

Rapid growth in the overseas market for developed country degrees demands fresh thinking from universities, governments and quality assurance agencies: That was the message at a recent British Council-organised forum in Beijing – Quality Assurance of Degrees Awarded in a 3rd Country.

The forum heard of new Asian regional developments from senior representatives of academic accreditation agencies in China, Hong Kong and the UK.

Chinese officials said agreement is close in talks between the Mainland and Hong Kong. Discussions are aimed at expanding an existing mutual recognition agreement to include overseas qualifications earned on locally-accredited courses. Such a development could increase opportunities for UK institutions that offer programmes in Hong Kong to tap the Chinese market by drawing more Mainland students to the territory. The UK already supplies 70 percent of overseas programmes in the Asian city, which is a thriving regional education hub.

Talks with Hong Kong are “going on well,” said Gong Wan, Deputy Director General of the Beijing-based Chinese Service Centre for Scholarly Exchange that verifies overseas degrees are genuine.

Hong Kong counterparts believe a memorandum is likely by mid-2013, according to Robert Fearnside, Deputy Executive Director of Hong Kong Council for Accreditation of Academic and Vocational Qualifications.

“UK institutions are waiting on it.” he said.

Meanwhile, the UK’s QAA has just completed an audit of a selection of Sino-UK joint programmes and institutes in China. China is the third most popular location for UK transnational students, with almost 36,000 studying for UK qualifications there. In a separate initiative, QAA is preparing to issue new guidelines addressing all academic partnership-programmes, overseas and domestic, in January 2013.

The forum, **Quality Assurance of Degrees Awarded in a Third Country**, was the fifth of six British Council **Global Education Dialogues: The Asia Series 2012-13**. Discussions were organised into three plenary sessions, followed by parallel workshops on the same three topics, and a final report-back and summing up.

The opening plenary, Current Trends in Transnational Education set out economic and demographic trends driving third country transnational education. The second plenary, Quality Assurance for Degrees Awarded in a Third Country, explored reforms to quality assurance systems in Asia, where Malaysia, Singapore and Dubai are significant host countries, and raised questions about future evolution. The session on Verification for Degrees Awarded in a Third Country heard presentations from China’s accreditation and verification agencies. Their views and concerns were valuable as China is a major country of origin for students taking overseas degrees within all frameworks -- international, third country transnational and locally-provided transnational.

Speakers argued for urgent research work to develop better data on transnational education completed in third countries. “Without good data, we’re in a bit of a policy vacuum,” said Dr. Lorne Gibson, who is Director of International Business and Partnerships and Convenor of the TNE Special Interest Group, International Education Association Australia.

Better understanding is urgent because the sector as a whole has been growing swiftly, at more than 10 percent a year since 2008, and is likely to continue almost as strongly.

Increasing inter-regional mobility is forecast in the British Council's study "*Shape of things to come: higher education global trends and emerging opportunities to 2020*" that shows East Asia leading this trend. In addition, the study predicts further expansion of transnational education provision, likely to foster international student and academic mobility within the region.

New trends

Students of transnational education providers do not fit the conventional image of an international student as someone who travels abroad to gain a degree, as Mr Gibson explained. They sign up to study for qualifications from a foreign university, but may be taught on a branch campus in their home country, through joint programmes with partner universities or distance learning.

In line with the latest trends in globalization, such students are increasingly leaving home to gain their foreign degrees in a third country. Examples of third country transnational education would be Philippine or Indonesian students in Singapore or Malaysia (the latter also winning Arab students with its Islamic culture).

A graphic example of how demand for internationally savvy, culturally sensitive hires is re-shaping tuition came from the head of international programme development at University of London, the world's oldest and still the largest offshore education provider, with 54,000 students worldwide, even from North Korea.

Dr Tangjie Ward described how it is possible for a Malaysian student to take University of London courses there, move to Egypt in their second year to gain cultural exposure to the wider Muslim world by enrolling at London's partnership study centre in the American University of Cairo, then complete their final year in London, potentially benefiting from UK-based internship programmes.

Data shows pent up demand for quality education, especially where gross national income per capita has reached USD \$10,000 a year, yet college enrolment rates still lag behind developed nations, at between 40 to 60 percent. Many such countries are in East Asia, Mr Gibson said.

Transnational education hubs have emerged in Hong Kong, Malaysia and Singapore, serving local and third country students, especially from poorer Asian countries. Students studying transnational programmes in Hong Kong, Malaysia and Singapore exceed the number of locals who depart for foreign universities.

Anecdotally the number of all TNE students who move location, either onshore or a third country, is "large and growing", said Mr Gibson.

Turning to the future of TNE, Mr Gibson stressed it is likely to be dominated by large providers who have worked out how to do TNE successfully. Consolidation is evident, for instance in Australia 7 institutions have 50% of the market. "Universities will either be in TNE and aim to do it really well, or not at all," he said. A positive consequence is that strategies and motivations are becoming more sophisticated, abandoning merely commercial or opportunistic goals, as TNE becomes an integrated part of a university's internationalization strategy.

