

Experts Meeting on an International Database of Recognised Higher Education Institutions
7 April 2004 – UNESCO, Paris

Background

A small Experts Group was convened on 7 April 2004 at UNESCO Headquarters, Paris, to provide suggestions on an international database/portal. It is foreseen that the outcomes of this Experts Group Meeting would then be discussed by the Drafting Group of the UNESCO/OECD guidelines in Tokyo, October 2004 to seek a consensus between the countries on the possible creation of such a database/portal as part of the discussions on the UNESCO/OECD guidelines on Quality Provision in Cross-border Higher Education.

This Experts Group consisted of experts representing bodies active in the recognition of qualifications, quality assurance, and higher education and information services for students, and came from Canada, Hong Kong (China), India, Japan, South Africa, the United Kingdom and the United States of America, as well as International Association of Universities (IAU). In addition, a representative of the Japanese Ministry of Education, and Members of the OECD and UNESCO Secretariats participated in this discussion. (Annex I - List of Participants).

This meeting was chaired by Mr Kurt Larsen of the OECD and Ms Stamenka Uvalic-Trumbic of UNESCO.

Discussion

1. General Issues

- a) Consensus from the Workshops of the Drafting Meeting, 5-6 April 2004, stressed the importance of building on existing initiatives.
- b) The tool should be characterised by simplicity and user friendliness. It would be important that the database should be easily accessible, and therefore not require a high level of technical sophistication.
- c) It would be important to link the work on the database/portal with the work on revising the UNESCO Conventions on the recognition of qualifications.
- d) The OECD Secretariat stressed that it would be important that the final database/portal would be more than just a portal with links to existing sites. At the very minimum, the database/portal should have good search mechanisms and guidelines on the contents of the site.

2. Capacity Building/National Roles

- a) There is a need for a high degree of trust between countries for the database/portal to function properly. It is important to note that countries' focus on quality may vary between that of programmes and/or that of institutions
- b) This tool could be used for capacity building at the country level for statistical officers in Ministries of Education to compile these lists of recognised higher education institutions. The UNESCO Institute of Statistics (UIS) is interested in assisting in such an exercise.
- c) Some countries would need help with capacity building at the national level to assist them in setting up lists of bona fide institutions to be included in the database/portal. UNESCO does not have the funds to support capacity building in this area at present, but would nevertheless be able to envision some pilot studies. These aspects would have to be explored further.
- d) It is important that this suggestion builds on existing networks, information and data in all UNESCO regions.

3. Purpose

- a) It is important that the 'consumer protection' objective of the database/portal should be clearly

defined. In addition, other aspects of the purpose of the database/portal should be made more explicit. The establishment of such a database/portal can also be helpful for national recognition of qualifications bodies in their decisions on the recognition of foreign degrees, as well as providing incentives for institutions to promote transparency and quality, as they have an interest in being on the nationally determined list of recognised higher education institutions.

- b) It is important to note that while the underlying purpose of the database/portal is consumer protection, inclusion of an institution on the database/portal will carry with it a judgement on its quality.
- c) The Representative from the Hong Kong Council for Academic Accreditation (HKCAAC) stated that, according to its experience, students generally have two types of queries: i) recognition of national qualifications in a foreign country; and ii) recognition of foreign qualifications in the home country. In both cases a list of nationally recognised higher education institutions would be helpful.

4. Development

- a) Development of the database/portal could be done in stages, and it would be good to set milestones for the different stages.
- b) Transparency is important in the development process of the database/portal.
- c) It would be important to place the development of the database/portal in the context of ongoing activities and bodies such as those of: national initiatives, CHEA activities, the IAU, INQAHE etc.
- d) Advertising its existence to promote its widespread use would be important.

