

External Quality Assurance beyond borders and role of Quality Assurance networks: towards Global Quality Register

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Abstract

Quality Assurance in higher education has national as well as international implications. Over the past few decades External Quality Assurance (EQA) has emerged as an important tool to ensure credibility of higher education institutions (HEIs) and programs for the purpose of international mobility. Mutual recognition of Quality Assurance (QA) decision among different countries is one of the major tools used by EQA agencies. Regional and international QA networks such as Asia Pacific Quality Network (APQN), European Network for Quality Assurance (ENQA), International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE) are playing important role as facilitator of trust as well as exchange of good practices among EQAAs. The membership of regional and international QA networks is now considered critical requirement for establishing credential of EQAAs bodies which operate nationally as well as internationally. Moving beyond this informal recognition, there is emphasis on formal recognition of EQA bodies which seek to operate regionally or internationally. European Quality Assurance Register (EQAR) is the most prominent example where most of the European EQA bodies have undergone formal registration procedures. This has provided legitimate basis for cross border QA activities. On similar lines, Asia Pacific Quality Register (APQR) is established as a stakeholder initiative in Asia Pacific region. It is pertinent, however, to note that many of the international operators in QA are based in USA which are recognised by national recognition bodies like Council of Higher Education (CHEA) and/ or USDE. India is also on verge of launching multiple QA bodies regime. On the other hand, there is increased concern about several unrecognised and dubious players acting as international/global QA agencies. Similar to degree mills, now we are faced with menace of accreditation mills also. These two different trends have necessitated a need of formal regional as well as international mechanism of recognition of legitimate EQAAs. The initiatives to explore the possibility of Global Quality Assurance Register (GQAR) are an important step in this direction. This paper critically examines the growth of regional and international QA activities and makes a strong case for establishment of global quality register. The paper also discusses various dimensions including problems and prospectus of such initiatives in context of existing mechanisms of recognition of accreditation bodies.

Key Words: External Quality Assurance, QA networks, QACHE, GQAR

Introduction:

Rapid expansion in higher education sector has created a special space for the Quality Assurance in global HE scenario. This expansion and developments have promoted the policy makers and governments to establish quality assurance agencies to regulate and promote quality assurance in higher education. External Quality Assurance has emerged as an important tool to ensure quality of HEIs and programs. Besides QAAs, regional and international QA networks are functioning as an important mechanism to ensure and enhance transparency in the process of operations of quality assurance agencies through mutual recognition. Mutual recognition of Quality Assurance (QA) is one of the major tools used by EQA agencies for assuring quality among various QAAs. Networks such as APQN, ENQA, INQAAHE, ANQAHE, AfriQAN are playing important role as facilitator of trust as well as exchange of good practices among EQAAs in HE. Regional and international quality assurance bodies and complement the work of national QA agencies in protecting learners from poor quality providers and maintaining the integrity of higher education. The key trends in higher education include privatisation, internationalisation and massification. Innovations and technology driven online courses are changing face of HE scenario rapidly. This rapid growth has also given rise to degree and accreditation mills etc. These trends and developments have posed great challenges in the higher education to assure quality. According to the recent statistics enrolment in private Indian higher education accounts to one in three of the world's higher education students which means approximately 70 million students enrol in private HEIs which was 57 million in 2010. (<http://www.prophe.org/en/global-data/>). Also the increased market size of the Indian higher education segment stood at approximately Rs. 2,230 billion in FY17 and is expected to grow over 11% over the next three years to reach Rs 3,100 billion resulting in increased enrolments, variety of courses and higher fees especially in case of the private institutes. This Phenomenal growth has driven in gaining wider acceptance of QA bodies not only in India but also reached almost all countries. In 2016, there were over 4.8 million international students, up from 2 million in 2000 (UNESCO, 2018). More than half of these were enrolled in educational programmes in six countries: The United States of America, the United Kingdom, Australia, France, Germany and the Russian Federation. Prominent sending countries of

international students include China, India, Germany, South Korea, Nigeria, France, Saudi Arabia and several Central Asian countries (<https://migrationdataportal.org/themes/international-students>) Quality Assurance plays a major role in regulating the operators and providers of higher education. Increased cross border education, disruptive technology and innovations are bringing the world closer beyond boundaries on hand. While intolerance, discrimination and violence dividing the world in name of race, religion and origin are presenting new challenges for QAs and networks on the other hand. Regional and international bodies, networks and associations have been established for purposes of creating synergies through sharing good practices, information and experiences. Regional and international quality assurance bodies thus complement the work of national QA agencies in protecting learners from poor quality providers thus maintaining the integrity of higher education. These networks enable systematic benchmarking of QA bodies against internationally acclaimed good practices and also serve as mechanisms to assure quality of QA bodies.

