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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

Quality Assurance Works Hand-in-hand with Qualifications Framework to Promote Recognition

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Abstract

The development of National Qualifications Frameworks (NQFs) provides significant opportunities for Quality Assurance (QA) agencies to contribute solutions to the challenges of qualification recognition. The Hong Kong Qualifications Framework (HKQF) is underpinned by a robust quality assurance mechanism to ensure all HKQF-recognised qualifications are of good quality and standard. With the launch of HKQF, the Hong Kong Council for Accreditation of Academic & Vocational Qualifications (HKCAAVQ) plays an important role in facilitating recognition of tertiary education locally and internationally by implementing various innovative initiatives, including use of the HKQF in its qualifications assessment, the implementation of non-local programme accreditation, use of comparability studies on the HKQF and overseas QF, and participation in joint quality assurance exercises with other national QA agencies. These initiatives demonstrate how a quality assurance agency can support QF, and promote trust and enhance mutual recognition in a globalised world. This paper also describes challenges and solutions which can become the basis for further promotion of recognition of qualifications at the national and global levels.

Quality Assurance Works Hand-in-hand with Qualifications Framework to Promote Recognition

Introduction

National Qualifications Frameworks (NQFs) have become an increasingly important policy instrument to improve access and participation in lifelong learning. More than 150 countries and territories are involved in the development and implementation of NQFs (Education Bureau and European Commission 2016). Along with the growth of NQFs, regional qualifications frameworks have also been developed which enable promotion of international and global communication and cooperation and comparability of qualifications. Hong Kong established its Hong Kong Qualifications Framework (HKQF) in 2008, which is underpinned by a robust quality assurance mechanism to ensure all QF-recognised qualifications are of good quality and standard (HKQF 2018a). This paper will show how quality assurance undertakings by the Hong Kong Council for Accreditation of Academic & Vocational Qualifications (HKCAAVQ) works with the HKQF to facilitate recognition of local and international tertiary education.

Development of Qualifications Framework in Hong Kong

With the advent of globalisation and the transformation into a knowledge-based economy, the Hong Kong Government stressed the importance of enhancing capability and competitiveness of its workforce. In 2004, the Executive Council of Hong Kong endorsed the development of the HKQF to encourage and promote lifelong learning (Young 2008) and the HKQF was officially launched on 5 May 2008 upon the enactment of the Accreditation of Academic and Vocational Qualifications Ordinance (AAVQO) (Cap 592). The key objective of establishing the HKQF is to provide a platform to facilitate lifelong learning with a view to continuously enhancing the quality, professionalism and competitiveness of the workforce in an increasingly globalised and knowledge-based economy (HKQF 2018a).

The HKQF is a typical enabling framework which is a voluntary system and applicable to all sectors to facilitate an interface between academic, vocational and continuing education. There are three key features of the HKQF: QF levels, credits and award titles. The HKQF is a seven-level hierarchy of qualifications. Each level is characterised by outcome-based generic level descriptors, describing the common features of qualifications (HKQF 2018a). A QF credit, expressed in notional learning hours, measures the volume or size of learning of a qualification. A QF award title distinguishes programmes according to their levels and credit sizes (QFS 2018). The Credit Accumulation and Transfer (CAT) system is another key function of the HKQF. Individuals are provided with flexibility while duplication in learning is minimised.

Since the launch of the HKQF, the HKCAAVQ, formerly the Hong Kong Council for Academic Accreditation (HKCAA), has statutory powers under the AAVQO (Cap 592) to act as the Accreditation Authority and Qualifications Register (QR) Authority. All qualifications have to be accredited by the HKCAAVQ, except for those accredited by self-accrediting institutions (QFS 2018). The Accreditation Authority is responsible for developing and implementing the standards and mechanism for academic and vocational accreditations and determining whether a qualification from a programme offered by a non-self-accrediting operator can meet a certain HKQF standard.

The public face of the HKQF is the QR, which is a centralised online database of qualifications. All qualifications listed on the QR are quality-assured and recognised under the HKQF (HKQF 2018b). In its role as the QR Authority, the HKCAAVQ is responsible for determining the entry of a

qualification onto, and removal of such qualification from, the QR and monitoring advertisements relating to the HKQF to prevent misrepresentation ((Education Bureau and European Commission 2016). As of December 2018, there are 8187 qualifications published on the QR offered by 237 operators (HKQF 2018b).

The development of the NQF is not necessarily limited to being a national policy, but one with global reach. Mrs. Carrie Lam, Chief Executive of Hong Kong Special Administrative Region also states that Hong Kong has been progressively raising its profile internationally and facilitating recognition of qualifications among counterparts in Mainland China and overseas (Education Bureau and HKQF 2018). With the advent of globalisation and rapid development of national and transnational qualifications frameworks, the Hong Kong Government strives to internationalise the HKQF to support Hong Kong to become a regional educational hub and provide a basis for referencing, alignment, or recognition of qualifications under the HKQF by overseas counterparts (QFS 2018).

