

ACCREDITATION GOING GLOBAL

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The Issue

What is the potential of cross-border accreditation? Will universities go for a first or second opinion abroad? Will foreign reviews replace national assessments? What motivates universities and agencies for this extra work? What about understanding local context?

Governments across the globe consider higher education a national public good. State bodies set regulatory frameworks and provide most of the funding. Quality assurance and accreditation are steered by governments either directly, through legislation or, indirectly, through funding. Conversely, external evaluations, audits and accreditation influence state licensing and funding decisions regarding students, institutions and programs.

Accreditation agencies are generally active within national boundaries. Only few operate across a world region or beyond. The 2005 United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)/Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) [Guidelines for Quality Provision in Cross-border Higher Education](#) recommended "international composition of peer review panels, international benchmarking of standards, criteria and assessment procedures and [to] undertake joint assessment projects."

In Europe, agencies are experimenting with cross-border reviews, an idea first launched in the 2006 European Union (EU) [Recommendation on further European cooperation in quality assurance in higher education](#). Melinda Szabó and Colin Tück have reviewed this new practice in a report of the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR), entitled [Recognising International Quality Assurance Activity in the European Higher Education Area \(EHEA\) \(2014\)](#).¹

Cross-Border Reviews – The European Experience

European higher education benefits from a unique tradition of cooperation, fostered by European Union funding schemes. Virtually all universities and colleges in the wider Europe participate in the EU funded student exchange program called Erasmus², which has grown from 3,000 students in 1987 (12 countries) to 250,000 in cohort 2015 (33 countries and more).

Next to that, the Bologna process, launched in 1999 by 27 countries, is building a European Higher Education Area (EHEA). By 2015, 48 countries have signed up to a series of "confidence building measures," ranging from harmonized degree structures (qualifications frameworks) to teaching and learning (competence-based), transparency tools (credits, diploma supplement) and guidance (credential evaluators) to [Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area \(ESG\)](#), the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) and EQAR.

EQAR can be compared to the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA). EQAR checks whether an agency is "trustworthy" and substantially in compliance with the ESG, i.e., sufficiently professional and independent. EQAR aims to "facilitate the mutual recognition of quality assurance and accreditation decisions." Agencies registered are allowed "to perform their activities across the EHEA, while complying with national requirements."

Governments may be reluctant to expose their universities to foreign scrutiny, but the "combined international aspirations" ([European Universities Association, Trends 2015 Report](#)) of universities and agencies are strong drivers for change. Szabó and Tück demonstrate in their report that national systems are indeed opening up, albeit slowly.

According to Szabó and Tück, cross-border reviews are still complementary, but a fascinating finding is that, by 2014, 20 European countries already have allowed their higher education institutions (under certain conditions) to "discharge" their obligatory external quality assurance requirements with a foreign agency. A number of cross-border reviews have taken place in countries as diverse as Austria, Belgium (Flanders), Lithuania, Poland and Romania.

¹ https://www.eqar.eu/fileadmin/documents/eqar/riqaa/WP5_RIQAA_Report_final.pdf

² [European Community Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students](#)

Governments sometimes limit the external seal to certain types of institutions (private or public, universities or colleges) or types of accreditation (institutional vs. program, initial vs. subsequent). Some countries demand that foreign agencies gain prior permission by applying for the national register of accreditors or by establishing agreement protocols with the national agency. Standards used may be those of the sending country, the host country/institution or a mix.

Universities have different motives. A suitable national agency may not exist in their country or they may wish to align their degrees with the Bologna process, enhance their international profile, increase their autonomy, improve institutional management, develop an institutional quality culture, experience different review approaches or search for specialized agencies better fitting their needs. Cross-border assessments are sometimes part of national reforms or linked to accreditation for regulated professions.

Agencies are chosen because of their international reputation, their expertise in particular fields, the peers they use, their affordability, language or country of origin. Choosing the right agency requires extensive preparation. There are legal and linguistic barriers and issues with complexity and understanding local context.

Agencies need to get acquainted with the foreign education system, train peers and adapt the work to different national requirements, as was successfully done, for example, by the national agencies of Austria (Agency for Quality Assurance and Accreditation Austria or AQ Austria), Finland (Finish Education Evaluation Centre or FINEEC) and Switzerland (Swiss Center of Accreditation and Quality Assurance in Higher Education or AAQ) and by internationally oriented agencies in fields like STEM (ASIIN) and public administration (EAPAA).

Global growth

Cross-border reviews are gradually becoming an accepted and appreciated part of the quality assurance and accountability landscape. They complement other instruments at the disposal of Presidents and Deans. The phenomenon is likely to increase in the years ahead, both within and between world regions.

In conclusion, I foresee a global growth scenario along the following lines:

- All regions of the world are, with varying degrees of intensity, in the process of establishing their own regional higher education area, similar to, but not identical with, the Bologna process. Common quality standards and cross-border reviews are part of the debate everywhere. This is, for instance, the case in Africa, where a very ambitious Action Plan has been adopted, most recently, at the first African Higher Education Summit in Dakar, Senegal.³
- There is an overall tendency towards university leaders taking their own decisions within less tight national frameworks. This new degree of autonomy often includes the freedom to choose quality assurance mechanisms, which serve better various university needs, including cross-border assessments.
- Students, parents and sponsors – public and private – appreciate the additional reassurance offered by foreign accreditors on the quality of delivery and the (international) employability of graduates.
- The diversification in types of institutions, programs and modes of delivery, including cross-border and online, is likely to lead to a proliferation of quality assurance and accreditation mechanisms in the years ahead, including distance and user-based assessments. International reviews, by trustworthy agencies, will be part of the equation.
- Cross-border reviews will help to ensure implementation of Sustainable Development Goal 4.3 of the post-2015 development agenda of the United Nations, prepared by UNESCO, which calls for equal access for all women and men to affordable "quality technical, vocational and tertiary education, including university."⁴

National authorities may loosen some control, but they have a lot to gain in terms of variety of insights and quality of advice by opening up their systems, institutions and programs to international review.

For all these reasons, universities are advised to weigh the added value of foreign reviews for their operations. Agencies should consider taking up this additional role as part of their portfolio, while they "go with the flow" of delivery modes. Organizations like CHEA could act as facilitators or take up an assessment role of their own.

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³ [Declaration and Action Plan of the 1st African Higher Education Summit on Revitalizing Higher Education for Africa's future March 10-12, 2015, Dakar, Senegal.](#)

⁴ *Transforming our world: The 2030 agenda for sustainable development*, to be adopted at the United Nations Sustainable Development Summit 2015, 25 Sep 2015 - 27 Sep 2015, New York. The subsequent "Education 2030 Framework for Action" will be adopted alongside the General Conference of UNESCO in Paris in November 2015.