

THE CHEA INTERNATIONAL DIRECTORY ON QUALITY ASSURANCE: A RESOURCE FOR GLOBAL COOPERATION

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1. INTRODUCTION

Improving global understanding of quality assurance policies and procedures in higher education is of growing importance. With increasing internationalization, massification, digitalization, and global humanitarian and social crises, this is fundamental for supporting innovation and the transformation of tertiary education, while helping institutions manage both historical and new challenges. At such a moment, promoting communication and cooperation on quality assurance across borders and among a variety of actors and stakeholders is essential to nurture global knowledge exchange and understanding, and to provide mutual support while addressing key issues in quality assurance of higher education. The need for enhancing communication and cooperation was highlighted in the survey of quality assurance agencies conducted by the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) in 2000/2001. The findings of that survey identified possible actions to strengthen quality assurance procedures and practices. These included sharing information on “devices to improve the evaluation and assessment system,” “methodology and good practice in quality review,” “rules and regulations about naming and nomenclature,” and “agency actions/background information about providers operating internationally,” among others (CHEA, 2001, p. 1).

Given the significance of strengthening cooperation in quality assurance, this article provides an overview of the CHEA International Directory on Quality Assurance (Directory), a notable CHEA initiative for enhancing information sharing. This paper describes the results of an initial exploration of the data listed in this Directory¹, including data features and their limits. This article begins with the main structure of the Directory and describes the types of information listed. It also discusses the history of the Directory and how frequently it is updated. Following this description, an initial thematic analysis of the typologies of organizations and their activities is presented. References to the relevant literature on the topics and phenomena identified from the analysis are also included.

2. THE CHEA INTERNATIONAL DIRECTORY: AN OVERVIEW

In the early 2000s, CHEA created the CHEA International Directory, a free, online-access directory that includes information about more than 550 organizations with varying roles and responsibilities in quality assurance from more than 100 countries across the globe. It represents a gateway to the world of quality as-

¹ This paper reflects the information that was listed in the CHEA International Directory until September 2022. The Directory is in the process of being updated and improved in order to offer more resources to users.

assurance organization data and is the only centralized, comprehensive database of its type. The information it provides is essential for the advancement of the scholarship about quality assurance innovation and international cooperation. It is a tool developed to assist scholars and practitioners in locating information on quality assurance authorities across the globe.

The CHEA International Directory includes information about quality assurance and accreditation bodies² “authorized to operate by their respective governments either as agencies of the government or as private (nongovernmental) organizations” (CHEA, 2022), as well as governmental entities that oversee higher education (such as Ministries of Education or Departments of Education), organizations formally in charge of the recognition of higher education qualifications, and networks/associations of higher education institutions or quality assurance agencies. Thus, it provides information from a variety of diverse types of key actors and stakeholders invested in the establishment and monitoring of quality assurance: those who formally make decisions on accreditation policy, those who inform the policymaking process with field knowledge, and those who implement the accreditation process of higher education institutions and/or programs. Ongoing conversations about the improvement of quality assurance practices and procedures can benefit from collaboration across this broad range of stakeholders involved in quality assurance.

According to the CHEA website, the information in the Directory comes from a wide variety of sources. Most information has been obtained from the organizations’ websites. The Directory includes contact information (i.e., institutional address, email, and website) and a brief description of the role and primary activities of each organization. Descriptions originally produced in a language other than English were translated with the assistance of multilingual translation technologies. The Directory is maintained and updated every six months by senior personnel at CHEA. Records for new organizations are also periodically added.

3. THEMATIC ANALYSIS OF THE DIRECTORY

The primary focus of this initial analysis of the CHEA International Directory was on the types of organizations, their functions, activities, and, when applicable, their geographic location. The major topics discussed herein include: (1) the geographic distribution of the organizations, (2) the variation in quality assurance terminology, and (3) the existence of multiple types of quality assurance networks.

As with other cross-cultural research including language differences, the translation of the non-English descriptions into English may represent a limitation of this analysis, having major implications for the validity of the results if adequate mitigation strategies are not adopted (e.g., Temple & Young, 2004). However, it is important to note that most organizations based in non-English speaking countries provided a brief description in English of their activities on their website. The translations created by the organizations reduced translation issues of language differences. Although this represents a positive point, it does not eliminate potential limitations of the analysis. It may be desirable to implement further strategies to enhance trustworthiness.