5. Content

- a) It was noted that 53 countries were identified as having a list of recognised higher education institutions available on the web at the time of checking. The number might be higher, if a more profound mapping study were undertaken. However, there would still be many countries that do not have such a list available on the web.
- b) Possible content of the database/portal:
 - i) There is a need for broad guidelines on which types of tertiary education institutions should be included in the national list of recognised institutions. This would allow for flexible and inclusive lists which take into account the specifics of each country.
 - ii) These guidelines might provide recommendations for the types of quality assurance mechanisms that would allow an institution to be listed in the country list.
 - iii) It would be useful to use the ISCED levels to define the scope of the database/portal in terms of the levels of post-secondary institutions that would be included.
 - iv) The focus of this initiative should be on listing 'bona fide'/recognised institutions in the first development phase. In a second phase, complementary information, as mentioned in point 5 c), could be added.
- c) Possible supplementary information that could be included in the database/portal:
 - i) For each country it would be useful to have links to information on their quality assurance and accreditation system. The (minimum) content of this segment should be determined.
 - ii) Development of a set of questions for students to guide them in their assessment of the quality of provisions would be useful.
 - iii) It would be useful for the quality assurance community to have information on the scope and scale of the issues from the recognition community.
- d) How will 'cross-border education institutions' be included in the national lists?
One recommendation was that countries include foreign institutions that they have recognised nationally on the list they have provided. Nevertheless, there will still be many cross-border institutions that will not figure on the list, as many countries presently do not have procedures for recognising 'cross-border education institutions', and cross-border e-learning delivery of

degrees is especially difficult to identify. However, if the work on an international database/portal of recognised institutions is successful, it would become advantageous for 'cross-border education institutions' to be included in the list.

- e) The notion of comparability is very important. This issue relates to terminology used by different bodies. Defining the common terms for the purpose of the database would be helpful.

6. Legal Issues

The country lists will have legal implications with regard to national laws. It is important to mention issues of data protection. This would have to be assessed further.

7. Users

Potential target users include students, recognition bodies, government and possibly funding bodies, professional associations, policy makers, and statisticians.

8. Statistical Data and Research

- a) UIS has compiled data on cross-border flows for researchers in the framework of UIS/OECD activities. There is also interest in students studying by distance. UIS has just completed studies concerning science education and mobility of scientists.
- b) UIS and OECD Statistical services are collaborating on a number of projects concerning student and researcher mobility, student assessment etc.

9. Budget proposal

It was decided to present a budget proposal for the international costs of creating a database/portal of recognised higher education institutions for the next drafting session of the UNESCO/OECD guidelines in Tokyo, October 2004.

10. Follow up tasks

A short meeting on the proposed international database/portal of recognised higher education institutions will take place on 30 June from 14:00–17:30, back-to-back with the 2nd UNESCO Global Forum on quality assurance, accreditation and recognition of qualifications, in order to prepare a paper to be discussed at the UNESCO/OECD drafting session meeting on the guidelines, 14-15 October 2004 in Tokyo.

The UNESCO and OECD Secretariats will get in contact with the experts to ask whether they would be ready to work on the following issues for the meeting on 30 June 2004:

- 1) Which types of higher education institutions should be included in the database/portal? To which extent should this be left up to countries?
- 2) Recommendations for the types of quality assurance mechanisms that would allow for an institution to be listed in the country list.
- 3) In several countries it is not institutions but programmes which are being recognised. How can this issue be tackled in the database/portal when combining a list of institutions/programmes that has been quality assured/accredited/recognised and information on by whom?
- 4) In 5 c) there is a list of supplementary information that could be included in the database, maybe in a second phase (information on countries quality assurance/accreditation systems, student guidelines, possible information on the academic recognition centres). Proposals about which information is useful should be clarified.
- 5) A budget for the international database/portal should be estimated both in terms of establishing the database and in terms of updating/running it. The costs should be specified according to phase one and phase two, depending on the level of extra information that could be included. CHEA's and IAU's experience in running such information databases would be helpful in establishing a budget. The costs will also depend on whether the information would be available in several languages or just English.

The UNESCO/OECD Secretariats would work on:

- 1) Specifying all the different purposes of such a database/portal (see 3 a))

- 2) The mapping of information publicly available on information and credential centres on academic recognition.
- 3) The mapping of information publicly available on national and regional quality assurance agencies in collaboration with INQAAHE;
- 4) The elaboration and revision of the "list" of recognised higher education institutions.

The following time schedule for this work is foreseen:

- a) Drafts of the different inputs mentioned above will be discussed at the meeting on 30 June.
- b) A consolidated paper on the proposal of an international database/portal will be prepared by the experts and the UNESCO and OECD Secretariats to go on the Electronic Discussion Group by early September 2004.
- c) Discussion of the consolidated paper will take place at the UNESCO/OECD drafting session of the guidelines, 14-15 October 2004 in Tokyo.

**UNESCO/OECD Experts meeting
on International Database on Recognised Higher Education Institutions**

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UNESCO Headquarters, Paris**

Conference Room III

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