

# Realizing the Power of PAOs: Challenges and Solutions to Implementing International Education Requirements



Accountancy education involves many different elements, from syllabus development to producing learning materials, from establishing tuition arrangements to delivering examinations and requiring practical experience. It can take years to build the foundation for a professional qualification, and while PAOs may not have the legal authority for every aspect of accountancy education, they play a key role in supporting educational programs and delivering qualifications.

To support PAOs and this central role they play, more than 80 professional accountancy organization (PAO) representatives from 25 countries came together for a half-day, interactive workshop to discuss accountancy education successes and challenges. The workshop, organized by IFAC and the Pan African Federation of Accountants, and held alongside the 4th Africa Congress of Accountants in Kampala, Uganda.

The workshop generated discussion on PAO efforts to design, develop and maintain their professional qualifications, as well as IFAC member organizations' work to adopt and implement the International Education Standards (IES)—a requirement for all IFAC members as part of IFAC's *Statements of Membership Obligation*—issued by the *International Accounting Education Standards Board*.

Facilitated by IFAC *PAO Development Committee* members, workshop participants navigated:

- [pathways to entry and enrollment requirements](#);
- [branding and marketing qualifications](#);
- [syllabus content, learning materials, and tuition arrangements](#);
- [examination content, delivery, and marking and administration](#);
- [practical experience requirements and delivery arrangements](#); and
- [continuing professional development \(CPD\) to keep members' knowledge current](#).

The stories told and lessons learned provided useful insight and demonstrate PAOs' ability to drive positive change and introduce international good practice regardless of their unique country circumstances.

*The ideas, examples, and learnings that follow reflect the contributions of workshop participants.*

## PATHWAYS TO ENTRY & ENROLLMENT REQUIREMENTS

In many jurisdictions there is a lack of professional accountants and a decline in the numbers of students interested in a career in accountancy. This can often be attributed to the nature of the educational system, such as a lack of a clear connection between academic programs, professional qualification, and potential career paths; an elitist perception of the profession; and other barriers to entry.

### *Laying Foundations*

Collaboration with high-quality educational institutions, such as universities offering business, finance and economics-related degree programs, can secure a pathway between academic program and professional qualification. PAOs can use their knowledge to assist higher education institutions to incorporate the latest international standards into their curricula. In addition, the connections made can help raise awareness of the accountancy profession and opportunities offered by the PAO. For example, the Liberian Institute of Chartered Accountants (LICPA) has designed a [Syllabi Integration Program](#) whereby LICPA's syllabi for its two credentialing programs are integrated into the university's accountancy curricula and students are equipped to pass the professional qualification examination upon graduation from university.

PAOs can promote the value of accountancy professionals by publicizing the variety of roles they perform, in business or practice, across private and public sectors, and at various levels in the financial information supply chain. In some countries, the accountancy profession's growth is hindered by a lack of recognition, support, and opportunities for accountancy professionals at levels other than the chartered accountant or certified public accountant level. Several PAOs throughout Africa—in Liberia, Rwanda, South Africa, and Zambia, among others—have an accounting technician level qualifications they are working to strengthen.

### *Quality over Quantity*

Focusing on student recruitment into accountancy programs should be balanced by solid efforts to ensure that students enrolling in the program have some foundational knowledge and education. This foundation is necessary for students to be successful in an accountancy program, which can be a fundamentally different learning experience for some students. Options for addressing this include providing targeted career advice for young people while they are still in high school and college in addition to aspiring professional accountant candidates and introducing a voluntary entrance-level test.

## BRANDING AND MARKETING QUALIFICATIONS

PAOs must actively demonstrate their relevance and remain fit-for-purpose to the needs of their members, key constituents, stakeholders and wider society. In order to engage and communicate most effectively, a PAO needs to have a clear understanding of its value proposition and be able to answer questions such as: why should students choose this qualification over another? Why should members continue to pay their subscriptions? What makes the qualification relevant to employers?

A professional accountancy qualification needs to be—and be seen as—accessible. In addition to the collaboration and messaging outlined in the *Laying Foundations* section, PAOs could enhance their brand and market their qualifications by offering residency programs, establishing affiliated research centers or

lecture halls with universities, and providing scholarships. PAOs have many mechanisms at their disposal to engage with potential students, including speaking at high school career sessions, partnering with universities to engage with first-year students, profiling prominent accountants, and traditional and social media campaigns. Ultimately, it is up to the profession to spark students' interest. Messaging should focus on what makes the accountancy profession unique, and the PAOs' qualification is the route to becoming a globally recognized, internationally mobile, trusted business advisor working in the public interest.

PAOs remain relevant by regularly reviewing and understanding what is important to their key stakeholders, and effectively communicating, via the right platform, how they can deliver. As PAOs consider the large array of stakeholders they might need to engage with as part of their marketing efforts, IFAC's *Finding Your Voice: PAOs, Advocacy, and Public Policy* is a helpful starting point.

