



Part XX IQA Guidelines for Dual Accreditation and Mutual Recognition Agreement Negotiation

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Applicable Scope: IAPUC Council, IQA Accreditation Decision Committee (ADC), IQA Office, and other quality assurance institutions conducting mutual recognition agreement negotiations with IAPUC

Preface

In an era of deepening globalization of higher education, international mutual recognition of quality assurance systems has become a key institutional infrastructure for promoting academic mobility, credential mutual trust and educational cooperation. For the IAPUC-IQA accreditation system, recognition by other quality assurance institutions serves as a vital endorsement for its global credibility and authority, and constitutes a strategic pathway to secure international recognition and cross-border cooperation conveniences for private universities and colleges accredited by IQA.

Nevertheless, mutual recognition agreement negotiations are far from simple signing ceremonies. They involve in-depth dialogues on the legal status, academic standards, quality assurance methodologies, decision-making procedures and interest balance of both parties. A mutual recognition agreement concluded without prudent negotiation and rigorous evaluation will fail to enhance the reputation of the accreditation system; instead, it may erode the credibility of IQA accreditation due to low-quality mutual recognition. For this reason, IAPUC formulates these Guidelines to establish a systematic, prudent and transparent decision-making framework and negotiation norms for the IQA accreditation system in international dual accreditation and mutual recognition agreement negotiations.

These Guidelines uphold three core philosophies. First, **standard protection**: the prerequisite for mutual recognition is the substantive equivalence of the quality assurance systems of both parties, rather than general friendly intentions. All mutual recognition negotiations shall commence with rigorous evaluation of the counterparty's system. Second, **managed autonomy**: these Guidelines provide principled guidance and bottom-line constraints for negotiators while reserving flexible space for negotiation strategies. Third, **institutional interest supremacy**: all decisions on mutual recognition negotiations shall take the long-term credibility of the IAPUC-IQA system and the overall interests of accredited institutions as the highest criterion. Personal relationships or short-term conveniences of individual negotiators shall not override institutional interests.

These Guidelines do not predetermine the outcomes of any specific negotiation, but provide a complete and consistent institutional reference for the entire lifecycle of negotiations, including preliminary evaluation, agreement signing, and regular review after agreement implementation.

Chapter I General Provisions

Article 1 Purposes and Basis

These Guidelines are formulated for the following purposes:

- (1) To establish a framework of principles, standards and procedures for dual accreditation and mutual recognition agreement negotiations between the IQA accreditation system and quality assurance institutions of other countries;

- (2) To clarify the initiating conditions, internal approval procedures, and authorization and constraints for negotiators of mutual recognition negotiations;
- (3) To develop an evaluation methodology for overseas quality assurance institutions, ensuring that mutual recognition decisions are based on rigorous substantive equivalence judgments;
- (4) To specify the mandatory clauses, signing procedures and post-entry-into-force supervision mechanisms for mutual recognition agreements;
- (5) To safeguard the transparency, prudence and consistency of mutual recognition negotiations and decision-making processes.

These Guidelines are formulated based on:

- The principled provisions on international recognition of accreditation systems and external quality assurance stipulated in the *IAPUC-IQA Accreditation Manual*;
- The core principles of the UNESCO *Global Convention on the Recognition of Higher Education Qualifications* (2019);
- The guiding principles for mutual recognition of quality assurance institutions set forth in the *Code of Good Practice* of the International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE);
- The guidelines for external evaluation of quality assurance institutions specified in the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG)* issued by the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA).

Article 2 Definitions

Term	Definition
Dual Accreditation	An institutional arrangement whereby IAPUC-IQA and overseas quality assurance institutions mutually recognize each other's accreditation decisions, enabling institutions accredited by one party to simplify or be exempted from repeated accreditation procedures when meeting the accreditation standards of the other party.
Mutual Recognition Agreement (MRA)	A legal document formally concluded between IAPUC and another quality assurance institution, explicitly specifying the scope, conditions, procedures, rights and obligations of mutual recognition for both parties.
Counterparty Institution	A quality assurance institution of another country or region that conducts mutual recognition negotiations with IAPUC.

