the two agencies' processes, with HKCAAVQ's processes aimed at programme level accreditation while QAA's TNE review processes being enhancement oriented and looking at a broader institutional and strategic level. Engaging in proactive dialogues and communications to share information becomes critical. QAA and HKCAAVQ started sharing from the very beginning information to enhance mutual understanding of the respective quality assurance processes and standards for transnational education. Data and intelligence about UK TNE in Hong Kong was shared from the start to facilitate the identification of the sample of UK provision to be looked at as part of QAA TNE Review and the provision which could fall under the scope of the joint review exercise. This formed a critical foundation of the joint quality assurance exercises.

Another challenge was to prepare staff and reviewers involved in the joint exercises to ensure they were familiar with quality assurance policies and standards adopted by both agencies. Briefing sessions were conducted to help staff and review panel members in the two quality assurance agencies understand the key features of the respective operating frameworks. For example, HKCAAVQ shared its experiences and observations in non-local programme accreditations with the QAA TNE Review team, while QAA staff shared TNE Review processes and practices with HKCAAVQ colleagues. Inter-agency cooperation provides staff and reviewers an opportunity to expand their range of quality assurance knowledge and experiences. It also enables them to contribute to the development of best practices in other jurisdictions.

Each quality assurance body has its own standards that providers are required to meet. HKCAAVQ conducts an accreditation exercise, in which providers must meet the standards required by HKCAAVQ to gain or maintain its accreditation status. The purpose of the QAA TNE Review is to identify good practices to enhance the quality of transnational education operated outside the UK. A preliminary desk-based comparability study was conducted to benchmark the standards and reference points underpinning the HKCAAVQ accreditation process and QAA TNE Review. It was found that there were a number of common standards used by both quality assurance agencies, such as staffing, resources as well as quality assurance systems. Identifying similarities in standards and processes through conducting desk-based study is useful to gain common grounds in the joint exercises.

Having providers embrace the joint exercise was another challenge as this was a new way of conducting an exercise. When liaising with the providers involved, some raised concerns about how different standards would be applied by the two agencies and how one agency standard would apply vis-a-vis another. So different parties may be uncertain about how it works. Different forms of briefing activity were also carried out to help UK providers understand the process and approach of the joint quality assurance exercises. Guidelines for all stakeholders involved were developed for all parties to ensure the same understanding of the process and the eventual outcomes.

Outcomes

The joint exercise conducted by QAA and HKCAAVQ is a good example showing how two quality assurance agencies worked collaboratively to support the developments in the global quality assurance community.

The first significant outcome of QAA/HKCAAVQ joint exercise was to gain a deeper understanding of differences and commonalities of each other quality assurance systems and processes. A key difference between the two processes run by HKCAAVQ and QAA is that HKCAAVQ runs a programme accreditation process while QAA TNE Review is an enhancement-oriented review which includes a focus on broader institutional and strategic aspects. In addition, while HKCAAVQ accreditation has a definite outcome, which affects the programme recognition under the Hong Kong Qualifications Framework, QAA TNE Review aims to identify best practices and offer constructive recommendations for improvement. In terms of similarities, the two agencies work under very similar principles and processes. Similar principles included fitness for purpose, peer review and an evidence-based approach while the process consisted of the review of the documents and on-site visits to collect data. Similar standards were employed in regards to staffing and quality assurance norms. Key to the success of the joint review exercise was to seek common ground while retaining the respective fundamental differences in processes. As a result, reciprocal trust in each other's quality assurance system was strengthened.

Perhaps the most significant outcome of these joint quality assurance exercises has been that the participation of QAA reviewers in HKCAAVQ accreditation panels acting on behalf of both agencies facilitated the benchmarking of standards and processes through their practical implementation. On this basis, it was possible to conclude that HKCAAVQ accreditation decisions can be relied upon by QAA for UK quality assurance purposes as a guarantee of robust quality assurance of UK TNE in Hong Kong. This means that QAA can recognise HKCAAVQ accreditation decisions, avoiding the need of future review of UK TNE provision already accredited by HKCAAVQ. This is a big step toward enhancing the efficiency of the quality assurance of cross-border provision, avoiding unnecessary duplication of regulatory efforts.

Conclusion

More generally the successful example of cooperation between QAA and HKCAAVQ required flexibility, innovative thinking, regular communication, and understanding each other specific operating environment. The two agencies cooperated closely through all the stages of the QAA TNE Review process. Cooperation between the two agencies has also extended to the dissemination of the findings of the joint quality assurance exercise. The two agencies have co-organised a conference on cooperation in quality assurance event in Hong Kong, contributing also to a broader seminar looking at the issue of cooperation in the quality assurance of cross-border higher education in the East Asia context. Such close cooperation allowed both agencies to deepen reciprocal understanding, and to strengthen reciprocal trust in each other's quality assurance systems. The joint quality assurance exercises conducted in Hong Kong can serve as a starting point to illustrate how two agencies can work in a collaborative and complementary fashion to develop an innovative approach to reduce duplication of efforts and achieve mutual recognition. More inter-agency collaboration is needed to further improve the quality of transnational education and tackle the challenges in the borderless world.