

## **INTERNATIONAL HIGHER EDUCATION AND INTERNATIONAL QUALITY STANDARDS**

As higher education is increasingly international, with the growth of institutional partnerships and increased student mobility across borders, “What counts as quality?” needs to be answered internationally as well. Although regional quality assurance efforts (Europe, the Middle East, Africa) currently augment longstanding country-based efforts, there is no single set of international standards by which all quality is to be judged. Is there a need for such standards? Are they becoming an imperative? Or, should quality assurance remain country-based and regional, continuing to primarily emphasize valued cultural diversity and national sovereignty?

This *Policy Brief* begins to explore what it would mean to establish a single set of international quality standards for higher education. What are the benefits? What are the disadvantages and challenges?

“International quality standards” in higher education refer to agreement or consensus about what constitutes academic quality, including expectations of faculty, curriculum and standards to judge student performance.

### **WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF A SINGLE SET OF INTERNATIONAL STANDARDS?**

A single set of international quality standards can support further expansion of international higher education and student mobility through mutual understanding of degree requirements, what counts as academic excellence and student success. It can build cooperation, confidence and trust among higher education institutions across borders. Agreement about what constitutes quality higher education can assist developing and developed countries in benchmarking quality. Common standards can assist with international comparisons and, if desired, rankings. A single set of international standards is part of building an effective international marketplace for quality higher education.

Standards might be developed in a variety of ways. International or supra-national bodies, such as the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the World Bank or the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), could spearhead such an effort. Organizations specializing in quality assurance, such as the International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education or the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) International Quality Group, might lead this work. Other organizations such as the International Association of Universities might be appropriate venues. Alternatively, independent groups of higher education leaders, convened for this specific purpose, might undertake such an effort. There would need to be a mechanism to obtain consensus on the standards, perhaps through some of the bodies mentioned above. Whatever the body charged with this task, key and very difficult questions would need to be addressed: How are we describing quality? How do we achieve enough consensus to assure that the standards engender confidence and are used? How do we judge the effectiveness of the standards over time?

One approach would be to start with a set of guiding principles for quality – instead of moving immediately to a single set of standards – combining top-down and bottom-up approaches by involving all concerned constituents (e.g., students, academics, institutions, governments, quality assurance bodies). The focus would be on effective practice or common expectations of quality.

Examples of this “guiding principles” approach include the 2005 *UNESCO-OECD Guidelines on Quality Provision in Cross-Border Higher Education* ([http://www.unesco.org/education/guidelines\\_E.indd.pdf](http://www.unesco.org/education/guidelines_E.indd.pdf)), the 2005 *European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance* ([http://www.enqa.eu/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/ESG\\_3edition-2.pdf](http://www.enqa.eu/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/ESG_3edition-2.pdf)) and the 2008 *Chiba Principles: Higher Education Quality Assurance Principles for the Asia Pacific Region* that

were developed in conjunction with the Asia-Pacific Quality Network Annual Conference (<http://shelbycearley.files.wordpress.com/2010/06/finalqaprinciples.pdf>). Not only have such efforts provided international and regional guidance about quality, they have also assured the opportunity for change in quality practice. The two latter examples have or are undergoing some significant review and revision just years after their initial presentation. Such guiding principles can evolve into standards over time.

### **WHAT ARE THE DISADVANTAGES AND CHALLENGES OF A SINGLE SET OF INTERNATIONAL QUALITY STANDARDS ?**

A single set of international quality standards may conflict with longstanding country-based approaches to quality higher education that reflect unique and important cultural and social conditions. A common approach to quality could not encompass all the variation among higher education institutions and their respective roles in their societies. International quality standards may be harmful if they are weak or discourage initiative at the national or institutional level. They may require a level of generalization about quality such that the standards are meaningless. International standards run the risk of standardization and a “top-down” approach to quality at the price of creative and flexible grassroots efforts.

There are additional caveats here. First, international standards in most other fields (e.g., agriculture) are politically driven. This would not be effective in higher education. Second, to the extent that such standards were viewed as “one size fits all,” they will likely be ignored. Third, as higher education systems change rapidly, these standards must keep pace or quickly be rendered obsolete.

Given that country-based quality assurance will remain in place even if international standards were developed, a commitment to continuing to strengthen quality assurance practice at the national level would be essential. A case would need to be made for the added value of a common set of consensus-driven, aspirational, flexible international expectations of quality operating alongside robust national quality assurance systems. Will such an approach enrich efforts to further assure quality for students in many countries?

Higher education colleagues would need to be convinced of the benefits of moving toward at least generic international guidance on quality or a set of effective practices for quality or an international statement of principles of quality. They would need to agree that at least some international convergence is a desirable goal. Colleagues would need to be persuaded that the benefits of international standards could be realized while the disadvantages could be avoided.

### **WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?**

The dialogue about a single set of international quality standards is not new, but the sense of urgency about the future of international higher education has been heightened, influenced by the growth of online education and the expansion of programs, students and faculty engaged internationally. The CHEA International Quality Group began to address this important issue at its 2014 Annual Meeting. We plan to continue the conversation, purposefully exploring these central questions about the quality of higher education.



*The CHEA International Quality Group (CIQG) thanks the speakers and participants at the 2014 CIQG Annual Meeting and Advisory Council, especially Anthony McClaran (QAA-UK) and Andrée Sursock (EUA) for their fine presentations. These discussions contributed greatly to the Policy Brief.*