

The importance of cross-border cooperation in the quality assurance of TNE

A comparative overview of national approaches to TNE

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to provide evidence on the importance of cross-border cooperation in the quality assurance of transnational education (TNE) by offering a comparative overview of how TNE is quality assured by both sending and receiving countries. Through this comparative analysis, it will be possible to appreciate the diversity of approaches to TNE. The paper also shows that for the foreseeable future, progress towards effective and efficient quality assurance of TNE cannot rest on the hope of developing an internationally agreed framework, but it must rest on strengthening cooperation between quality assurance agencies operating within different national frameworks.

Design/methodology/approach – This paper looks at four key sending countries of TNE, the UK, Australia, the USA and Germany, considering the main drivers for out-going TNE, its main features and how it is quality assured. It then considers the same aspects from the perspective of receiving countries of TNE, looking at four key receiving locations, China, Dubai, Singapore and Hong Kong. It also offers an overview of some recent international initiatives aimed at fostering cross-border cooperation in the quality assurance of TNE.

Findings – In the backdrop of this overview of different approaches to TNE, this paper will conclude that for the foreseeable future it is not possible to develop an internationally agreed view and approach to TNE and its quality assurance. This conclusion allows the author to focus on the importance of cross-border cooperation amongst quality assurance agencies in sending and receiving countries for the effective and efficient quality assurance of TNE.

Originality/value – This is the first comparative study of different countries' approaches to TNE and its quality assurance, taking into account both sending and receiving countries. It allows pointing to the key different features in different countries' approaches and illustrates how these often relate to the underlining national strategic priorities and drivers for TNE (either in-bound or out-bound). It also allows the international community to realise that in the absence of a viable shared and agreed international framework for the regulation and quality assurance of TNE, it is of paramount importance to focus efforts on inter-agency cross-border cooperation in order to ensure that TNE continues to be of good quality and relevant to the respective communities.

Keywords Cooperation, Quality assurance, Transnational education, Cross-border education, QACHE

Paper type Case study

Introduction

The internationalisation of higher education has regularly been accompanied with calls for and attempts to internationalise its quality assurance. In 2004, UNESCO and OECD jointly developed "Guidelines for quality provision in cross-border higher education" (UNESCO/OECD, 2004) to assist the international community addressing the quality assurance challenges associated with the expansion of all forms of cross-border



higher education. Specifically, the UNESCO/OECD Guidelines aimed to provide an international framework setting out how all key stakeholders, including governments, higher education providers, student bodies, quality assurance and accreditation bodies, and academic and professional recognition bodies of the sending and receiving country, could share responsibilities for the quality assurance of CBHE.

Two years later UNESCO collaborated with Asia Pacific Quality Network (APQN) in the development of a toolkit to support the implementation of the UNESCO/OECD Guidelines (UNESCO/APQN, 2006). The UNESCO/APQN (2006) “Toolkit: regulating the quality of cross-border education” is directed at national level policy makers, providing them “with a reference tool to assist with the development of regulatory frameworks for quality assurance in cross-border education, whether from a receiver or provider perspective” (p. 3).

More recently, a consortium of quality assurance agencies and networks, developed as part of the Erasmus Mundus project Quality Assurance of Cross-Border Higher Education (QACHE) a “Toolkit for quality assurance agencies: cooperation in cross-border higher education” (ENQA, 2016). The QACHE Toolkit complements the UNESCO/APQN Toolkit’s effort and support the UNESCO/OECD Guidelines’ intention to “provide guidance to key stakeholders on how to share the responsibility of assuring quality provision of cross-border higher education between the sending country and the receiving country” (UNESCO/OECD, 2004, p. 41), by offering practical guidance on how agencies can cooperate in the quality assurance of transnational education (TNE).