## SYLLABUS CONTENT, LEARNING MATERIALS AND TUITION ARRANGEMENTS

Ensuring a PAOs' professional qualification syllabus is reflected accurately in learning materials and effectively taught in the classroom can pose challenges for PAOs. Significant costs are associated with the production, dissemination and regular updates of high-quality learning materials. In some cases, textbook development is outsourced, and some PAOs rely on independent training centers to teach students. Even if a PAO has its own school, it can be difficult to ensure consistent instruction quality. These challenges have a direct effect on student success in professional qualification examinations and, therefore, on the number of qualified professionals within a jurisdiction.

### *Destination: Collaboration*

The core subject areas covered by a professional qualification syllabus are typically the same from one country to the next. This is, therefore, an area in which partnerships between PAOs can have a significant positive impact.

In Mozambique, the Ordem dos Contabilistas e Auditores de Moçambique (OCAM) has partnered with Ordem dos Revisores Oficiais de Contas (OROC) in Portugal to implement a pathway for candidates to attend OCAM's College of Auditors. Through this partnership, OROC supports OCAM with a syllabus, learning materials and trainers. Equally important, because of the knowledge OCAM is gaining, it will be better equipped to develop its own examinations for its College of Accountants with supplementary assistance from another Portugal-based PAO, the Ordem dos Contabilistas Certificados.

The Liberian Institute of Chartered Accountants (LICPA) and Institute of Chartered Accountants (Ghana) (ICA Ghana) work together to allow Liberian students to receive training from ICA Ghana staff and trainers, all while LICPA develops its own capacity and resources.

*ICA Ghana*, with the assistance of the Institute of Chartered Accountants in England and Wales (ICAEW), is developing an accreditation and monitoring scheme for independent tuition providers teaching the ICA Ghana professional qualification program. The project, which is under the IFAC PAO Capacity Building Program with funding provided by the Department for International Development in the UK (DFID), will

result in enhanced quality and tuition as well as tuition provider monitoring, which will help to improve communications between the tuition providers and ICA Ghana.

The Botswana Institute of Chartered Accountants (BICA) recently signed a Memoranda of Understanding with Botswanan universities and is hosting a train-the-trainer workshop to improve the capacity of teachers who provide training on the new BICA professional qualification.

In Kenya, the Institute of Certified Public Accountants of Kenya (ICPAK) conducts triennial joint reviews with the Kenya Accountants and Secretaries National Examinations Board to ensure that the accounting education program offered by tuition providers continues to meet international standards.

Meanwhile, in Burkina Faso, the Ordre National des Experts-Comptables et des Comptables Agréés du Burkina Faso (ONECCA-Burkina Faso) signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the local university whereby the university will now offer the same courses and syllabus necessary to pass the regional professional qualification. This allows candidates to complete their training and sit for examinations within Burkina Faso instead of traveling to Senegal or Cote d'Ivoire, where the regional qualification educational program is offered, which helps to reduce educational costs.

For PAOs considering collaboration and partnerships, IFAC's *Counting on Each Other: Establishing & Maintaining Effective PAO Partnerships* is a useful starting point.

## EXAMINATION CONTENT, DELIVERY & ADMINISTRATION

Developing, delivering and marking professional qualification examinations in line with the syllabus and in a fair and consistent manner is crucial to student success and can prove particularly challenging for PAOs. Examiner independence must be maintained while simultaneously ensuring their familiarity with the syllabus and what is taught. As those marking examinations may change regularly, ensuring familiarity with the syllabus and marking scheme is an ongoing exercise. Arrangements must also be made for the safe storage of examination papers before and after exams. Partnerships with global, regional, and/or local organizations with experience in these areas can be helpful.

As part of its twinning arrangement under the IFAC PAO Capacity Building Program funded by the DFID, ICAEW ran a ten-day workshop in 2016 with ICA Ghana during which examiners practiced drafting questions that were reviewed by workshop facilitators. Similarly, the *Institute of Certified Public Accountants in Rwanda (iCPAR) and the Association of Chartered Certified Accountants (ACCA) have partnered* to review and strengthen iCPAR's professional qualification examinations. In Lesotho, the Lesotho Institute of Accountants (LIA) received support from the World Bank and the European Union to implement the *country's first local qualification and exam*.

South-south collaboration is also currently being used to strengthen examinations and harmonize qualifications. ICA Ghana and LICPA partnered to use *ICA Ghana's professional qualification examination for LICPA*, with the development of Liberian Tax, Public Sector Accounting, and Business Law manuals underway to address local legislation. The South African Institute of Chartered Accountants and the Institute of Chartered Accountants of Namibia (ICAN) similarly share examinations, with ICAN contextualizing its final examination to include information on local tax and business laws.

