Sustainable Development of Quality Assurance in Higher Education

Edited by:

Dr. Jagannath Patil, India
&
Ms. Malini Nair, Fiji Islands
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Edited by:
Dr. Jagannath Patil, Former President, APQN
&
Ms. Malini Nair, APQN Board Member

Assistant Editors:
Savitha D.J. & Umesh Kumar R.
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An Anthology of Selected papers presented at the APQN 2016 Conference

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APQN Board Member

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Joint accreditation as an effective tool for assuring trust in the quality of cross-border education

Prof. Vladimir Navodnov¹, Prof. Galina Motova² and Mrs. Oksana Matveeva²

Abstract
The paper explores issues of joint accreditation as a modern trend in the development of quality assurance in the European Higher Education Area. Joint accreditation is interesting for HEIs which deliver joint degree programmes under bilateral agreements between HEIs or for joint programmes which have an integrated curriculum agreed on and delivered by two HEIs, for HEIs with a large number of foreign students or/and institutions invested in increasing student mobility.

Joint accreditation is an effective tool for assuring trust in the quality of cross-border education. It may decrease the number of bureaucratic procedures and the burden on the HEI when evaluating the quality of study programmes, and provide trust and recognition of the quality of education.

The paper discusses the procedure of joint accreditation projects implemented by NCPA. It involves extensive preliminary work, bilateral agreements with partner agencies and detailed account of all procedural issues: agreement and coordination of standards, methodological consulting and support of representatives of HEIs undergoing joint accreditation, site visits, writing a self-evaluation report and the final report of the external evaluation panel.

The international activities of accreditation agencies involve active exchange of experience and ideas, exchange visits to other agencies, joint work on programme accreditation. The principles of joint accreditation that contribute to greater trust are also identified.

Key Words: Accreditation, tool, Cross Border Higher Education, Joint accreditation

1. Director, National Centre for Public Accreditation (NCPA), Russia, E-mail: vgn8108@mail.ru
2. Deputy Director, NCPA, E-mail: gn.motova@ncpo.ru
3. Deputy Head of Accreditation Department, NCPA, Russia
Introduction

Joint accreditation - is a procedure which is conducted on mutual agreement by two accreditation agencies regarding the external evaluation of the quality of a study programme (a cluster of programmes). This is especially relevant for joint and double degree programmes, which imply a high level of student mobility.

Joint accreditation of study programmes is a modern trend in the development of quality assurance in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). However, it is not widespread yet. The development of joint accreditation is facilitated by the Bologna process documents. In April 2012 at the Ministerial conference in Bucharest (Romania) it was stated: “We will support the joint efforts of competent authorities and quality assurance agencies to create external quality assurance processes that minimize the bureaucratic burden on joint programmes. Single accreditation procedures that substitute the different national accreditation procedures should fit the different national purposes of all partners, “(Mobility strategy 2020 for the European Higher Education Area (EHEA)” At the following conference in May 2015 (Erevan, Armenia) the ministers adopted another document - European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes, which laid out standards and procedures for joint accreditation. It is of paramount importance that the results of joint accreditation should be unconditionally recognized on the territory of all the EHEA countries.

Joint accreditation is interesting for higher education institutions which deliver joint degree programmes under bilateral agreements between HEIs or for joint programmes which have an integrated curriculum agreed on and delivered by two HEIs. Also, for HEIs with a large number of foreign students or/and institutions invested in increasing student mobility. Joint accreditation may decrease the number of bureaucratic procedures and the burden on the HEI when evaluating the quality of such programmes, and what is more important, to provide trust and recognition of the quality of education.

However, there are a lot of obstacles on the way of implementing this trend. In the first place, not all national education authorities are ready to promote the development of joint accreditation. They see a threat to their influence on HEI and try to justify their reluctance by the excuse that the standards of joint accreditation do not take into consideration national requirements and the national context. The accreditation agencies of some countries are not ready for this either, especially in the countries where an accreditation agency is directly dependent on the bodies of power.

Nevertheless, the process has been launched and the ministers, having adopted the new documents, committed themselves to aligning national normative acts and adhere to the Bologna principles.
The first experience of joint accreditation in Russia was gained by NCPA and the European Association of Conservatoires in the accreditation of the programmes the Vocal Art and Academic Choir Conducting delivered by the Gnesins Russian Academy of Music and the Academy of Choral Art in 2012.

In 2015 NCPA implemented several joint accreditation projects: the Far Eastern Federal University programmes together with Higher Education Evaluation and Accreditation Council of Taiwan (HEEACT), Peter the Great St. Petersburg Polytechnic University programmes together with the Accreditation, Certification and Quality Assurance Institute (ACQUIN, Germany), Lobachevsky State University of Nizhny Novgorod programmes together with the Higher Education Evaluation Center of the Ministry of Education (HEEC MO, China).

Prior to the accreditation of the programme extensive preliminary work had been done. It involved both substantive and organizational aspects. As the first step it was necessary to conclude bilateral agreements with partner agencies and give a detailed account of all procedural issues. The next step – agreement and coordination of standards requires a lot of time and effort. Considering common principles of education quality assessment, especially between the Bologna countries, the agreement of standards should not cause many problems. However, in practice, many differences have been identified, connected with specific features of national systems of education. For example, availability or absence of unified state educational standards and state regulation of the educational process, obligatoriness or voluntariness of quality assurance procedures, the organization of work and composition of a joint external evaluation panel. Besides standards it was necessary to coordinate the structure of the self-evaluation report and the final report of the external evaluation panel, to agree the terms of reference and dates of procedures and the composition of the joint panel of experts.

At the preparation stage it is important to make provisions for methodological consulting and support of representatives of HEIs undergoing joint accreditation. For them this could be a new unknown procedure which may cause anxiety and concern. It is important to provide the HEI with all the necessary documentation. It is necessary to conduct similar work with members of evaluation panels that will be nominated by partner agencies. The site visit at the institution lasts 3 days and the success of the evaluation exercise; its effectiveness and efficiency depend on the concerted effort and rapport of the expert team.

Joint accreditation requires from an accreditation agency considerably more time and effort on the preparation of the procedure than for regular procedures. But this work contributes to the agency’s development, its procedures and approaches.
The international activities of accreditation agencies have been developing for over two decades within the frame of international networks and associations (INQAAHE, ENQA, APQN, CEENQA and others). As a rule, such activities involve active exchange of experience and ideas which the agencies’ employees acquire during conferences, workshops and forums organized by the networks and also through the analysis of information published in open sources (websites, journals, documents). Valuable experience can be gained during exchange visits to other agencies (for example, good practice of APQN). However, only joint work on programme accreditation gives the partner agencies real understanding of problems, immersion in a creative atmosphere and getting new ideas and opportunities for development.

The principle of openness is very important in this kind of work: the more responsible the attitude to your work is, the more open and self-critical you are about your work, the more you show sincere interest and involvement in the activities of the partner agency the greater is trust in the results of joint work. And as a result there will be more confidence in the quality of study programmes which undergo the procedure of joint accreditation.