In order to fully grasp the importance of fostering cross-border cooperation in the quality assurance of TNE, it is helpful to appreciate the differences between the approaches to TNE and its quality assurance adopted by some of the main sending and receiving countries of TNE. To this aim, this paper offers an overview of the key features of the TNE regulatory landscape in four key sending countries, the UK, Australia, the USA and Germany, and four key receiving locations, China, Dubai, Hong Kong and Singapore. This will help appreciating how the way ahead to achieve progress in internationalising the quality assurance of TNE will need to rest in strengthened cross-border cooperation between agencies operating within different regulatory frameworks, rather than hoping to develop an internationally shared framework.

Out-bound TNE

UK

In the UK HE providers with degree-awarding power are self-accrediting, and as such they do not need to obtain prior approval by government or the national quality assurance authorities to engage in TNE activities. These can take any shape that suits UK providers’ strategies and needs. Collaborative partnerships and distance learning are the dominant models, while branch campuses represent a minor but highly visible share of the UK TNE landscape.

In this context of high degree of institutional autonomy, TNE is seen as a commercial activity, in the sense that providers in receipt of public funding have not been allowed to use taxpayers’ money to support their international operations. One of the key drivers for UK providers to engage in TNE activity is in fact that of increasing international students’ enrolment by increasing enrolment in the UK either through articulation agreements or by enhancing institutions’ international visibility and reputation overseas through in-country (TNE) provision. There are of course other important drivers, such as the internationalisation of the academic offer and the student experience, strengthening international research links, contributing to local capacity development and meeting international demands for quality higher education.

The Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) for Higher Education has monitored TNE provision since its inception as part of its mission to safeguard the standards and improve the quality of UK HE wherever this is delivered. The way QAA has done this has traditionally been twofold: as part of mainstream institutional reviews in the UK, which look at the total provision of a provider including their overseas provision; and through a complementary

dedicated TNE review process. This TNE review process includes visits to overseas delivery sites both to test the implementation of institutional policies and processes for ensuring the quality and standards of TNE, and to gain a better understanding of the TNE student experience (QAA, 2017a).

Given the geographical spread and quantity of UK TNE arrangements – with over 80 per cent of all UK degree-awarding bodies (about 140 overall) offering TNE provision in most countries of the world, and with the number of TNE students (694,000) now well exceeding that of international students coming to the UK (HESA, 2019) – QAA has adopted a country-based approach to ensure the efficiency of its TNE review processes. On an annual basis, a country with significant UK TNE is selected and a sample of provision in the country is reviewed, rather than looking at providers' TNE provision as part of their mainstream institutional review.

The geographical spread and scale of UK TNE also makes cooperating with host countries' agencies a high priority in order to enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of the quality assurance of TNE. QAA played a leading role in developing the QACHE Toolkit, and it is a founding agency of the Quality Beyond Boundaries Group (QBBG) and the Cross-Border Quality Assurance Network (CBQAN), two networks aimed at fostering international cooperation in the quality of TNE. QAA has also piloted innovative ways to cooperate with in-country agencies such as the recent joint review of UK TNE in Hong Kong with the Hong Kong Council for the Accreditation of Academic and Vocational Qualifications (HKCAAVQ) (QAA, 2018a), and a joint study on the UK TNE student experience in Dubai and Singapore the Dubai Knowledge and Human Development Authority (KHDA) and the Singapore Committee for Private Education (CPE) (QAA, 2018b).

However, currently, things are in flux in the UK with regard to the quality assurance of TNE. With the establishment of the Office for Students (OfS), QAA's cyclical institutional reviews in England have come to an end. Established English higher education providers are now monitored by the OfS through an annual analysis of a set of metrics, and the OfS is working with the Higher Education Statistic Agency to develop data sets capable to capture TNE provision. At the same time, a sector-wide consultation is due to be launched to gather the extent of sector support for continued in-country monitoring of TNE by the QAA.

Australia

Australian self-accrediting universities, just like UK degree-awarding bodies, are free to engage in any type of TNE activities without having to seek prior approval from the national regulator, the Tertiary Education Quality Standards Agency (TEQSA). Collaborative partnerships, or third-party arrangements as referred to in Australia, are also the predominant form of TNE activity.