Substantive Equivalence	Two sets of quality assurance systems deliver comparable quality assurance effects in core elements, without requiring complete consistency in standards, procedures and terminology.
Joint Accreditation	An advanced form of mutual recognition, in which IAPUC and the counterparty institution cooperate in review and jointly make accreditation decisions in a single accreditation activity.

Article 3 Basic Principles

IQA international mutual recognition negotiations shall adhere to the following basic principles:

Principle	Core Connotation
Standard Protection	Mutual recognition is premised on the substantive equivalence of the quality assurance systems of both parties. IAPUC shall not lower equivalence requirements to pursue more mutual recognition partnerships, nor accept any clauses that may weaken IQA accreditation standards during negotiations.
Institutional Interest Supremacy	All decisions on mutual recognition negotiations shall take the long-term credibility of the IAPUC-IQA system and the overall interests of accredited institutions as the highest criterion.
Transparent Decision-Making	The initiation of mutual recognition negotiations, formulation of evaluation conclusions and signing of agreements shall go through transparent internal decision-making procedures within IAPUC.
Regular Review	Signed mutual recognition agreements shall be subject to regular review. Substantial changes to the counterparty institution's quality assurance system may lead to agreement revision or termination.
Non-Exclusivity	The conclusion of a mutual recognition agreement with one institution shall not prejudice IAPUC's right to conduct mutual recognition negotiations with other institutions.

Chapter II Negotiation Initiation Conditions and Internal Approval

Article 4 Preconditions for Negotiation Initiation

IAPUC may initiate mutual recognition negotiations with an overseas quality

assurance institution only if all of the following preconditions are met:

(1) Legitimacy of the counterparty institution: The counterparty institution is legally established and operational in its country or region, with statutory or publicly recognized authorization to conduct accreditation or quality review of higher education institutions.

(2) Independence of the counterparty institution: The counterparty institution maintains independence from government, higher education institution and commercial interests in accreditation decision-making and standard formulation. If the institution has affiliated relationships, it shall have demonstrated substantial professional autonomy. Factors for judging independence include: whether the decision-making body has diversified composition free from control by a single stakeholder; whether accreditation standards and decisions are free from external administrative intervention or commercial pressure; and whether the institution's funding sources are stable, transparent and not overly dependent on a single stakeholder.

(3) International recognition of the counterparty institution: The counterparty institution shall satisfy at least one of the following criteria:

1. Being a full member of the International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE) or a regional quality assurance association;
2. Having passed external evaluation of regional quality assurance institutions (e.g., EQAR registration under ENQA, CHEA recognition in the United States);
3. Without the above full membership or external evaluation qualification, its quality assurance standards and practices are preliminarily assessed by IQA Office to be rigorous and comparable with internationally accepted norms.

(4) Preliminary equivalence evaluation: The IQA Office conducts a preliminary evaluation of the counterparty institution's quality assurance system and formulates a *Preliminary Equivalence Evaluation Memorandum*, confirming a reasonable basis for substantive equivalence. Evaluation data sources include publicly released standard and procedural documents of the counterparty institution, available external evaluation reports, and records of previous academic exchanges and preliminary communications between the two parties.

(5) Strategic value evaluation: The mutual recognition negotiation possesses strategic value for the IAPUC-IQA system, including but not limited to promoting international recognition and cooperation of accredited institutions, enhancing the international reputation of the IQA system, and demonstrating benchmark effects for subsequent mutual recognition negotiations.

Article 5 Internal Approval for Negotiation Initiation

(1) After completing the evaluation of preconditions, the IQA Office shall submit a *Mutual Recognition Negotiation Initiation Application* to the Accreditation Decision Committee (ADC), attached with the *Preliminary Equivalence Evaluation Memorandum* and strategic value evaluation opinions.