HKCAAVQ's Initiatives in Promoting Recognition under the HKQF

The integrity of the HKQF is underpinned by a robust quality assurance mechanism. The HKCAAVQ as the Accreditation Authority of HKQF in Hong Kong strives to work within the HKQF to enhance recognition of qualifications locally and internationally since its launch through the following initiatives:

1. Use of Comparability Studies as Evidence in Accreditation and Assessment

To further internationalise the HKQF and promote recognition, the Hong Kong Government conducted four comparability studies on the HKQF and overseas Qualifications Frameworks, including the European Qualifications Framework (EQF), the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework, the New Zealand Qualifications Framework (NZQF) and the Irish National Framework of Qualifications. These four comparability studies not only facilitate recognition of qualifications, but also enhance the quality of education. The HKCAAVQ as the Accreditation Authority of the HKQF makes reference to such findings in its accreditation to safeguard the quality of education. For example, in a Learning Programme Accreditation exercise, the provider is required by the HKCAAVQ panel to review the HKQF levels of the individual modules of the non-local programmes it offers in Hong Kong to align with the outcomes of HKQF and EQF referencing exercises. In addition, the HKCAAVQ uses the findings in its assessment services. With reference to the comparative analysis of the NZQF and the HKQF, the HKCAAVQ updates its Country/Area Profile for New Zealand to enhance its assessment of New Zealand qualifications (Education Bureau, HKQF and NZQA 2018).

2. Indication of HKQF Level in Qualifications Assessment

Hong Kong is a top territory for sending students abroad and also a transnational education hot spot, alongside Australia and the UK (Ilieva et al. 2017). It is critical that the qualifications awarded by cross-border providers are legitimate and recognised for employment or further studies both a home and abroad (Knight 2007). However, in reality, non-local qualifications may not be recognised locally. Students with non-local qualifications sometimes are required to provide evidence to ascertain that their non-local qualifications are comparable in standard to the entry qualification requirements stipulated by employers or institutions. The HKCAAVQ provides qualifications assessment services to assess whether the totality of students' local and non-local educational qualifications (obtained from senior second onwards) meets the standard of one particular level of qualifications in Hong Kong. The totality of the educational qualifications is assessed and compared to the level of the HKQF. In view of the development of national and transnational QFs, the

qualifications with indications of the HKQF can facilitate cross border mutual recognition of qualifications and the mobility of labour. NQFs act as translation devices and enable people to draw some initial conclusions when comparing qualifications across borders (Education Bureau, HKQF and NZQA 2018).

3. Non-local Programme Accreditation Recognised under HKQF

The credibility of higher education programmes and qualifications is important for students, their employers and the academic community (Knight 2007). The HKCAAVQ conducted a pilot exercise of non-local programme accreditation in 2009. After this successful pilot exercise, non-local programmes became eligible to undertake the same accreditation tests as local programmes in Hong Kong and if successful, be included on the QR. The number of accredited non-local providers of transnational education has increased. The result may be due to various incentives provided by the Hong Kong Government. Hong Kong is one of the few regions which provide bursaries to students on non-local programmes (Ilieva et al. 2017). For example, students of full-time non-local programmes are eligible to apply for financial assistance if such programmes have been accredited by the HKCAAVQ. In addition, such qualifications attained by students are recognised under the HKQF as meeting the same standard of comparable qualifications at the approved HKQF level(s) obtained in Hong Kong. As a result, students of accredited non-local programmes are provided with the same benefits and therefore equal opportunities are given to those students with accredited local qualifications (Kristoffersen and Chong 2015).

4. Use of NQFs to Facilitate International Cooperation and Recognition

It is becoming increasingly popular to use NQFs for international cooperation and recognition purposes (Education Bureau, HKQF and NZQA 2018). The HKCAAVQ and the UK's Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) have developed a model for cross-border collaboration, having conducted two pilot joint quality assurance exercises involving two partnerships between a UK degree-awarding body and a Hong Kong provider in April and May 2018. NQF is an important tool for such an inter-agency collaboration. The HKQF and the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland (FHEQ) share common features, including the outcome-based approach, the naming of bachelor's, master's and doctoral award and measure of credits (QAA 2018). HKQF credits are also aligned with higher education credit framework for England in which a single credit represents 10 notional hours of learning. Credit is a tool for describing the comparability of learning achieved in terms of its volume and intellectual demand (QAA 2008). Through these joint initiatives, QAA concluded that it can confidently rely on HKCAAVQ's accreditation decisions for UK Transnational Education (TNE) provision in Hong Kong with HKCAAVQ's peer review panels and the use of the HKQF which shares similar features as the ones in the UK, such as levels and credits (QAA 2018).