QA in context of HE

Quality in higher education has gained significance in countries the world over. In countries like India, the explicit focus on quality enhancement in higher education through an external mechanism is relatively new (Stella A 2002). Traditionally quality in higher education is responsibility of institutions themselves. Additionally, quality assurance is often demanded by governments, ministries of education or by supra-national agreements but only rarely developed as strategic initiative by universities themselves. (Eklund, M J 2013). Higher education and university systems exist from centuries while most EQAs are recent entities. History of accreditation in United States goes back to 1900, while India has two decades of accreditation experience. Yet, QAAs in most systems have occupied prime place as it is considered as powerful tool:

- To ensure accountability for public funding [welfare state]
- To secure trust and public guarantee about quality of offerings [legitimacy and currency]
- To protect students and stakeholders from dubious or substandard provisions [Watchdog]
- To provide stimulus for improvement and innovations [Facilitator] (Patil, 2015)

EQA as facilitator of quality improvement and innovations would be an ideal case for healthy relations among QA bodies and universities.

Whether QAAs ensures all the roles and responsibilities? Is it happening? If Yes, Question is how many QAAs are doing everything above or have achieved some of these purposes?

Internationalisation of Higher Education

Internationalisation of higher education continues to be on the prime agenda of higher education providers worldwide. The global population of students who move to another country to study continues to rise, reaching almost 5 million in 2014 which is more than double the 2.1 million internationally mobile students in 2000. As per the statistics by OECD report the population may reach 8 million students per year by 2025 .While USA remains the most popular destiny for international students, followed by the UK, Germany, France and Australia (50%).The most mobile students from Asia, with China, India and South Korea. Governments and HE authorities are coming out with new plans and strategies to attract international students and continued to drive a range of international experiences. The Ministry of Education and Science launched a new scholarship programme in 2014, which will provide \$133.3m funding for 3,000 Russian postgraduates to study overseas at some of the world's leading universities between 2014 and 2017. Germany is also pushing study abroad for its university students, with a new programme that aims for half of all degree students to experience study abroad by 2020. At present, roughly a third of all German students spend some time at a university outside Germany. In the USA, the Institute of International Education has launched a new five-year programme, 'Generation Study Abroad', to double the number of students obtaining international experience during their degree from the present 295,000 (10% of the student population) to 600,000 by 2019. Also Technology based innovations are bringing the world closer beyond boundaries. The Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) have become one of the most high profile aspects of the use of technology in teaching in recent years, with 142 universities providing free courses open to all participants via Coursera and edX alone. Most of South Africa's 23 universities offer some form of distance learning online, and with the number of university-age students across Africa predicted to double from 200 million to 400 million by 2045, online learning fills a gap in both opportunity and affordability. The European Commission has funded a new internet portal, Europeana, which gives students and researchers all over the world access to millions of books, paintings, films, museum objects and archival records drawn from libraries and archives across Europe. [Source: University of Oxford, International trends in Higher Education 2015].

Contribution and impact of internationalisation of HE on QA- The way forward learning from QACHE project

Internationalization in all forms has posed great challenges in front of higher education and QA systems. An Erasmus Mundus Project entitled "Quality Assurance of Cross-border Higher Education" (QACHE) led by ENQA in which Asia Pacific Quality Network [APQN], ANQAHE and some leading QA agencies are partners revealed different ways QA of CBHE is being perceived and handled in Europe , Asia Pacific and Arab region. In Asia Pacific Survey we found that majority of the respondents [68%] agree that CBHE has a positive influence on the national system in terms of academic standards, HE access, etc .However, concerns about comparability of degree, sovereignty issues and cultural gaps were also raised.