(2) The ADC shall review the application within 45 days and make a decision on negotiation initiation by a two-thirds majority vote.

(3) The ADC's review shall focus on the following aspects:

1. Whether there is a reasonable basis for substantive equivalence between the counterparty's quality assurance system and the IQA system (final equivalence judgment is not required at this stage, but a sufficient foundation for in-depth evaluation must be confirmed);
2. Whether the mutual recognition brings clear practical benefits to IQA-accredited institutions;
3. Whether there are known major risk factors that may seriously affect mutual recognition, such as recent major quality scandals, political intervention or credibility crises of the counterparty institution.

(4) After the ADC approves negotiation initiation, the IQA Office shall report the decision to the IAPUC Council for filing. The negotiation shall be officially initiated if the IAPUC Council raises no major objections within 30 days upon receiving the filing.

Article 6 Authorization and Constraints for Negotiators

(1) The IAPUC Council appoints 2 to 3 personnel from the IQA Quality Accreditation Committee, ADC and/or IQA Office to form a negotiation delegation, including at least one member of the IAPUC Council or a person directly authorized by the Council.

(2) Negotiators shall obtain official written authorization from the IAPUC Council. The authorization letter shall specify the name and position of negotiators, basic negotiation objectives and bottom lines, the scope and limitations of preliminary commitments negotiators are entitled to make, and the categories of agreement clauses that require approval from the IAPUC Council and ADC before acceptance.

(3) Negotiators shall perform the following obligations during negotiations:

1. Strictly abide by the scope of authorization and bottom-line constraints;
2. Timely report negotiation progress and major issues to the IAPUC Council and ADC;
3. Keep confidential sensitive negotiation information, including undisclosed information of the counterparty institution and unconfirmed clauses of both parties;
4. Suspend negotiations and request instructions from the IAPUC Council and ADC when involving major issues beyond the scope of authorization;
5. Accept professional support from IAPUC-appointed legal advisors throughout the negotiation process.

(4) Negotiators are prohibited from the following acts:

1. Making any commitments or concessions beyond the scope of authorization;
2. Accepting hospitality or benefits from the counterparty institution beyond standard

working meals and transportation arrangements during negotiations;

3. Using non-public information obtained from negotiations to seek personal or institutional interests.

Chapter III In-Depth Evaluation of Counterparty Institutions

Article 7 Initiation of In-Depth Evaluation

(1) After negotiation initiation, the IQA Office shall establish an evaluation team independent of the negotiation delegation to conduct an in-depth evaluation of the counterparty institution's quality assurance system. The evaluation team consists of 3 to 5 professionals with extensive experience in quality assurance. Members of the negotiation delegation shall not serve concurrently on the evaluation team.

(2) The evaluation team is responsible for independently forming substantive equivalence evaluation conclusions on the counterparty's quality assurance system, providing technical basis for mutual recognition decisions. The team's work is independent of the negotiation process, and its evaluation conclusions are technically binding on negotiations. Negotiations shall be terminated if the conclusion confirms "no substantive equivalence".

Article 8 Evaluation Dimensions and Contents

The evaluation team shall conduct in-depth evaluation of the counterparty institution's quality assurance system from the following dimensions:

(1) Legal status and governance structure: Legal status and establishment basis; independence and diversity of governance structure; decision-making procedures and check-and-balance mechanisms.

(2) Accreditation standard system: Completeness and systematicness of accreditation standards; coverage comparison with IQA's eight standard domains; academic rigor of standards and existence of obvious low-standard or ambiguous provisions.

(3) Accreditation procedures: Completeness of self-evaluation, peer review, on-site visit, decision-making and appeal procedures; procedural transparency and traceability; protection of institutional and public right to know.

(4) Reviewer management: Selection criteria and procedures for accreditation reviewers; conflict of interest management system; reviewer training and evaluation mechanisms.