TNE activities, as in the UK, are not publicly subsidised, and Australian providers share the same key drivers for engaging in TNE activities with UK providers. However, although Australia is one of the main sending countries of TNE and one of the pioneers in out-bound TNE, its TNE landscape is much more limited in scale and scope, with just under 120,000 students studying offshore with about 60 higher education providers (Australian Department of Education, 2017). The different scale of Australian TNE affects the way in which its quality is assured.

Just as QAA, TEQSA maintains an oversight of Australian TNE to ensure the equivalency of the student experience and student learning outcomes. There are two main differences with the QAA. One is that because of the smaller scale of Australian TNE, no country-based approach is currently adopted. TNE is looked only as part of national institutional review processes either at renewal of provider's registration or at programme accreditation for non-self-accrediting institutions. A further difference is that reviews of TNE delivery sites are undertaken only when justified by risk triggers identified through

desk-based, data-driven analysis – an approach more similar to that adopted by the OfS. On the contrary, QAA approach to in-country review visits has traditionally been more enhancement driven, aimed at looking at good practice in different types of provision for the benefit of the whole sector, including through case studies, and not only at provision regarded as riskier (TEQSA, 2016).

Inter-agency cooperation is also high in the agenda of TEQSA, even if the more limited extent of Australian TNE provision might make it less urgent for TEQSA than for QAA. TEQSA was a partner agency in the QACHE project and is also a founding member of both QBBG and CBQAN.

USA

The key drivers for out-bound TNE in the USA, in addition to those common to the UK and Australia, include a particular emphasis on outward mobility, as well as on exporting the American teaching and learning experience. This explains why the two common forms of USA TNE are study abroad centres, allowing US students to gain an international experience, and American universities integrated in national HE systems – which are to be considered as foreign universities delivering US style education and seeking USA accreditation. The only other form of American TNE is branch campuses.

In the USA, quality assurance is undertaken by different accreditation agencies recognised by the US Department of Education or the Council for HE Accreditation, such as the main six regional accreditation organisations (CHEA, 2018). Different accreditation agencies will have different policies for TNE. However, branch campuses and study abroad centres are generally considered as a substantive change in a provider's higher education offering requiring initial accreditation (WASCUC, 2018). After initial accreditation, an American university's TNE would not be reviewed directly unless there is a serious concern or if selected in a sample of overseas activity to look at as part of national re-accreditation. Another common feature is that US regional accreditation agencies would not accept collaborative or third-party arrangements, the most popular forms in the UK and Australia.

There is no available data about US TNE, but it is fair to say that it is much more limited in scope and scale to UK TNE. Cross-border cooperation in quality assurance is not a key priority for most USA accreditation agencies, given the limited extent of USA TNE. A number of regional accreditation agencies are, however, more active internationally such as WASC Senior College and University Commission (WSCUC), which has been a member of QBBG.

Germany

Turning to the last sending country under consideration, the German approach to TNE stands out against all the others here considered. In the context of a conception of higher education as a public good, where HE is largely state funded, TNE is not regarded as a commercial activity. For the most part, German TNE is publicly funded through the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD), which disburses funding from different governmental departments.

The main drivers of out-going TNE are therefore not primarily commercial, but national policies aimed primarily at fostering the internationalisation of German HE providers, promoting German cultural relations and education policy, as well as supporting international capacity development.

Another key feature is that DAAD puts emphasis on the fact that German TNE provision should be characterised by a truly cooperative approach with local institutions and a high degree of engagement and presence by the German institutions. No validation or franchise arrangements, the main common form of TNE for the UK and Australia, are therefore funded by DAAD. The three types of DAAD funded-TNE mirror the types of TNE in the USA:

- (1) "German study programmes abroad" to facilitate outward mobility;

- (2) “German-backed universities”, where under the mentorship of one or more German providers a new HEI abroad is founded which is part of the local HE system, normally seeking accreditation by relevant German accreditation bodies; and
- (3) full branch campuses, also generally integrated in the local HE system.