Four key findings of QACHE from analyses of surveys from 3 regions

- The sheer diversity of approaches and regulatory frameworks for inbound or outbound CBHE within and across the three investigated regions
- Lack of information about and knowledge of different agencies' approaches and national frameworks
- A “trust gap” between sending and receiving countries about the quality of CBHE, with receiving country being generally more skeptical than sending countries about the quality, and quality assurance, of incoming provision
- Low levels of cooperation amongst QA agencies in the quality assurance of CBHE

QACHE: Implications

The Toolkit is composed of three sections, Information Sharing, Cooperation in Quality Assurance, and Networks of Agencies. The first two providing practical guidance to QAAs on the things they can consider doing to improve the sharing of information relating to CBHE and enhance cooperation in its quality assurance. The third section offers similar guidance on things that networks of agencies can consider doing to facilitate information sharing and cooperation amongst their QAAs. Each section starts with a general principle, followed by more specific recommendations and examples of things to do that could help implementing the principle.

Figure1:QACHE vicious cycle

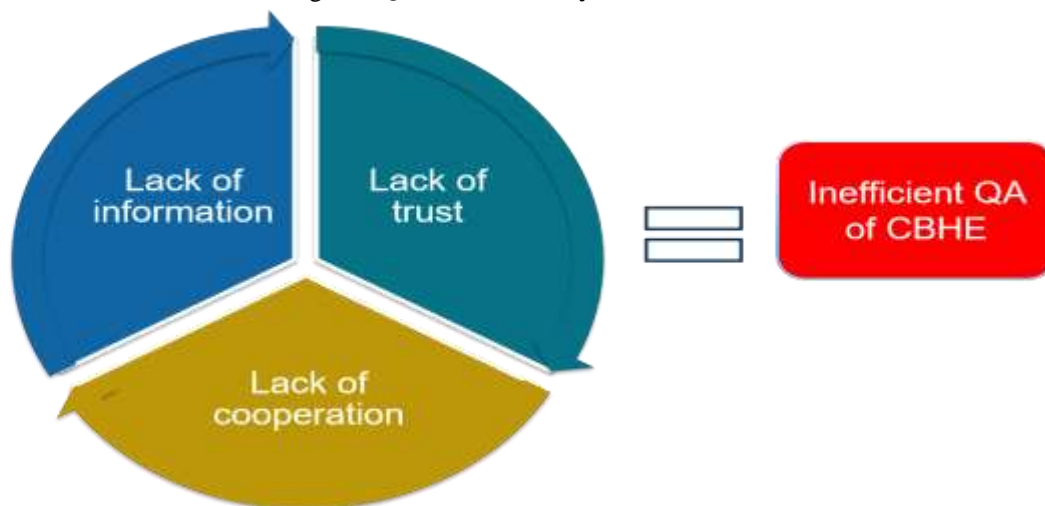
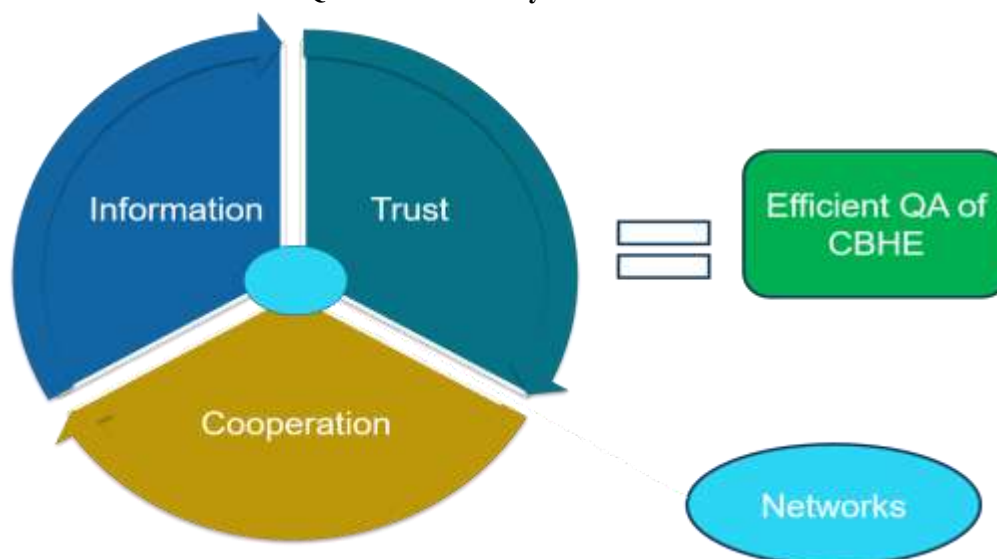