3.1 Geographic Distribution

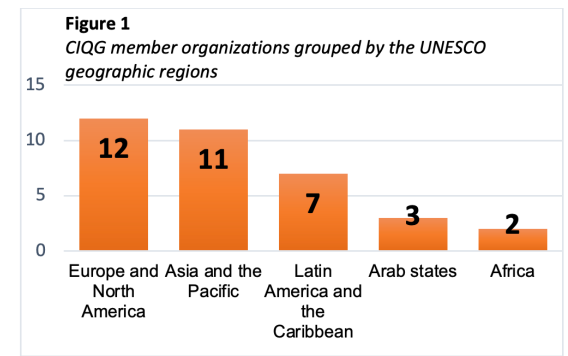
The first aspect that emerged from the analysis is the existence of many accrediting agencies or other organizations involved in or responsible for quality assurance. This phenomenon is primarily due to the global recognition of the importance that quality assurance has in the establishment of civil society and economic prosperity (Lane, 2012). Around 40 years ago, many countries across the world started establishing national quality assurance agencies (Uvalić-Trumbić & Martin, 2021). Similar to the evolution of the United States’ higher education system described by Cooper et al. (2004), quality assurance across the globe “started small, locally, and voluntaristically; it became universal, mandatory and extensive” (p. 2). The development of accreditation mechanisms followed diverse directions, with similarities and differences in rules and procedures.

The countries of the organizations listed in the Directory can be classified into the five UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) geographic regions³ (i.e., Africa, Arab States, Asia and the Pacific, Europe and North America, and Latin America and the Caribbean). Thus classified, it

² Within the scope of this paper, “(external) quality assurance agencies/organizations/bodies”, “accreditation or accrediting agencies/organizations/bodies” and “accreditors” are used interchangeably.

³ As stated by UNESCO, this geographic categorization does not imply the expression of any opinion whatsoever on the part of the author concerning the legal status of any country, territory, city or area or of its authorities, or concerning the delimitation of its frontiers or boundaries.

emerged that there are currently quality assurance organizations in all geographic regions and nearly every nation. Most of the organizations belong to countries located in “Europe and North America” or “Asia and the Pacific.” Thirty-five (35) organizations in the Directory are members of the CHEA International Quality Group (CIQG) – a group established in 2012 to foster innovation and international cooperation in quality assurance. These 35 CHEA/CIQG member organizations cover all five UNESCO geographic areas, although not distributed homogeneously: “Europe and North America” and “Asia and the Pacific” are represented respectively by 12 and 11 organizations. The least represented region is Africa, with only two organizations part of the CIQG (Figure 1).



3.2 Terminology

The analysis showed great variation in the terms used by accrediting agencies to describe their activity. For example, according to the glossary of terms and definitions on quality assurance published by UNESCO in 2007, accreditation is “the process by which a (non-)governmental or private body evaluates the quality of a higher education institution as a whole or of a specific educational program in order to formally recognize it as having met certain pre-determined minimal criteria or standards” (Vlăsceanu et al., 2007, p. 25). The result of the accreditation process is the awarding of a status to an institution, program, or agency to operate within a time-limited validity. The analysis of the data listed in the Directory underlined that while “accredited” is the most utilized term, “authorized”, “recognized”, “certified”, “registered”, “licensed”, “approved” and “validated” are frequently used as synonyms for “accredited”, indicating that diverse terms have the same meaning in different countries.

There are also examples of the same term conveying different meanings. In the United States, for instance, the term “recognition” in the context of quality assurance refers to the process through which an external body reviews and certifies the effectiveness of accrediting agencies in ensuring and enhancing the quality of higher education. This is a process that exists in other quality assurance systems around the world, even if it is not so common, but it is described with different terms (for example, “registered” agency in Europe). In most countries, the term “recognition” refers exclusively to the formal acknowledgment, by a competent authority, of the validity and academic level of a foreign education qualification, of partial studies, or of prior learning for the purposes of employability or for admission to higher education (as defined by UNESCO in the 2019 Global Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications).

Borrowing a phrase coined by Bobrow and Dryzek (1987) to describe the confusion caused by multiple definitions of policy across and within the social science disciplines, one might well ask if the variation in quality assurance terminology results in a “babel of tongues in which participants talk past rather than to one another” (p. 4). Diverse terminologies do not necessarily represent a limitation when access to information, and a way to understand the meaning of the terms used, is ensured. Multiple international glossaries of terms and definitions have been developed over the years (e.g., the one published by UNESCO, as previously mentioned, or by the International Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education, INQA/AHE). These represent essential tools to support mutual understanding.

3.3 Associations/Networks on Quality Assurance

Multiple regional and international networks on quality assurance have been developed throughout the years to share best practices and enable collaboration, as highlighted in the relevant literature (e.g., Wells, 2014; Salmi, 2017). Several of these have been supported by intergovernmental organizations like the World Bank and UNESCO (Uvalić-Trumbić & Martin, 2021). Although the association of tertiary education institutions has a long history (e.g., the Association of Commonwealth Universities, founded in 1913), the establishment of international or regional networks focusing specifically on quality assurance is a relatively recent phenomenon that emerged within the last three decades.

