

## **A NEW WAY OF EVALUATING OVERSEAS PROVIDERS**

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Quality assurance evaluations undertaken by an external body, whether as an accreditation, audit or assessment process, tend to adopt a fairly standard methodology. The ubiquitous approach is to request a self-assessment to inform a panel of reviewers, usually 'peers', who ask for additional information to fill perceived gaps. A review visit takes place and then a report with either a summative or formative judgement is produced, which is usually in whole or in part, in the public realm. This approach is used whatever the purpose of the external quality assurance process: be it to control the sector, ensure compliance with government or professional body requirements, ensure accountability or encourage improvement.

The same approach tends also to be used when examining the offerings of overseas providers. Often, in such circumstances, the quality assurance process is designed to ensure that such provision is tightly controlled and that it fits the educational and regulatory requirements of the importing society, especially when that is small nation, and does not undermine the integrity of the higher education system to which it is contributing.

It is understandable why countries that import higher education have processes that closely scrutinise the offerings of foreign providers. No system wants to be seen to endorse provision that is regarded as substandard or not fit for purpose. However, close scrutiny of overseas provision can be costly, whether it is done by the receivers or indeed the providers or their national (or regional) quality agency. Often, such scrutiny duplicates evaluations that have already taken place. For example, a provider may be offering the same programme that has been evaluated or accredited in the home setting as a programme for study at a remote, overseas campus. If the programme is the same, then there is a case for accepting the scrutiny of the original programme as a form of quality control of the remote version.

This paper outlines and critiques the adoption of an approach to quality assurance of overseas provision that was designed to minimise overlap of quality assurance processes, reduce bureaucracy to a minimum while still providing the necessary reassurance.

### **The Dubai Process**

The Knowledge and Human Development Authority (KHDA) is a Dubai Government entity established with the objective to improve the quality of educational outcomes at universities and colleges in Dubai and to establish Dubai as a leading provider of higher education and research in the Gulf. KHDA is responsible for improving quality and maintaining high standards at institutions inside all of Dubai's Free Zones. KHDA achieves this objective through the licensure and independent quality assurance of all higher educational providers in Dubai Free Zones.

Until recently, institutions in the Free Zones were not subject to any quality assurance processes, except for those few that voluntarily sought Commission for Academic Accreditation (CAA) licensures and accreditation. In 2007, KHDA established an innovative quality assurance system focused on validating the equivalency of institutions and programmes in Dubai with their place-of-origin, rather than on assessing these programmes against local standards. The fundamental premise is that the foreign institutions and programmes were brought to Dubai precisely because they are valued in their original form.

Institutions are required to apply for academic licensure to the KHDA Licensing Bureau. The issuance of a KHDA academic license is dependant on a review of the academic programme offerings in line with Dubai strategic plans and the quality assurance process in place for the provision of cross border higher education programmes. KHDA's quality assurance model focuses on the concept of validation of equivalency of the quality of the institution and programme in Dubai (i.e. the university branch and its programmes) with the quality of the institution and programme at its place-of-origin. To determine this validation, a Universities Quality Assurance International Board (UQAIB) has recently been established. UQAIB consists of leading experts in quality assurance from many countries around the world. The purpose of UQAIB is to provide KHDA with reputable, independent, and international input and guidance on the quality of higher education provided in Dubai's Free Zones. UQAIB achieves this objective by reviewing all academic licensing applications of the higher education providers and making recommendations to the Director of the Licensing Bureau at KHDA. It also approves, through equivalency validation, all programmes by higher education providers, co-operates and engages with any university, international organisation, institution, or authority in matters relating to quality assurance and enters into relevant agreements with such bodies to achieve this objective.

### **Broader implications**

Many countries import programmes. In the case of countries with developing higher education systems, such as Dubai, this is a deliberate strategy to respond to the urgent need for a broad range of high-quality programmes designed to meet the needs of a rapidly growing economy. However, there are complex value-laden issues associated with building a higher education sector designed to serve the country but based on the programmes and corresponding quality assurance systems of other countries. Programme curriculum is not value free. Choices about what subject matter is deemed appropriate is informed by local economic needs as well as the broader social paradigm, which includes religious and cultural factors. Choices about the teaching and assessment methods applied reflect cultural values about social structures and systems.

Similarly, the standards and criteria used in the corresponding quality assurance processes are not value-free. Although they are designed to help ensure that curriculum are internationally appreciated, they are also a vital means by which a nation instils the values that it deems to be important for social development.

As such, relying upon validation of equivalency as the primary method of quality assurance has a significant impact on the values inherent within the higher education system. This paper explores some of these issues in depth and considers the manner in which the UQAIB model interacts with these values and the consequences for Dubai's development. Many of the issues explored will have broader application to other countries and jurisdictions addressing the issue of quality assuring imported programmes.