“German-backed universities” are perhaps the predominant or higher profile model. In this mode, German universities will be strongly involved in curriculum development, quality assurance and training of teaching staff, and German staff will usually also provide teaching. Normally such institutions, as the American foreign universities, do not award German degrees but only local degrees, although these degrees will be recognised and often are accredited in Germany.

The different funding model also affects the dominant subject areas. UK, Australian and USA TNE being private endeavours are predominantly oriented towards programmes which are low cost to run, at least in the first stages, such as in business administration or informatics. German TNE can focus instead from the start on resource-intensive disciplines such as engineering or natural sciences, where German university are traditionally strong, but which are more expensive to run. The funding model, however, limits the extent of German TNE, which is more limited than Australian and UK ones, with approximately 20,000 students enrolled in 70 TNE projects funded by DAAD (GAC, 2016).

All programmes of state recognised HE providers have to be accredited by agencies licensed by the German Accreditation Council (GAC). GAC’s standards apply to programmes leading to a German degree, irrespective if the degree is offered inland or abroad.

Given the nature and limited scale of German TNE, inter-agency cooperation in quality assurance has so far not been a high priority, although GAC has a strong interest in cooperation in the accreditation of joint programmes, and was a member of the QACHE project consortium.

DAAD as the principal funder of German TNE will also undertake quality controls on a periodic basis to ensure that the German universities involved in TNE project it funds fulfil the requirements for funding. These requirements include academic and quality assurance requirements, as well as ensuring TNE projects become self-sustainable. DAAD funding is in fact generally limited to a number of years.

In-bound TNE

China

China presents features that resonate with the German approach amongst the sending countries considered here. In particular, in China the demand and types of imported foreign provision are driven and regulated by national education and social policies and priorities, and TNE partnerships must run as not-for-profit academic ventures.

China sees in-bound TNE primarily as a way to facilitate transfer of knowledge in the country and to develop the capacity of local HE institutions. This key rationale informs the types of TNE accepted in the country and the criteria for approving incoming TNE. TNE can only take the form of partnerships between foreign and national providers; China refers to TNE as China Foreign Cooperation in Running Schools (CFCRS) – covering both jointly run institutions and programmes.

CFCRSs are seen as much as possible as partnerships between equals, or in any case involving substantial if not equal involvement by both partners. Thus, foreign institutions have to commit resources, delivering at least one-third of the programme for instance. The Ministry of Education (MoE) also encourages jointly developed courses and merging of foreign and local courses. Recently the MoE has also put a limit to the number of CFCRSs that foreign providers might enter into, in order to avoid overstretching and the risk that foreign providers are not able to commit enough resources to the partnership.

Responding to previously unregulated growth, the MoE has also indicated priorities subjects and geographical areas, in order to ensure that new CFCRSs meet the labour and development needs of the country. Therefore, programmes in popular subject areas like business, finance and management are not encouraged or favoured, whereas partnerships in western China are encouraged and favoured. The MoE also encourages award of foreign degrees in China where students can complete the whole cycle in China, limiting in this way the impact that TNE might have on brain drain.

The regulatory system for TNE can be split into the pre-approval and post-approval stage. At pre-approval stage, the agency playing a role is the China Education Association for Internal Exchange (CEAIE), operating under the Ministry of Civil Affairs, and leading on international educational exchanges and cooperation. CEAIE helps the MoE in screening new applications for CFCRSs, and in doing so it seeks cooperation with sending country agencies to ensure the MoE receives only genuine applications. CEAIE has also the statutory responsibility for quality assuring sub-degree level-TNE and runs a voluntary accreditation scheme for higher education-level TNE.