The Association of Accountancy Bodies in West Africa’s regional accounting technician examination—the Accounting Technicians Scheme, West Africa—provides a standardized, recognized professional qualification for accounting technicians throughout West Africa. This enables transfer of knowledge and movement of services across the West African region, as all accounting technicians qualified through this examination are assured of having a base-level of expertise.

When entering into a partnership, PAOs should always consider how best to absorb the partner knowledge and how to own responsibility for sustaining their future growth.

## PRACTICAL EXPERIENCE REQUIREMENTS & DELIVERY ARRANGEMENTS

Practical experience requirements ensure that aspiring professional accountants have access to work experience, ethical training, professional skills development, and the mentoring they need to operate effectively in practice. It is not easy to ensure students have access to the most relevant experience in appropriate roles, and PAOs can struggle to support, monitor and manage this area of responsibility.

One approach is to have a framework connecting practical experience with needed competencies—something that ICPAK and iCPAR recently developed. In Nigeria, practical experience must be undertaken with a registered professional practice firm, which better enables the PAO to monitor students’ experience.

Providing training and materials for employers offering placements is key to raising awareness and can also increase the likelihood that practical experience will achieve its intended goal. For example, ICA Ghana is working with ICAEW to develop and implement an accreditation scheme for training employers. LIA and BICA are working directly with potential employers to ensure that students have access to appropriate training.

In South Africa, the South African Institute of Professional Accountants (SAIPA) has furthered its engagement with the business sector and potential training employers through an initiative called *Business Rescue*. Once licensed as business rescue practitioners, SAIPA members work with a business to help get it back on its feet, getting buy-in from creditors and other stakeholders, and implementing a clear action plan. This is a clear demonstration of the value, skills, and acumen that professional accountants can bring to employers and, in turn, can serve as feedback to create enhanced training experiences to ensure future accountants remain equipped to handle business practicalities.

In many cases, firms identify individual “mentors” within their organizations to assist in keeping practical experience relevant and tracking candidate progress. Some PAOs may also consider implementing professional qualification examinations or parts thereof after a practical experience placement or internship is complete.

Continuous, open communication between PAOs and training employers as well as review of established policy are key to ensuring practical experience benefits all parties.

## CPD & KEEPING MEMBERS' KNOWLEDGE CURRENT

### *Access and Relevance*

Implementing continuing professional development (CPD) requirements and providing members with high-quality CPD offerings is a key element of a PAO's value proposition. PAOs in Bénin, Burkina Faso, and Cote d'Ivoire all have professional training centers to facilitate members' access to CPD courses. In Morocco, Ordre des Experts Comptables du Royaume du Maroc coordinates CPD training with employers to ensure that professional accountants are learning in-demand skills. The Ordre National des Experts Comptables et des Comptables Agréés du Mali offers free training to attract high participation. In Senegal and Cote d'Ivoire, PAOs drive participation by offering free relevant tools (such as USBs and CDs) and making training events a networking opportunity featuring key experts.

In order to cater to a wide range of professional accountants—practitioners, public sector employees, and accountants in business—PAOs often work with external training providers. This means they need to evaluate and ensure a level of quality control for the courses and providers. Initiatives in this area is ongoing in Benin, Ghana, and a number of other countries.

PAOs in Bénin, Malawi, Morocco, South Africa, Uganda, and Zambia often solicit feedback from members and employers via email, Facebook, and in-person member forums to ensure courses remain current and address market needs.

### *Cost*

Organizing high-quality events comes at a cost—and PAOs generally bear it. Many manage costs by partnering with other organizations, including other PAOs and local training providers. Some PAOs, such as South Africa and Zimbabwe, often negotiate discounted programs with training providers and incorporate the cost of CPD into membership fees. In Senegal, the PAO is moving from singular, themed courses to a full-fledged, continuous CPD program that will eventually generate a revenue stream. Morocco is taking advantage of new technologies and considering online training as a way to reduce costs.

### *Monitoring and Enforcement*

To ensure that members fulfill CPD obligations, PAOs have implemented various monitoring systems. In Burkina Faso and Mali, the PAOs accept CPD credits for training carried out with other IFAC member organizations. In Bénin, the PAO offers over 200 hours of CPD per year and stresses the importance of CPD compliance on Facebook and via email to minimize the number of members expelled for non-compliance.

In some cases, long-standing and senior members of PAOs object to CPD requirements, as they are of the view that they have demonstrated their competence. One PAO identified a unique challenge where professional accountants receive PhD-level training prior to joining the PAO and, therefore, CPD is not always viewed as a necessity by practitioners. PAOs in South Africa, Uganda, and Zimbabwe charge fines, issue suspensions, and remove practicing licenses to name just a few examples of enforcement policies.

Another PAO publishes the names of members in good standing, and who have completed CPD, in the local newspaper as an incentive rather than a punitive measure.