(5) Decision independence: Independence of the accreditation decision-making body from government, industry association and institutional interests; transparency of decision-making basis and procedures; sufficiency of appeal and remedy channels.

(6) Post-accreditation supervision and periodic re-evaluation: Mechanisms for

continuous post-accreditation supervision; cycle and standards of periodic re-evaluation.

(7) International activities and mutual recognition experience: Signed mutual recognition agreements and their implementation status; participation and reputation in international quality assurance activities.

(8) Consistency between standards and actual implementation: Consistency between publicly released standards/procedures and practical accreditation cases of the counterparty institution; significant discrepancies will affect the overall reliability evaluation.

Article 9 Evaluation Methods and Procedures

(1) The evaluation team shall adopt a combination of the following methods:

1. Document review: Study the counterparty's standard documents, procedural guidelines, annual reports, available external evaluation reports and representative accreditation case materials;
2. Equivalent communication and on-site visit: Conduct formal in-depth communication with the counterparty institution on evaluation issues; conduct on-site visits with the counterparty's consent to observe practical operations, including attending accreditation decision meetings (if permitted), accessing accreditation information systems and sampling accreditation archives (subject to confidentiality requirements and consent of relevant parties);
3. Third-party information verification: Verify the overall higher education quality assurance environment of the counterparty's country/region through public channels, and consult independent expert opinions familiar with the regional quality assurance system when necessary.

(2) Upon completion of the evaluation, the team shall compile a *Substantive Equivalence Evaluation Report*, covering evaluation methods and processes, dimension-by-dimension evaluation findings, equivalence analysis with the IQA system and comprehensive evaluation conclusions.

(3) Comprehensive evaluation conclusions are classified into the following grades:

- Substantively Equivalent: The counterparty's system is comparable to the IQA system in rigor and assurance effects in core dimensions; recommendation to proceed with mutual recognition agreement signing;
- Partially Substantively Equivalent: The counterparty's system is only substantively equivalent to the IQA system in specific disciplines or academic levels; recommendation to sign a scope-limited mutual recognition agreement;
- Conditionally Equivalent with Remediable Gaps: The counterparty's system is generally comparable to core IQA requirements with identifiable and remediable gaps; recommendation to sign a transitional cooperation agreement targeting full mutual recognition;
- Non-Equivalent: The counterparty's system has systematic gaps with the IQA

system in core dimensions with no valid foundation for mutual recognition.

Chapter IV Substantive Negotiation Contents

Article 10 List of Negotiation Topics

Mutual recognition agreement negotiations shall cover the following mandatory topics:

- (1) Mutual recognition scope: Types of accredited activities covered by mutual recognition, including institutional overall accreditation, specific disciplinary accreditation and specific degree-level accreditation;
- (2) Mutual recognition forms: Specific implementation models, including simplified IQA accreditation procedures for counterparty-accredited institutions, recognition of partial or full peer review results of the counterparty, joint accreditation, or a combination of mutual recognition agreements and simplified review frameworks;
- (3) Basis for substantive equivalence: Specific basis and demonstration for confirming substantive equivalence between the two systems, which may cite key findings of the *Substantive Equivalence Evaluation Report*;
- (4) Restrictions and exclusions of mutual recognition: Fields, disciplines and degree levels excluded from mutual recognition, and special restrictive conditions;
- (5) Information sharing and annual notification: Scope, frequency and methods of bilateral information sharing during the agreement term, including regular exchange mechanisms for accredited institution lists, accreditation status changes, and major revisions to standards or procedures;
- (6) Conflict of interest and confidentiality: Conflict of interest management and confidentiality obligations for bilateral personnel in mutual recognition activities such as joint accreditation;
- (7) Special arrangements for joint accreditation: If joint accreditation is included, specify review team composition, decision-making authority allocation, on-site cooperation modes, joint formulation mechanisms for accreditation reports and decisions, and arrangements for cost sharing and reviewer remuneration;
- (8) Practical benefits for accredited institutions: Specific benefits of mutual recognition for accredited institutions of both parties, including simplified repeated accreditation procedures, facilitated credit and credential mutual recognition, and permitted public promotion of mutual recognition status;
- (9) Agreement term, review and termination: Initial agreement validity period (generally no more than 5 years), regular review mechanisms, renewal conditions, unilateral termination conditions and procedures, and transitional arrangements after agreement termination;
- (10) Dispute resolution: Resolution approaches for disputes arising from agreement interpretation and implementation, with friendly bilateral negotiation as the primary principle;

