Reviewer's report

Title: Quality Assurance in Transnational Higher Education: a case study of the tropEd network

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Reviewer: Marta van Zanten

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This paper describes the quality assurance framework used by the tropEd network, which appears to be a successful model for ensuring the quality and equivalence of a degree program offered at multiple institutions worldwide. The authors also conducted a literature review of cross-national quality assurance systems and discuss tropEd activities within the context of the themes which emerged in the literature. While the topic of this paper is likely worthwhile to the BMC Medical Education audience, and issues of quality assurance and transnational education are timely areas for research, this paper could be greatly improved by developing a much more specific research question, enhancing the Methods section, reorganizing some of the information in the Results, adding limitations and areas for future research, and rewriting numerous unclear sections.

Major Compulsory Revisions

Introduction

1. The first two sentences require references.

2. The terms “double and joint degrees” need definitions. Are these two separate terms that mean the same thing, or do they have separate definitions? Do the terms refer to two separate degrees earned at the same time at the same institution, or do the terms refer to one degree earned at the same time from more than one institution, or something else? Are double and joint degrees offered in institutions in the tropEd network, and if yes, what are the implications related to quality assurance of the education programs?

Background of the tropEd network section:

3. The tropEd website should be included as a reference. How many different countries are represented by the 30 institutions that offer this degree? Are there numerous institutions that offer this degree that do not participate in the network?

4. The last sentence of this section describes the purpose of this paper, although the exact research question is not explicitly stated. It is unclear what kind of “results” of the tropEd Network quality assurance process were researched and will be described (i.e., success of programs undergoing the quality assurance review, success of the quality assurance process, student/graduate satisfaction, graduation rates, examination performance, job placement, etc.)

Methods
5. The Methods section is incomplete, as it only describes how the literature search was conducted. No information is provided regarding how the “participatory observation during network meetings” or “review of documents of tropEd” processes were conducted. For example, how many meetings were observed, by whom, what was being observed, how was the information gathered during the observation documented, etc. Also, what types of documents of tropEd were reviewed, how were they reviewed, by whom, what types of information was sought, etc.

Results

6. The Results section needs better organization. It is unclear throughout the Results section when the authors move from discussing the literature review themes to discussing these themes in the context of the tropEd network. For example, in the Equivalence and comparability of quality assurance frameworks section, the first paragraph discusses the literature review, and the following paragraphs appear to discuss the tropEd context, but this transition is unclear. Additional section headers are needed to make these transitions smoother.

Equivalence and comparability of quality assurance frameworks section:

7. Who are the voting members of the General Assembly? How many representatives per institution, etc., and are voting results by consensus or majority or something else? Throughout this section, (and the rest of the paper), the passive tense should be avoided. For example, in the third paragraph of this section, by providing this information in the active tense, it would be clear to the reader who developed the standards, professional profile, quality criteria, and checking of the curriculum content. As it is written it is not clear how this information was developed.

8. The fourth paragraph of this section is very confusing. What is the difference between a course and a module? Why would a module be rejected if it was the course that was not acceptable? Do numerous courses make up a module, or the other way around, or are they totally separate entities? Who gave the “oral and written explanations”? Were they given by a tropEd committee to the institution submitting the course / module, or was the purpose of these explanations for the institution to defend their submission? What is the difference between an “advanced module” and an “optional module”? The authors’ excessive use of the passive tense makes these types of descriptions difficult for the reader to understand.

9. The last sentence prior to Table 1 is not clear. If there are more than 30 institutions in the network, and the duration of the quality assurance review is for five years, why were only eight courses reviewed over the five-year period (2007 – 2011)? One would assume all 30 (or close to 30) would need to be reviewed during this time period. Or was the review of only those courses that needed to be re-accredited, and the rest of the institutions are newly admitted as the result of some separate quality assurance review?

10. In the paragraph after Table 1, what is the relationship between the Executive Committee and the GA? Why would changes need to go back to the GA and not
the Executive Committee?

11. A sentence in this paragraph is needed stating that these results are presented in Table 1.

12. In the sentence describing the thesis requirements, does this imply that there is there no formal quality assurance of the various institutions’ thesis requirements?

True collaboration versus erosion of national education sovereignty section:

13. It would aid the reader if the information in second paragraph describing who and how the tropEd quality assurance system was developed was presented much earlier in the paper.

14. The paragraph describing benefits of being in the network requires more detail. How was this information collected?

Accreditation agencies section:

15. The first paragraph of this section is extremely long, disorganized, and covers too many different themes without a logical flow. I suggest breaking it apart into several paragraphs based on either geographic regions or content themes, such as medical education accreditation agencies versus professions in other higher education fields, or some other way.

16. The sentences describing the situation in Africa are unclear. The authors state that the mandatory accreditation of medical schools increased from 2/9 in 2007 to 9/9 in 2012. It is unclear where the authors found the 2/9 data, referenced by the Burdick (2007) article, as that article states that 7 of 12 known accreditation systems for medical schools are mandatory.

Transparency section:

No issues noted.

TropEd practice and the wider context section:

17. This section is redundant, since the issues covered have mostly all already been previously mentioned in each section following the paragraphs that discussed the literature review. I suggest incorporating the information in this section into the previous sections.

Conclusions:

18. No study limitations or areas for further research are mentioned. For example, the authors could attempt to use various outcome measures to investigate the impact of the tropEd quality assurance process on student/graduate performance or workplace/employment success.

Minor Essential Revisions

19. This paper requires extensive and careful proofreading to correct the numerous mistakes throughout. Here are some that I noted in the text:
   • Title contains inconsistent capitalization
   • First paragraph of Introduction: Stella 06 should be Stella 2006, First paragraph
of Background of the tropEd Network: the word “education” is misspelled

• Equivalence and comparability of quality assurance frameworks: I assume this section needs a “1” before it to be in line with the following sections which are numbered 2 – 4. Fourth paragraph, “ever” should by “every”. Fifth paragraph, for sentences that begin with numbers, the number should be spelled out.

• Use of italics and underlining not consistent throughout. Line spacing between sentences of different paragraphs not consistent throughout. Mistakes in punctuation throughout (for example, in the abbreviation “i.e.”).

• Inconsistent use of acronyms: For example, UNESCO, Ecotec, KIT and UCL all need definition the first time the terms are used. The spelled out term General Assembly is used after it has already been defined as GA. Same for Masters in International Health, it is shortened to MIH, and then later in the paper spelled out again.

20. The references are provided twice, once as part of the paper and again as a separate file. The separate file appears to be the version with the fewest mistakes, but still contain numerous typos and inconsistencies:

• Sometimes there is a period after the page numbers and sometimes not

• The date a website is accessed is not written in a consistent fashion across references

• DOI, ISSN and ISBN numbers are provided inconsistently

• Knight references both contain inconsistent capitalization

• The issue number is italicized for some journal references and not for others

• OECD reference – year should be 2003?

• WFME reference should point directly to source document on wfme.org website, not to secondary website.

**Level of interest:** An article whose findings are important to those with closely related research interests

**Quality of written English:** Needs some language corrections before being published

**Statistical review:** No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.

**Declaration of competing interests:**

I declare that I have no competing interests.