Evolution of the Tokyo Convention – Lessons and insights

When we talk about UNESCO’s higher education programme, we always mention the conventions on academic recognition as UNESCO’s most important work.

Indeed, among its five key functions, UNESCO has chosen to use its standard-setting function as the entry point for its engagement with higher education.

Among the different levels of normative instruments, UNESCO uses the highest level – the convention – to lay the foundation for a focused, human rights-based intervention, as well as to expand connections to other relevant areas in higher education.

Unlike other types of normative instruments such as recommendations, declarations and so forth, a convention is the equivalent to an international treaty that needs official ratification if countries want to be party to it.

We trace below the evolution of the Tokyo Convention, officially known as the Asia-Pacific Regional Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications in Higher Education, through adoption to implementation, looking at the guidelines and tools which have worked, the impact of COVID and the lessons learned along the way.

From adoption to ratification

The convention was adopted in November 2011 in Tokyo, Japan. It is the second generation of the Asia-Pacific Convention and a replacement to the Bangkok Convention which was adopted in 1983 in Bangkok, Thailand.

With the adoption of the Tokyo Convention, the Asia-Pacific has become the second region in the world to have a revised regional recognition convention after Europe’s Lisbon Convention which was adopted in 1997.

Adoption is the end of a lengthy process starting from a feasibility study followed by several rounds of drafting exercises as well as consultations with member states and other stakeholders.

Adoption also means that the text of the convention is officially finalised and is open for ratification by member states from the region and beyond, whose national protocols may differ from country to country.

It can take months and even years for governments to prepare a national benefits analysis report before a ratification request can be submitted to the national parliament for public debate and official endorsement. In some countries in Asia-Pacific, the cabinet or ministry is able to make the ratification decision and have it documented at their national parliament through their respective ministry of foreign affairs.
In early 2018 – over six years on from the adoption of the Tokyo Convention – the prerequisite five ratifications had been acquired for the Tokyo Convention to enter into force. Currently, 11 member states and the Holy See have ratified the Tokyo Convention with more ratifications on their way in the coming years.

UNESCO Bangkok will continue to provide technical support to its member states for their ratification and implementation of the Tokyo Convention, as well as for promoting strong links with the Global Convention, which is complementary.

Implementation mechanisms

After the Tokyo Convention enters into force at the national level, parties to the convention need to identify competent recognition authorities. These recognition authorities can be ministries, specialised agencies, higher education institutions and employers, depending on whether systems are of a centralised or decentralised nature.

Parties to the convention also need to designate one entity or several entities to serve as national information centres (NICs).

Countries tend to assign their existing quality assurance agencies as their recognition authorities and as their NICs. It is commonly understood that recognition decisions should be based on a process of comparing information to determine if there are substantial differences between foreign and domestic qualifications.

Therefore, NICs can provide professional advice on foreign credentials based on an analysis and comparison of the information available which is then considered by recognition decision-makers. In many cases, these kinds of services are fee-paying in order to recover some of the implied costs, especially as more people now possess foreign qualifications following the expansion of higher education opportunities within and across countries.

At the regional level, there are two major mechanisms in place for implementing the Tokyo Convention:

• The yearly sessions of the Tokyo Convention Committee, which aim to review the progress of the implementation of the Tokyo Convention, identify obstacles and gaps and push for the development of relevant guidelines and tools to help build the capacity of the parties when it comes to implementing the convention.

So far, with the leadership of the Committee Bureau, UNESCO Bangkok has organised three Tokyo Convention Committee sessions, in 2018, 2019 and 2021 hosted by the Republic of Korea, UNESCO Bangkok and Japan respectively. The fourth session will be hosted by China’s Ministry of Education later this year.

• The Asia-Pacific Network of National Information Centres (APNNIC), the web portal jointly launched by the NICs of the parties to the Tokyo Convention in November 2020. This is the key regional recognition infrastructure which ensures that all NICs are
connected efficiently through a common platform to promote transparency and fairness for information-based qualification recognition.

It is not necessary for countries to have a solid recognition authority or an NIC before proceeding with the ratification of the Tokyo Convention. In fact, the implementation process of the convention is also a process of capacity building at the national level to enable countries to catch up with more mature systems in the region and beyond.

Guidelines and tools development

Through the Bangkok Convention Committee, several guidelines have been produced, including the Guidelines for National Information Centres which were published in 2014.

The Tokyo Convention Committee is considering updating the guidelines in due course to ensure that they address the changing needs of the parties to the convention.

Since the Tokyo Convention came into force in February 2018, UNESCO Bangkok has published several guidelines and policy briefs on development and strengthening of national qualifications frameworks, blended learning for quality higher education, a holistic approach to measure the internationalisation of higher education and other related topics.

In 2020, in view of the challenges to learning caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and the increasing use of online platforms in the delivery of higher education programmes, parties to the Tokyo Convention issued a joint statement, emphasising the importance of global and regional solidarity and enhanced collaboration in academic recognition, especially in the recognition of qualifications obtained through non-traditional modes, including online and blended learning.

During the third session of the Tokyo Convention Committee held virtually and hosted by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology of Japan in October 2021, parties to the convention agreed to put special effort into developing regional guidelines and tools concerning the recognition of the school leaving diplomas, certificates and standardised tests which are used to access higher education; recognition of online and blended learning; and the development and operation of micro-credentials in the years to come.

The Sydney Statement (2016), Shenzhen Statement (2017) and Seoul Statement (2018) and the outcome documents of the previous Regional Convention Committee Sessions and the Regional Conference on Quality Assurance of Higher Education in Asia-Pacific have recognised that academic recognition is not an end in itself.

It is a means and an entry point that can be linked with quality assurance, mobility and the internationalisation of higher education, all of which will ultimately contribute to inclusive and equitable access to quality higher education for all, in line with Sustainable Development Goal 4.

Lessons learnt
From the perspective of the Asia-Pacific region and our related experiences, we would like to share the following lessons learnt over recent years.

First, having champions in the ministries concerned is key. These champions should be identified, empowered and incentivised to initiate the ratification processes in the country as they are in the driver’s seat to engage with domestic and international stakeholders and experts for consensus-building and technical back-up.

Second, the development of strong narratives about the benefits of joining the convention are extremely important for convincing national policy-makers and other stakeholders to support the ratification process.

It is important to note that the convention requires information transparency on qualifications from different countries. Information transparency with regard to quality assurance and qualifications frameworks is critical. This will allow learning outcomes to be compared for a substantial difference check that can lead to a recognition decision.

Again, recognition decisions can facilitate cross-border mobility of students and professionals.

Third, political commitment is critical for facilitating the ratification of the Tokyo Convention. In many cases, this commitment is simply a matter of prioritising the ratification among other pressing issues on the government agenda to get the processes truly up and running.

It is notable that the first batch of the ratifications of the Tokyo Convention came from countries with large numbers of inbound and outbound international students, for example, Australia, China, Japan, Republic of Korea and New Zealand, as these countries have already got a big stake in the implementation of the convention.

Since then, other countries with fewer international students have followed suit to join the convention, which is indicative of the increasing importance of fair recognition for promoting inclusive and equitable access to quality higher education for all in this region and beyond.

Finally, there is no need to reinvent the wheel in implementing the Tokyo Convention as an integrated approach toward using and upgrading existing national entities and mechanisms could prove to be the most expeditious way forward.

By Libing Wang, secretary of the Tokyo Convention and chief of the Section for Educational Innovation and Skills Development (EISD) at UNESCO Asia and Pacific Regional Bureau for Education, Bangkok, Thailand.

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