The second plenary, **Quality Assurance of Degrees Awarded in a Third Country**, explored new developments in quality assurance frameworks, and heard debate on what constitutes meaningful equivalence.

Presenter Carolyn Campbell, UK QAA's Head of Networks and Partnerships, explained how TNE growth has led to regulatory improvements by regional quality assurance and accreditation agencies. Her introduction focused on Malaysia, Singapore and Dubai. Others contributed overviews of China and Hong Kong, and Australia, during the plenary and subsequent workshop.

The Malaysian Qualifications Agency (MQA) tightened up on failing programmes in 2009, two years after it was founded. It accredits programmes and publishes a list of overseas programmes that have achieved local accreditation; these can then be regarded a part of national provision, enabling recognition by China under joint protocols.

Singapore's new Council for Private Education registers fee-based providers, stipulating adequate health insurance for non-local students. CPE's arrival shrank the private sector and triggered quality improvements, Ms Campbell said. However, Chinese regulators present [Mr Gong] felt CPE represents the commercial sector too closely to be considered a watchdog.

Dubai is building an International Academic City zone, and has established the University Quality Assurance International Board that focuses on validation equivalency, relying more on the QA processes of the home country.

Australia is in the midst of creating a unified national regulator – the Tertiary Education Quality Standards Agency, or TEQSA, in place of regional bodies. It will provide continuous monitoring, as Jen Tyrell of the Australian Embassy Beijing explained.

QAA Assistant Research Director Jane Holt explained the methodologies involved in her just-completed China tour's 13 site visits for QAA's audit of Sino-UK joint programmes and institutes.

As the trend for 'third country' students grows, it is urgent their degrees are recognized by home governments – in fact, by as many countries as possible – so they can benefit professionally, Ms Campbell stressed.

The QAA is also working to 'map' its quality assessment frameworks against those of other countries, to compare outlines, create better comparability and greater trust. It covers all programmes offered by UK institutions anywhere in the world to guarantee teaching quality, equivalent learning outcomes and comparable (though not identical) student experiences.

The issue of equivalent outcomes prompted much comment throughout the event. The QAA guarantees equivalent learning outcomes, said Ms Campbell. She and other speakers stressed student experience cannot be the same, nor should it seek to be, as diverse experiences may even be better as more relevant to students' goals.

China's Concerns

China's perspective was the major theme of the third plenary, Verification for Degrees Awarded in a Third Country.

The presenters were Mr. Gong Wan, whose agency verifies degrees obtained from overseas, and Mr. Wang Lisheng from China Academic Degrees and Graduate Education Development Centre that audits joint programmes and institutes. Comments also came from the Hong Kong agency's Mr. Fearnside.

Chinese students are 14 percent of international students worldwide, and a growing number of third country students, in SE Asia especially, said Mr Wang. China sent out 340,111 students in 2011.

The Asian giant has also set itself the target of becoming a destination for international students in degree-awarding courses, breaking out of its reputation as largely for Mandarin language training location. Whilst acknowledging third country courses could support this goal, Chinese officials are concerned about commercialism and low quality, seeing faculty quality as key to a worthwhile student experience.

Stressing the need for enhanced quality assurance in TNE, a senior Ministry of Education official was blunt. Poor quality education could be “a disaster to the social and economic development,” said Yang Xiaochun, Director of European Affairs in the ministry’s Department of International Co-operation and Exchange, speaking after the event. China had 780 TNE degree programmes in 2012, and more than 30 TNE institutions; 91 percent of programmes are provided by 9 countries and territory, Australia, Canada, France, Germany, Hong Kong, Russia, the UK, the US.

The Ministry of Education’s 10-year reform and development plan to 2020 requires universities to internationalise, and they face student demand for more diverse experiences. The Ministry is now approving 40 percent of applications compared to 20 percent in recent years, said Professor Zhao Yanzhi, a macro-economist and expert on higher education.

China has 39 bilateral recognition agreements for overseas degrees, reaching agreement with Malaysia last year (2011).

The biggest cause of scandals remains poor quality overseas provision to Chinese students, so foreign countries should publish better information on their institutions, said Mr Gong.

A recurring topic in plenaries and workshops was whether education was purely a public good, or can also be commercial. The consensus in report backs was that it is legitimate for providers to make a profit, though quality is vital and an essential public good.

Participants included China’s Ministry of Education, senior officials, regulators and professional bodies from Australia, the UK, Germany and Hong Kong. University attendees came from Vietnam, Australia, Myanmar, China, Hong Kong, and the US.

The multilateral format created “very useful” dialogue, according to one of Hong Kong’s leading academics on transnational education, Enoch Young. “Institutions and accreditation agencies have many talks but involving the government is not easy,” he said.

The forum was “a unique experience” as it was his first time to join a discussion on TNE,” said the deputy dean of economics at Vietnam’s Hoa Sen University, which has students of finance and fashion design studying for British and French qualifications.

British Council, China
19th December 2012