The responsibility to quality assure higher education-level TNE after the approval stage rests with another agency, the China Academic Degrees and Graduate Education Development Center (CDGDC), which in relation to Chinese higher education has the delegated responsibility from the MoE to quality assure post-graduate education. CDGDC monitors TNE through desk-based analysis, and where it detects lack of or risk of non-compliance with the MoE's criteria for CFCRSs it might carry out a review visit (for an overview of the operating environment for TNE in China, see QAA, 2017b).

Inter-agency cooperation is high on the agenda of both agencies. CEAIE managing international exchange programmes has active partnerships worldwide, and with regard to TNE it seeks to cooperate with sending countries agencies to screen new CFCRS' applications and as part of its voluntary accreditation scheme. CDGDC holds the secretariat of the fairly recent Asian-European initiative CBQAN, aimed at fostering sector-to-sector cooperation in facilitating the growth of quality European-Asian TNE, and both CDGDC and CEAIE have signed, together with QAA and the British Council the Beijing Statement, a statement of intent to strengthen cooperation in the quality assurance of UK-China TNE (British Council, 2016).

Dubai

The Dubai approach to TNE and its quality assurance can be placed at the opposite side of the spectrum from China. Dubai's drivers for importing TNE are very different. It is not interested in the development of local providers' capacity, but rather in meeting the skills and knowledge needs of a growing knowledge economy and a huge expat society representing approximately 90 per cent of resident population. Dubai is also interested in developing education as an industry alternative to oil production through the creation of a HE hub capable to attract students from the region and beyond. For this reason, Dubai wants quality undiluted foreign provision in the form of branch campuses, and it is not interested in collaborative partnerships.

According to the latest International Branch Campuses report by the Observatory for Borderless Higher Education, China has now overcome Dubai as a branch campus destination, however branch campuses in China are generally of a different nature, requiring partnerships with local providers and being integrated in the local HE system, and given the different sizes it is still true to say that Dubai is the location with the highest concentration of Branch campus.

TNE providers in Dubai mostly operate from free-trade zones (FTZs), which are exempted from federal regulations, and therefore do not need to have federal accreditation by the Commission for Academic Accreditation. However, they need authorisation to operate by the Dubai KHDA and have their programmers registered with them.

KHDA adopts an institutional authorisation and programme registration process which is based on what they refer to as an “equivalency model”, whereby through a panel of international experts it assesses the extent to which TNE providers fulfil the QA expectations of the home country agencies. The international panel also checks that TNE providers have policies, practices and resources in place to ensure that the learning experience and learning outcomes are substantially equivalent to those on similar programmes at the home campus. This is generally a desk-based exercise, although KHDA reserves the right to undertake institutional visits where it detects any cause for concern (KHDA, 2016).

KHDA has traditionally required TNE providers to deliver programmes that they already run back home, as a guarantee that the same QA processes are applied. However, KHDA has recently reviewed its programme approval regulations allowing providers with a strong record of performance in the FTZs to delivery programmes in Dubai not already delivered at home in order to better meet local knowledge and skills needs. This reflects a move in Dubai towards an approach to TNE which is more strategically linked up with other broader economic and social policies and priorities of Dubai, the extant higher education provision and new demographic and economic trends (for an overview of the operating environment for TNE in Dubai, see QAA, 2017c).

Looking at inter-agency cooperation this is very high on the agenda of KHDA, primarily because of the quality assurance model it adopts which places great reliance on the quality assurance oversight of the home country agency. KHDA has been the key driver behind QBBG, an informal grouping of quality assurance agencies in main sending and receiving countries aimed at facilitating information sharing, trust building and cooperation.

Singapore

Singapore’s main drivers for importing foreign provision have been varied, including meeting unmet demands, filling skills gap, developing the capacity of local providers and creating a HE hub. For this reason, no type of TNE provision is privileged or discouraged. In Singapore you can find branch campuses as well as partnerships of different types including the most common UK models, franchise and validation. UK providers are by far the main TNE operators in the country.