Reflections: Challenges and Solutions

The HKQF helps define the standards of qualifications, assure quality, develop an articulation ladder and promote mobility of learners and labour (Education Bureau, HKQF and NZQA 2018). NQFs not only provide benefits, but also bring with them challenges for implementing the initiatives to promote recognition of tertiary education outcomes.

Different Purposes for NQFs

NQFs are mostly designed to clarify and map the qualifications in a country or territory for its citizens – the hierarchy, the links between them and pathways for learners (Education Bureau, HKQF and NZQA 2018). Each jurisdiction's context is unique and has its own purposes and design for NQF. For example, the differences between the HKQF and the EQF derive principally from their

individual fundamental purposes. The HKQF is a local framework with qualifications registered at a particular level of the HKQF while the EQF is a regional framework to allow comparison between qualifications on different national frameworks. No qualifications are registered on the EQF (Education Bureau and European Commission 2016). Therefore, it is important to understand the differences and limitations of comparability studies when using the findings in quality assurance processes. The comparability studies between the HKQF and overseas QFs are still important in providing common reference frameworks that enable comparisons and understanding of qualifications across participating countries (Education Bureau and HKQF 2018).

Diverse Education Systems

There is a need to develop an international system to facilitate and ensure recognition of academic and professional qualifications (Knight 2007). However, each country has its own education systems with different qualification titles and credits. When conducting qualifications assessment, both qualitative and quantitative assessment criteria are used in the assessment process. But, there are substantial differences (in terms of level, student load, quality, profile and learning outcomes) between the totality of the qualification and the targeted level of the HKQF. Therefore, it is a challenge to assess individual qualifications from one QF to another even though the qualification assessment outcome indicates an HKQF level. Reciprocal trust in each other's NQF is vital for recognition, but it takes time to build confidence. The conduct of benchmarking or comparability studies with overseas Qualification Frameworks appears as a good starting point to gain this reciprocal trust. In addition, the use of the findings by the HKCAAVQ shows core values of trust and respect among different stakeholders, including governments and quality assurance agencies.

Voluntary Quality Assurance System under the HKQF

It is a challenge to deal with the increase in cross-border education by traditional higher education and newer private commercial providers who do not participate in accreditation and quality assurance schemes (Knight 2007). Accreditation under HKQF is voluntary in Hong Kong. It is at the providers' discretion to determine whether they use HKQF levels or credits for their programmes. Over the next decade Hong Kong will experience a substantial decline in secondary school leavers and the population of postsecondary students will drop. This increases competition among local and non-local institutions offering postsecondary programmes. Providers may not seek HKCAAVQ's accreditation due to financial implications for accreditation fees. To support providers to undergo the accreditation under the HKQF, the Hong Kong Government has implemented incentive schemes for providers, such as the Accreditation Grant Scheme for Self-financing Programmes which covers the fees for accreditation exercises.

No Perfect Matches in NQF Collaboration

Even though the NQF is a useful tool for international collaboration, quality assurance agencies cannot expect that they are the same in detail, in terms of QF levels, credits and award titles across jurisdictions. In the joint quality assurance exercises, a difference between the FHEQ and the HKQF in the nomenclature of equivalent levels of study and awards are clearly evident (QAA 2018).

FHEQ (and EQF)	HKQF
Level 4	Level 3
Level 5	Level 4
Level 6	Level 5
Level 7	Level 6
Level 8	Level 7

Woodhouse (2004) says mutual recognition must take such differences into account. Therefore, differences in NQFs should not block recognition of qualifications. Furthermore, the similarities should also be taken into account. For example, the FHEQ and the HKQF are based on the

achievement of learning outcomes on the basis of awards of qualifications from similar levels of education (QAA 2018). Therefore, the HKCAAVQ and QAA seek common ground while retaining differences. In addition, the two agencies cooperated closely, sharing data, information and intelligence on TNE Review and HKCAAVQ accreditation (Fearnside and Chong 2018). Such close cooperation allowed the two agencies to deepen reciprocal understanding of commonalities and differences. As a result, reciprocal trust in each other's quality assurance system has been strengthened (QAA 2018).

Conclusion

The HKQF is not only a policy to encourage lifelong learning and enhance the capability and competitiveness of the workforce in Hong Kong, but also a platform to facilitate recognition in a globalised world. To achieve this, quality assurance must work hand-in-hand with the Qualifications Framework. Recognition of quality of education is at the heart of quality assurance. The initiatives taken by HKCAAVQ can serve as examples to illustrate how a quality assurance agency can support the implementation of QF and work in a collaborative and complementary fashion with different stakeholders to achieve recognition of qualifications locally and internationally. Close communication among the jurisdictional regulatory bodies is essential in the implementation of NQFs to achieve mutual understanding and recognition.

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