The CHEA International Directory lists numerous types of quality assurance-related networks. They may be distinguished by the geographic areas of interest (country, regional, or international), the types of their members (accrediting agencies and/or other organizations responsible for quality assurance), and, in the case of networks of quality assurance agencies, the types of accreditation carried out (institutional and/or program).

Regarding the geographic dimension, there is a world-wide association of quality assurance organizations in higher education, INQAAHE, which aims to “promote and advance excellence in higher education through the support of an active international community of quality assurance agencies” (INQAAHE, n.d.). However, the Directory also lists many regional networks for quality assurance (see Table 1) that are not always exclusively composed of accrediting bodies. Some of them cover a large geographic area; others focus on a smaller one, and in some cases, they are part of the larger area that encompasses them.

Table 1

Regional Associations or Networks on Quality Assurance

UNESCO geographic region	Name of the network or association	Acronym	Date of establishment
Africa	The African Quality Assurance Network	AfriQAN	2009
	The Southern African Quality Assurance Network	SAQAN	n.a.
Arab States	Arab Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education	ANQAHE	2007
	The Association of Quality Assurance Agencies of the Islamic World	QA-Islamic	2011
Asia and the Pacific	Asia-Pacific Quality Network	APQN	2003
	The ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) Quality Assurance Network	AQAN	2008
Europe and North America	American Council for Higher Education Accreditation	CHEA	1996
	European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (originally European Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education)	ENQA	2000
	Central and Eastern European Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education	CEENQA	2001
	European Consortium for Accreditation in Higher education	ECA	2003
	European Quality Assurance Register for Higher education	EQAR	2008
Latin America and the Caribbean	Ibero-American Network for Quality Assurance for Higher Education	RIACES	2003
	The Caribbean Area Network for Quality Assurance in Tertiary Education	CANQATE	2004

Other types of networks or associations are made by accreditors that focus on the accreditation of programs. Based on the review of the Directory’s data, it was clear that such types of associations are made by accrediting agencies that operate at the national or international level. Moreover, some of these networks consist of communities of diverse specialized accreditors (i.e., diverse disciplines or professions within the same network), like the Association of Specialized and Professional Accreditors (ASPA, US) and the Association of Accrediting Agencies of Canada (AAAC). Others are networks of programmatic accreditors specializing in specific disciplines or fields, like the European Network for Accreditation of Engineering Education (ENAE), which consists of accreditors responsible for the accreditation of first and second cycles of engineering programs.

4. CONCLUSIONS

This paper presented an overview of the results that emerged from a preliminary thematic analysis of the CHEA International Directory on quality assurance. The investigation revealed that there are multiple and

diverse types of stakeholders participating in the quality assurance of postsecondary education around the globe. Some of them are accreditors, others have oversight of accreditors, and yet others are governmental entities and associations/networks concerned with quality assurance. The diversity of stakeholders has been perhaps predicated by the rising recognition of the need to enhance the global understanding of higher education quality assurance policies and procedures. Recognizing the challenges of differing languages and differing terms across these stakeholders, it remains clear that developing, collecting, and sharing accessible, up-to-date, reliable data and information among countries is essential to supporting the higher education systems worldwide and fostering confidence and trust in the quality and reliability of qualifications. Through peer learning, more informed decisions can be made about regulations and quality assurance models. As stated by Kerr (1976), “[t]he quality of our actions can be no greater than the quality of our understandings” (p. iii). Further, with increasing internationalization of higher education – and with rising awareness from global challenges – organizations with certain responsibility in the quality of higher education, especially accrediting agencies, need “to interact across national boundaries, and to do this effectively they must have confidence in each other’s judgments” (Woodhouse, 2004, p. 77).

It would be important to note that resources to assist cooperation and collaboration are understood here mainly to exchange knowledge and increase understanding of various quality assurance systems, and not necessarily to achieve uniformity. While international cooperation in quality assurance and accreditation has helped to make practices more uniform and standardized (Eaton, 2018, p. ix), resulting in various advantages, the analysis presented here primarily advocates for acknowledging the power and benefit of cooperation in information sharing.

Given the inherently complex, multifaceted nature of educational challenges faced by higher education, and the formulation of policies to address them (Cooper et al., 2004), it would seem essential to strengthen the dialogue among key entities invested in establishing and monitoring quality assurance models. In fact, a “broad view of the challenges, tensions, and debates surrounding quality assurance and accreditation in higher education is essential information and context for those seeking to shape the future course of accreditation” (Phillips & Kinser, 2018, p. 6). The establishment of the CHEA International Directory is a significant advancement toward these goals and represents an international effort to further global understanding of quality assurance. As the Directory is further refined and updated, its use as a tool for increasing knowledge, communication, and collaboration will be further enhanced.

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