In recent years, there has however been, as with Dubai, a move towards consolidating quality and the relevance of TNE provision to local socio-economic needs. The approval process for new programmes has become therefore more selective. The gatekeeping role in Singapore is played by the CPE, part of SkillsFuture Singapore, which oversees private education in the country. The near totality of TNE provision is undertaken in partnership with local private education institutions (PEIs), as they are referred to in the country (branch campuses are regarded as private providers themselves.)

All TNE provision in partnership with PEIs needs CPE approval. The key academic criteria for approval are similar to those for Dubai, namely that the foreign degree-awarding body is a legitimate institution in the home country and is in good standing with the local regulatory bodies; that the degree programmes offered at the local PEIs are subject to the same quality assurance processes as the programmes offered at their home campuses; and that the graduates receive equivalent recognition, treatment and privileges as those enrolled in their home campuses. CPE also generally requires programmes to be already delivered at home and with the same title.

The CPE model differs from that of Dubai in that the assessment of equivalency of the learning experience and the quality assurance processes with those at the home campus is conducted by CPE officers rather than a dedicated panel of international experts, and the assessment is more mechanistic, going less in-depth with regard to institutional quality assurance policies and processes. It is more a registration than a quality assurance process, and it is exclusively a desk-based exercise.

However, CPE has now made it mandatory for all PEIs to seek EduTrust certification, a local certification traditionally required only for eligibility to recruit international students (CPE, 2018). CPE will therefore be exercising more of a quality assurance function than it has previously done with regard to TNE, looking at TNE providers partners' compliance with local standards (CPE, 2017).

CPE is also an important player in cross-border higher education, actively seeking cooperation in the quality assurance of TNE, including through its membership in QBBG.

Hong Kong

Hong Kong' key drivers for TNE are very similar to those for Singapore, namely meeting local unmet demands, filling skills gaps, developing the capacity of local private providers and, but to a lesser extent, creating a HE hub. All types of TNE arrangements are accepted; collaborative partnerships with private providers are by far most common, but there are also a high number of TNE arrangements with public universities. The vast majority of TNE in Hong Kong is from the UK.

The gatekeeping role is played by the Education Bureau of the MoE. All TNE programmes, referred to as "non-local programmes", need to be registered with the Bureau, which seeks the advice from HKCAAVQ as to whether a non-local course meets the criteria for registration. The key criteria is again that the awarding organisation is a bona fide institution in its home country and in good standing with its home country's regulatory bodies, and that the quality and standards of the learning experience are comparable to those of similar programmes offered at home. This is, as for Singapore, exclusively a desk-based exercise conducted by HKCAAVQ officers. HKCAAVQ will offer expert advice but the final decision for inclusion on the register is with the Education Bureau itself (for an overview of the operating environment for TNE in Hong Kong, see QAA, 2018a, b).

Whereas Dubai and Singapore so far have operated only approval and registration on the basis of the foreign programmes meeting the home country academic expectations, without adding any local requirements (although both Dubai and Singapore have given over the past few years more attention to local market and skills needs), Hong Kong has had for a number of years an additional local accreditation process which is run by the HKCAAVQ. Non-local programmes in Hong Kong can voluntary seek accreditation by the HKCAAVQ against local standards. This will allow them to be recognised under the local Qualification Framework and listed on the HK Qualification Register, both managed by HKCAAVQ. Once accredited non-local programmes are treated as local programmes and their students can be eligible for public financial support (HKCAAVQ, 2018).

HKCAAVQ is also a key player in advancing cross-border cooperation, including through its membership in QBBG and CBQAN, and its recent joint review exercise with QAA.

Conclusions: inter-agency cooperation

The comparative overview offered above highlights different national drivers for TNE, different conceptions and landscapes of TNE and different approaches to its quality assurance. These differences raise the question of how it is possible for the international quality assurance community to ensure continued oversight of cross-border higher education on the basis of a shared understanding.

The above overview highlights how cross-border quality assurance of TNE cannot, for the foreseeable future, take the form of an international agreed approach with agreed and shared sets of standards and processes. However, quality assurance agencies seeking to ensure an effective and efficient oversight of cross-border higher education can do so despite their different approaches, regulatory environment and policy frameworks, by working towards strengthening cross-border inter-agency cooperation in quality assurance across differences.

