

Sharing Quality Higher Education Across Borders: A Statement on Behalf of Higher Education Institutions Worldwide

(Note to reader: This document, prepared by the International Association of Universities (IAU), the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada (AUCC) (external link), the American Council on Education (ACE) (external link), Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) (external link), was circulated as a draft to higher education membership associations worldwide for comment from May to September 2004. This final version has benefited from their commentary.)

The Issue

Higher education's tradition of exchanging ideas and people across borders has long served to advance its contribution to society's cultural, social and economic goals. In recent years, there has been an impressive expansion of cross-border higher education initiatives. This expansion is characterized by two main trends. One is the growing imperative of higher education institutions to internationalize - to integrate an international/intercultural dimension into teaching, research and community service - in order to enhance their academic excellence and the relevance of their contribution to societies. Higher education institutions have long experience in this area, and are rapidly expanding their cooperation with their counterparts around the world.

The second trend is the growth of market-driven activities, fuelled by increased demand for higher education worldwide, declining public funding in many national contexts, the diversification of higher education providers, and new methods of delivery. The growth of this second trend, in particular, and the complex issues it raises, provide the impetus for this document.

The scope, complexity and volume of cross-border activity [1] create new challenges and intensify existing ones. Principal among these are the need to (a) safeguard the broader cultural, social and economic contributions of higher education and research, particularly given the critical role they play in today's global knowledge society; (b) protect the interests of students and facilitate their mobility; (c) strengthen the capacity of developing countries to improve accessibility to quality higher education, especially at a time when the gap in resources and access to knowledge between the industrialized and developing world is growing; and (d) preserve linguistic and cultural diversity within higher education.

This document is based on the belief that market forces alone are inadequate to ensure that cross-border education contributes to the public good. Therefore, it lays the groundwork for fair and transparent policy frameworks for managing higher education across borders that are underpinned by a set of guiding principles and a process of dialogue among stakeholders. These frameworks should address the challenges we face in developing and sharing quality higher education across borders for the benefit of all, and ensure that cross-border higher education's contribution to the broader public interest is not sacrificed to commercial interests.

Audiences

This statement is therefore addressed to two audiences: (1) higher education institutions and other providers [2] and their non-governmental associations worldwide, and (2) national governments and their intergovernmental organizations. It outlines the principles that the signatories believe should anchor institutional initiatives in cross-border education as well as government policies and positions in trade negotiations. It also recommends specific actions that reinforce these principles.

By endorsing this statement, the higher education membership associations listed at the end of this document signal their intention to (a) promote policies and practices among their member institutions which are based on the principles and actions called for in this statement; (b) cooperate at an international level to implement such policy frameworks and (c) engage in dialogue with their respective governments and intergovernmental organizations so that national and international policies and practices advance these principles and realize this action agenda.

Principles for Cross-border Higher Education

We believe that cross-border activity can make an important contribution to enhancing higher education if it is developed and delivered responsibly and effectively. We therefore set forth the following principles to guide the actions of all the stakeholders specified in this statement:

- Cross-border higher education should strive to contribute to the broader economic, social and cultural well-being of communities.
- While cross-border education can flow in many different directions and takes place in a variety of contexts, it should strengthen developing countries' higher education capacity in order to promote global equity.
- In addition to providing disciplinary and professional expertise, cross-border higher education should strive to instill in learners the critical thinking that underpins responsible citizenship at the local, national and global levels.
- Cross-border higher education should be accessible not only to students who can afford to pay, but also to qualified students with financial need.
- Cross-border higher education should meet the same high standards of academic and organizational quality no matter where it is delivered.
- Cross-border higher education should be accountable to the public, students and governments.
- Cross-border higher education should expand the opportunities for international mobility of faculty, researchers and students.
- Higher education institutions and other providers of cross-border higher education should provide clear and full information to students and external stakeholders about the education they provide.

Recommendations for Higher Education Institutions and other Providers

Based on these principles, we endorse the following action agenda for adoption and implementation by higher education institutions and other providers engaged in education across borders. In order to benefit from past experience, implementation efforts should recognize and, where appropriate, build on existing legal instruments, policy statements, fora and initiatives that are consistent with these principles and promote further research and policy dialogue [3].

- Become conversant with issues surrounding cross-border education and trade to inform the exchange among associations and their associations' engagement in a constructive dialogue with governments.
- Strive to ensure that higher education across borders contributes to the broader social and economic well-being of communities in the host country, is culturally sensitive in its approach and content, and strengthens local higher education capacity by, for example, cooperating, when appropriate, with local institutions.
- Obtain the proper authorization to operate as a higher education institution from government or other competent bodies [4] in the home and host countries. At the same time, governments and competent bodies should increase their collaboration, transparency, and information sharing in order to alleviate the administrative burden on higher education institutions.
- Build a culture of ongoing quality review, feedback, and improvement by creating robust quality assurance processes at the institutional level which rely heavily on faculty expertise and incorporate the views of students.
- Cooperate with their associations as well as with relevant governmental and non-governmental bodies to develop effective quality assurance principles and practices and apply them to cross-border activities.
- Cooperate with relevant governmental and non-governmental bodies to improve the international exchange of information and cooperation on quality assurance and recognition issues.
- Provide reliable information to the public, students and governments in a proactive manner, particularly with respect to the institution's legal status, award-granting authority, course offerings, quality assurance mechanisms, as well as other relevant facts as suggested by codes of good practice.