(11) Applicable law: Governing law and jurisdiction of the agreement.

Article 11 Bottom-Line Constraints in Negotiations

IAPUC negotiators shall strictly adhere to the following bottom lines during negotiations:

- (1) Mutual recognition shall not require IAPUC to revise core elements of its accreditation standards to accommodate the counterparty's system; accreditation standard revisions shall be based solely on IAPUC's own academic judgment and internal procedures, free from external negotiation pressure;
- (2) Mutual recognition shall not substantially weaken the independent decision-making power of IQA accreditation; all joint accreditation arrangements shall ensure that IAPUC holds speaking rights and veto power matching its accreditation responsibilities;
- (3) The independent appeal and arbitration mechanism of IQA shall not be overridden by mutual recognition agreements; the right of IQA-accredited institutions to file appeals with IAPUC in accordance with the *IQA Accreditation Appeal, Complaint and Dispute Resolution Management Measures* against joint decisions under the mutual recognition framework shall be guaranteed;
- (4) Mutual recognition agreements must include a bilateral regular information exchange mechanism to ensure IAPUC timely obtains quality updates of the counterparty institution and its accredited institutions;
- (5) Mutual recognition agreements must contain a unilateral withdrawal clause, enabling IAPUC to independently terminate the agreement without the counterparty's consent under reciprocal circumstances, such as substantial negative changes to the counterparty's quality assurance system.

Chapter V Agreement Signing and Subsequent Supervision

Article 12 Internal Approval of Agreement Texts

- (1) Upon completing negotiations, the negotiation delegation shall submit the draft agreement text and negotiation report to the IAPUC Council and ADC.
- (2) The ADC shall review the draft agreement, focusing on consistency with the overall interests of the IQA accreditation system, matching degree between mutual recognition scope and conclusions of the *Substantive Equivalence Evaluation Report*, and fairness and enforceability of bilateral rights and obligations.
- (3) Upon ADC approval, the draft agreement shall be submitted to the IAPUC Council for adoption by a two-thirds majority vote. The agreement shall be signed by IAPUC's legal representative or a person with written official authorization after Council approval.

Article 13 Agreement Signing and Release

(1) The agreement shall be signed by the legal representatives of both parties on a mutually agreed date and venue. The original agreement shall be permanently archived by the IQA Office in accordance with the *IQA Accreditation Records and Data Retention Management Rules*.

(2) Within 30 days after signing, the IQA Office shall release a public announcement of the mutual recognition agreement on the official IAPUC website, including the counterparty institution's name and region, scope and main forms of mutual recognition, agreement effective date and validity period, and access channels for the full agreement text.

(3) Within 60 days after the agreement takes effect, the IQA Office shall notify all IQA-accredited institutions of the core agreement contents, potential benefits and restrictive provisions.

Article 14 Post-Implementation Supervision and Regular Review

(1) During the agreement term, the IQA Office shall conduct continuous supervision of agreement implementation through the following measures:

- Regularly review publicly released standards, policies, annual reports and accreditation decisions of the counterparty institution;
- Maintain unobstructed communication channels to monitor major changes in the counterparty's organizational structure, governance system, accreditation standards and procedures;
- Collect and sort out practical benefits and feedback of IQA-accredited institutions under the mutual recognition framework.

