

**Theme:** Quality Assurance at a Distance

**Title:** A NEW WAY OF EVALUATING OVERSEAS PROVIDERS

**Authors (name, degrees, position, institution):**

**Mrs. Wessen Rawazik**

Quality Assurance Manager

Knowledge and Human Development Authority

**Mr. Martin Carroll**

Consulting Director

Oman Accreditation Council

**Dr. Warren Fox, Ph.D.**

Executive Director of Higher Education

Knowledge and Human Development Authority

**Dr. Lee Harvey, Ph.D.**

Editor of *Quality in Higher Education* Journal

**Contact details:**

Wessen Rawazik

Quality Assurance Manager

Knowledge and Human Development Authority

P.O. Box 500008, Dubai, UAE

Tel: +971 4 364 0029

Fax: +971 4 364 0001

Email: [Wessen.rawazik@khda.gov.ae](mailto:Wessen.rawazik@khda.gov.ae)

**Abstract:**

This paper outlines approach to quality assurance of transnational provision that is designed to minimize overlap of quality assurance processes and reduce bureaucracy to a minimum while still providing necessary external oversight of higher education providers (HEPs) located in Free Zones in Dubai, United Arab Emirates (UAE). These HEPs are foreign branch institutions whose home campuses are located outside the UAE. While operating in Free Zones, these institutions are exempt from licensure by the national accrediting body of the UAE, the Commission for Academic Accreditation (CAA). However, they are subject to licensure by the Knowledge and Human Development Authority (KHDA) a Dubai government entity. In order to license these institutions, KHDA has created a University Quality Assurance International Board (UQAIB) comprising of leading international higher education quality assurance experts. This Board provides recommendations about the quality of HEPs to the KHDA Licensing Bureau using an *equivalency validation* model. This model

is designed to *validate* that the learning context, intended learning outcomes and quality of an academic program as offered by a HEP Branch are approximately the same as offered by the HEP Home; and that the external quality assurance provisions in place for the HEP Home are satisfactory.

### **Introduction:**

Quality assurance evaluations undertaken by an external body, whether as an accreditation, audit or assessment process, tend to adopt a fairly standard methodology. The method is to request a self-assessment to inform a panel of reviewers, usually 'peers', who ask for additional information to verify the self assessment and/or fill perceived gaps. A review visit takes place and then a report with either a summative or formative judgment 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. While there are numerous minor variations on this model, the one major variation is the extent to which the assessment is based on an institution's own goals and objectives or on externally prescribed standards.

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 a 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 scrutinize the offerings of foreign providers. Experience of transnational higher education over the past 10-15 years has shown numerous limitations in the ability of traditional quality assurance systems to effectively address some of the unique features of transnational education (Carroll & Woodhouse, 2006). 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. Moreover, it is frequently done by both, leading to duplication and potentially confusion between different sets of accreditation standards.

Equivalency validation attempts to address some of these issues. It rejects the idea that localized quality assurance of transnational programs must either take the form of normal quality assurance processes (e.g. standards-based accreditation) or, alternatively, adopt an entirely *laissez faire* approach. Instead, it is predicated upon the idea that a significant degree of reliance (although not full reliance) may be placed upon the scrutiny of the original program and HEP as a form of quality control of the remote version.

### **The Dubai Process:**

The higher education environment in Dubai is divided into three distinct segments: The first segment comprise higher education institutions established by royal decree through the UAE government. The second segment comprises those that are quality assured by the UAE government established federal agency, the CAA. The third segment comprises those higher education institutions located in Free Zones in Dubai that are quality assured by the Knowledge and Human Development Authority (KHDA). Each of these segments exists in Dubai as a response to the specific higher education needs of the Emirate and the overall challenges and demands for higher education provisions in UAE.

Institutions established by royal decree constitute some of the oldest institutions in the country. These include the UAE University, The Higher Colleges of Technology and Zayed University for women. These institutions were created specifically to offer higher education opportunities for Emiratis (the national population of UAE). In total, approximately 35,000 students are currently attending royal decree institutions across the country.

In Dubai there exists a majority expatriate population consisting of Asians, Europeans and Middle Eastern residents resulting in a large demand for higher education. Consequently, private and foreign universities have established campuses in the UAE to cater to the expatriate population. To ensure that qualities of academic standards are maintained at these institutions, the UAE government established a federal agency, the CAA. This agency accredits these institutions and their programs against localized standards.