A number of recent international initiatives have been trying to facilitate cross-border cooperation in a number of ways. I had like to conclude this paper by giving a brief look at these initiatives, some of which I have already referred to above.

Quality Assurance of Cross-Border Higher Education project

QACHE was a project funded by the European Union managed by ENQA and undertaken a project consortium including the regional networks of key host regions of TNE, the AAPQN and the Arab Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education, and a number of national agencies with different experiences with TNE, QAA, GAC, TEQSA, as well as the French High Council for Evaluation of Research and Higher Education (HCERES), The National Agency for Quality Assessment and Accreditation of Spain. The main outcome of the two-year project is a Toolkit offering practical advice to quality assurance agencies, and their networks, on the things they might be able to do to enhance cross-border cooperation in the quality assurance of TNE (ENQA, 2016).

Quality Beyond Boundaries Group

QBBG, established in 2014, is an informal group of quality assurance agencies from the major sending and receiving countries of cross-border education aimed to creating a platform to collaborate, share information and best practices and work together to better address common challenges posed by growing TNE provision. QBBG is led by KHDA and it involves QAA, TEQSA, CPE, HKCAAVQ, WASCUC, as well as the Malaysia Qualifications Agency (MQA) (KHDA, 2018).

Cross-Border Quality Assurance Network

CBQAN is a network launched in December 2016 under the Asia-Europe Meetings of Ministers of Education aimed at building a communication and cooperation platform for stakeholders of cross-border HE quality assurance in Asia and Europe. It is led by CDGDC with support from MQA and the UKNARIC, and it also includes QAA, TEQSA, HKCAAVQ, HCERES and the national agencies of Belgium (BDNAC), India (NAAC), Ireland (Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI)), Korea (KCCE), Latvia (AIC), Pakistan (HEC) and Thailand (ONESQA) (UKNARIC, 2016).

QAA – INQAAHE project on the limits and challenges to cross-border cooperation

QAA received funding from INQAAHE to undertake a study on the challenges and limits to cross-border cooperation with a view to helping quality assurance agencies developing feasible strategies for international engagement. The study can be seen as a follow-up from QACHE, looking at the obstacles agencies face in implementing the advice contained in the QACHE Toolkit, in particular the obstacles and limits posed by the regulatory environment in which each national agency operates. The study is based on a survey eliciting the views of QAA's partners and key players in the quality assurance of TNE: CDGDC, CEAIE, CPE, KHDA, HKCAAVQ, MQA, TEQSA, WASCUC, as well as the Japan National Institute for Academic Degree and University Evaluation, and QQI, Ireland:

The study stresses the importance of trust building and engaging with other key stakeholders in the TNE landscape, in particular governments, TNE providers, as well as TNE students, as a way to facilitate cross-border cooperation. (Trifiro, 2018)

All these recent initiatives share the same goal to helping improve mutual understanding and therefore build reciprocal trust as a first step towards facilitating cross-border coordination of quality assurance activities. These initiatives demonstrate that a shared view of the role of quality assurance agencies in relation to TNE is emerging. This is the

view that quality assurance agencies should be enablers not inhibitors of quality and relevant TNE, and that key to realising this shared view is building the required trust for facilitating cooperation in the quality assurance of cross-border provision.

This view is based on the realisation that TNE should not only be seen as a high-risk activity posing challenges to quality assurance, but also as an innovative form of higher education provision capable to benefit students, societies as a whole, as well as providers. Inter-agency cooperation is a way for quality assurance agencies to respond in effective and efficient ways to the growth of cross-border higher education provision. Inter-agency cooperation is way to ensure that any regulatory gaps are covered, safeguarding the interests of students and societies from low-quality provision, and that unnecessary regulatory overlaps or obstacles are removed, lessening the burden on providers and quality assurance agencies themselves.

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