(2) Regular reviews shall be conducted at least once every three years after agreement signing, organized by the IQA Office with independent expert participation when necessary. Reviews shall focus on: stability of the counterparty's quality assurance system and whether equivalence-impairing changes have occurred; actual implementation effects of the agreement and unforeseen problems; and the necessity of agreement revision and updating.

(3) Special reviews may be triggered under the following circumstances:

1. Major changes to the counterparty's quality assurance system, such as substantial standard downgrades, erosion of decision independence or major quality scandals;
2. Loss of legitimacy, independence or international recognition qualifications specified in Article 4 of these Guidelines by the counterparty institution;
3. Systematic problems detrimental to IQA-accredited institutions arising from mutual recognition practices;
4. Other circumstances requiring special review as deemed necessary by the IAPUC

Council or ADC.

(4) Based on regular or special review conclusions, IAPUC may decide to maintain the original agreement, negotiate clause revisions with the counterparty, or initiate agreement termination procedures if revision consensus cannot be reached or unacceptable negative changes occur to the counterparty's system. Agreement termination decisions require dual approval from the IAPUC Council and ADC, with written termination notices delivered to the counterparty and reasonable transitional arrangements provided.

Chapter VI Supplementary Provisions

Article 15 Negotiation Records and Archives

Full official records of the entire mutual recognition negotiation process, including but not limited to the *Preliminary Equivalence Evaluation Memorandum*, *Substantive Equivalence Evaluation Report*, negotiation meeting minutes, ADC and Council review records, signed original agreements and all review reports, shall be permanently retained by the IQA Office in accordance with the *IQA Accreditation Records and Data Retention Management Rules*.

Article 16 Relationship with Other Normative Documents

Document	Relationship with These Guidelines
<i>IAPUC-IQA Accreditation Manual</i>	These Guidelines provide institutional expansion and detailed implementation rules for the international recognition principles of the accreditation system stipulated in the Manual.
<i>IQA Accreditation Appeal, Complaint and Dispute Resolution Management Measures</i>	The dispute resolution clauses of mutual recognition agreements are designed in alignment with these Measures.
<i>IQA Accreditation Records and Data Retention Management Rules</i>	The archiving and retention of mutual recognition negotiation and review documents are governed by these Rules.
<i>Multi-Campus and Transnational Operation Accreditation Review Guidelines</i>	The conclusion of mutual recognition agreements facilitates IQA review of overseas operation activities of counterparty-accredited institutions.

Article 17 Interpretation and Revision

(1) These Guidelines shall be interpreted by the IAPUC Quality Accreditation Committee.

(2) Any revision to these Guidelines shall be subject to approval by the IAPUC Council.

Article 18 Entry into Force and Transitional Provisions

These Guidelines shall come into force officially upon approval by the IAPUC Council. Ongoing mutual recognition negotiations at the time of entry into force shall be continued and implemented in accordance with the principles and procedures of these Guidelines.

Appendix A: Preliminary Equivalence Evaluation Framework

Covers the following evaluation dimensions and key points: legal status and authorization basis, governance and independence, accreditation standard system, accreditation procedures, peer review mechanisms, post-accreditation supervision mechanisms, and international recognition status.

Appendix B: Substantive Equivalence Evaluation Report Framework

Covers: evaluation team information, evaluation methods and processes, dimension-by-dimension evaluation findings, comparative analysis with the IQA system, and comprehensive evaluation conclusions and recommendations.

Appendix C: Core Clause Structure of Mutual Recognition Agreements

Covers: basic legal information of contracting parties, mutual recognition scope and forms, substantive equivalence statement, bilateral rights and obligations, specific joint accreditation arrangements (if applicable), information sharing and notification mechanisms, agreement validity and renewal, termination and withdrawal clauses, dispute resolution clauses, signing and entry-into-force provisions.

Document Approval

Role	Name / Position	Date
Drafting	IAPUC Quality Accreditation Committee International Mutual	May 2026

	Recognition Standards Working Group	
Review	IAPUC Quality Accreditation Committee	To be confirmed
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