More recently, Free Zones have been established in Dubai dedicated to promoting local access to international higher education. This is a unique model whereby foreign institutions establish branch campuses to provide the local expatriate and national population with greater access to international education. It provides students who are unable to travel overseas for higher education due to financial constraints or who identify a desired program of study, an opportunity to obtain a foreign qualification. On the other hand, it also alleviates the “brain drain” effect by those students who are financially capable of pursuing their higher education studies abroad by bringing the foreign programs to Dubai. The branch campus model seeks to maintain the international standards of the home campus rather than tailor qualifications to suite local accreditation standards. The KHDA has established a system for validating the equivalency of these institutions and their programs with the home campus.

Established in 2006 by the government of Dubai, KHDA has been mandated with the objective of developing the education and human resource sectors in the emirate. In achieving this, KHDA is building a culture and system that puts learning at the heart of society. With respect to higher education, KHDA has developed objectives that provide student with access to quality post-schooling learning and thereby establishing Dubai as a leading center for tertiary education and research.

In 2007, KHDA created the University Quality Assurance International Board (UQAIB). This Board is comprised of international experts in the field of quality assurance and cross border higher education provisions. As such, the Board is qualified to provide KHDA with reputable, independent, international input and guidance on the quality of higher education provisions in Free Zones.

The purpose of UQAIB is “to ensure that the quality of higher education of the Higher Education Providers is in line with both International and the Emirate standards” (KHDA Board Resolution No. 1 2008). It does this by approving programs and making recommendations to the KHDA Licensing Bureau about the licensure of Branch HEPs.

In reaching its conclusions, UQAIB employs an *equivalency validation* model. This model is designed to *validate* two things: (a) that the learning context, intended learning outcomes and quality of an academic program as offered by a HEP Branch are approximately the same as offered by the HEP Home (i.e. that there are effective transnational quality assurance provisions in place); and (b) that the external quality assurance provisions in place for the HEP Home are satisfactory.

This unique model of quality assurance places reliance, as much as possible, on the external and internal quality assurance processes that are already in place external quality audits as conducted by external quality assurance agencies from the country of origin of branch institutions established in Free Zones. It places onus on these agencies to ensure that a degree earned from studying at a branch in Dubai will be the same as a degree earned from the home campus. The

Equivalency Validation considers the quality of higher education provision at branch institutions in Dubai on three factors. Firstly, the higher education institution must be appropriately approved in a manner recognized by the government of its home country. This may take various forms, including includes state, provincial or regional licensure, statute or other method of recognized approval.

Secondly, the standards applied in such approvals for the home campus must be in line with international best practices and eligible to meet Dubai’s minimum standards. This is in order to ensure that the Home HEP’s approval is not only legitimate in its own context, but also credible internationally. The development of summative standards on this matter is fraught with difficulty and has thus far eluded the International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE), global peak body for external quality agencies. Therefore, on this matter the combined expertise of UQAIB Members is invaluable.

Third, there must be evidence of equivalency whereby the programs offered at the HEP Branch are of the same nomenclature and comparable academic standards as those offered at the home campus. Equivalency Validation therefore places reliance not only on the HEP Home’s external quality assurance regime, but also on its internal transnational quality assurance system vis-à-vis the HEP Branch.

In the event that information available from these sources is unsatisfactory or insufficient for the Board to make a recommendation to the Licensing Bureau about the equivalency of the HEP Branch and HEP Home, UQAIB can augment the available information with its own independent audit of the HEP Branch.

### **Implementation:**

A first round of academic license applications under the UQAIB model has nearly been completed. Already it has become apparent that the model is capable of avoiding unnecessary duplication and conflict with other quality assurance regimes, while also being capable of detecting and addressing the more obvious quality concerns. However, it has also proven desirable to establish a minimal, core set of HEP Branch criteria to which UQAIB may refer in those instances in which it needs to conduct its own independent audits.

### **Implications for other jurisdictions:**

Many countries import programs. 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 programs 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 programs and corresponding quality assurance systems of other countries. Program curriculum is not value free. Choices about what subject matter is deemed appropriate are 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 is internationally appreciated, they are also a vital means by which a nation instills the values that it deems to be important for social development.

Dubai's strategic vision seeks to establish a genuinely international higher education environment, rather than a Dubai education environment borne from imported programs that have then been customized to the local context. One of the advantages of UQAIB's equivalency validation model is that it enables imported programs to maintain their original character. Even then, Dubai is able to pursue this vision with the security of having a localized higher education sector in the UAE quality assured through royal decrees and the CAA. As such, the UQAIB model it may not be an appropriate model for other jurisdictions that seek to build a localized higher education sector through importing foreign programs as the basis for developing localized programs.

**Conclusion:**

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 explored some of these issues and considered 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 programs. A more detailed explication of the UQAIB and the equivalency validation model are provided elsewhere (Rawazik & Carroll, 2007).

**References:**

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