Recommendations to Governments

Meeting the challenges of cross-border education will require a concerted effort not only by higher education providers, but also by governments and competent authorities within nations. In this regard, it is vital that strong partnerships be fostered between higher education institutions and their associations on the one hand, and governments and their intergovernmental organizations on the other hand. We believe the cornerstone of this partnership should be a shared vision of principles and policies to govern the management of cross-border education

Some governments seek to manage cross-border higher education through multilateral and regional trade

regimes designed to facilitate the flow of private goods and services. There are three main limitations to this approach. First, trade frameworks are not designed to deal with the academic, research, or broader social and cultural purposes of cross-border higher education. Second, trade policy and national education policy may conflict with each other and jeopardize higher education's capacity to carry out its social and cultural mission. Third, applying trade rules to complex national higher education systems designed to serve the public interest may have unintended consequences that can be harmful to this mission [5].

Thus, we believe that international agreements and policies for cross-border higher education - particularly in the context of WTO and other trade discussions - should address these limitations. They should respect the right of governments and competent bodies within nations to regulate their higher education systems, to safeguard the public investment in higher education to achieve their cultural, social and economic goals, and to promote access and equity for students. Moreover, governments should play a constructive role in developing national and international policy frameworks that promote cross-border higher education's positive contributions to society. To this end, we recommend that governments adopt the following action agenda to complement the efforts of higher education providers:

- Engage with higher education institutions and other providers and their representative associations in dialogue about the principles articulated in this statement, particularly when elaborating trade policies.
- Promote and support academic and research partnerships and other forms of cooperation for higher education capacity-building in developing countries.
- Demonstrate a commitment to access through increased support for qualified international students with financial need.
- Cooperate with relevant governmental and non-governmental bodies to ensure that foreign higher education providers operating within their countries are appropriately authorized and monitored.
- Cooperate with relevant governmental and non-governmental bodies to make widely available accurate, timely, and user-friendly information on the country's higher education institutions and quality assurance and accreditation practices.
- Cooperate with relevant governmental and non-governmental bodies to improve information tools that ensure the information referred to above is shared internationally in a systematic fashion.

Conclusion

Higher education across borders is a promising avenue for enhancing equity, access and the quality of higher education. Realizing its potential is a shared responsibility of many stakeholders, including the associations cited below and the higher education institutions they represent. We urge all engaged in planning, providing, monitoring, and negotiating higher education across borders to adhere to the principles articulated in this statement and to implement the action items. We also urge governments to bring this statement to the attention of intergovernmental organizations whose mandates include higher education and to ensure that the values, principles, roles and responsibilities articulated in this statement guide these organizations' deliberations and actions. By taking these steps, and working collectively, we will help address the urgent need for national and international policy frameworks for sharing quality higher education across borders and affirm the value of higher education's continued contribution to the public good.

(This statement has been formally adopted by the higher education membership associations listed below.)

Signatories (click here)

[1] Higher education across borders is a multifaceted phenomenon which includes the movement of people (students and faculty), providers (higher education institutions with a physical and/or virtual presence in a host country), and academic content (such as the development of joint curricula). These activities take place in the context of international development cooperation, academic exchanges and linkages, as well as commercial initiatives.

[2] This group includes institutions and new types of higher education providers, whether they are public, private or for-profit.

[3] The following is a representative, but by no means exhaustive sample of related existing instruments, policy statements, fora and initiatives: UNESCO regional conventions on the recognition of academic qualifications and credentials (see www.unesco.org); UNESCO/Council of Europe Code of Good Practice in the Provision of Transnational Education (see www.cepes.ro); OECD-UNESCO Draft Guidelines on Provision of Cross-border Education (see www.oecd.org); development of the European Higher Education Area (see www.eua.be or www.bologna-bergen2005.no); Accra Declaration on GATS and Internationalisation (AAU, see www.aau.org); Joint Declaration on Higher Education and GATS (ACE/ AUCC/ CHEA/EUA, see www.unesco.org/iau).

[4] The term “competent bodies” is used in order to take into account the fact that in any given country, authority for higher education rests with different levels of government, non-governmental organizations, and institutions.

[5] This is particularly true given the fact that GATS, Article I:3 is ambiguous and open to interpretation. It is this Article that is concerned with services ‘supplied in the exercise of government authority’ where these services are defined as being supplied ‘neither on a commercial basis nor in competition with one or more service suppliers’.