Figure 2:
QACHE Virtuous cycle



Source: QACHE Portal of ENQA

The project has identified this virtuous circle as key in order to enhance the international quality assurance of CBHE. In particular, it facilitates the identification of regulatory gaps, and safeguard students and stakeholders from low quality

providers. Importantly, the QACHE project has highlighted the significant role that regional networks such as ENQA, APQN and ANQAHE that can play in facilitating the activation of this virtuous circle, through the facilitation of policy dialogue and information sharing, and other initiative aimed at building reciprocal trust and cooperation between their constituent agencies. This role can equally be played by informal multi-lateral initiatives such as Quality Beyond Borders (QBB). (*Trifiro, F and Sughnani, N,2016*)

Bengaluru Statement 2016 on next-Generation quality assurance of Higher Education

Organised by National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC), India and co-organised by Asia-Pacific Quality Network (APQN) in partnership with 16 leading Quality Assurance organisations including networks and QA agencies from Asia Pacific, Europe, America, Africa and Arab regions on 16-17 September 2016 at Bengaluru, India, re-affirming previous relevant commitments such as Nagoya Declaration on Higher Education for Sustainable Development-2014, Incheon Declaration-2015 “*Education 2030: Towards inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning for all*”, Bengaluru statement came out with shared aspirations and commitments of QA community worldwide .

The message from Bengaluru Statement 2016 on next-Generation quality assurance of Higher Education Bengaluru Statement 2016 on Next-Generation Quality Assurance of Higher Education: A Shared Vision and Commitment for Fostering Partnership Beyond Borders”, which was the culmination of the global summit organised by NAAC and APQN will be counted as the major landmark in the international history of higher education quality assurance.

Global partners included in the historic Bengaluru Statement – 2016 are Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) of USA, European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA), European Consortium for Accreditation in Higher Education (ECA), Arab Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ANQAHE), ASEAN Quality Assurance Network (AQAN) and Asia Pacific Quality Register (APQR) etc.

This historic Bengaluru Statement – 2016 expressed intent and aspirations for

- Cooperation among quality assurance networks and organizations to dissolve boundaries for quality higher education.
- Endeavour to Foster Trust Beyond Borders in higher education quality assurance:
- Sharing global information resources.
- Promoting values and ethical practices in quality assurance.
- Sharing and promoting good practices.
- Strengthening of capacity building.
- Developing strategies and resources for next generation quality assurance in age of technology.
- Resource mobilisation for quality assurance.
- Strengthening professionalism in quality assurance.(Patil,2016)

Bengaluru Statement – 2016 has called upon quality assurance networks, organizations and stakeholders of higher education to join hands and commit to work together to enhance quality in higher education in service of students and society. NAAC, APQN and other partners have agreed to deliberate further on this statement and develop action plan by making specific commitments to deliver on the various issues raised for the benefit of quality in higher education.

Key lessons, reflections and ideas

The Bengaluru Statement 2016 clearly shows the intent among key global stakeholders of quality to work together for common cause and explore untapped potential of networking among QA networks and QA organisations. These various international initiatives provides basis for some lessons and reflections as below:

- Internationalisation in HE is to be dealt with caution. As a measure of cooperation, capacity building and mobility, it could be boon but if not handled carefully it can sow the seeds of neo-colonisation. So putting the students’ welfare and national interest first, could be a good strategy.
- Regional QA labels can be good alternative to international accreditation as the regional educational hubs are becoming popular.
- Mutual recognition of QA decisions on accreditation of qualifications is good way forward to facilitate mobility
- National Associations, regional networks and global alliances can influence and shape the future of higher education locally and globally.
- Degree mills and accreditation mills are threat to society and affects good work of Universities and QA bodies. Zero tolerance policy by all stakeholders is need of the hour to deal with this menace.

Role of QA Networks

Quality Assurance in higher education has national as well as international implications. Over the past few decades External Quality Assurance (EQA) has emerged as an important tool to ensure credibility of higher education institutions (HEIs) and programs for the purpose of international mobility. Mutual recognition of Quality Assurance (QA) decision among different countries is one of the major tools used by EQA agencies. Regional and international QA networks such as Asia Pacific Quality Network(APQN),European Network for Quality Assurance (ENQA, International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAHE) are playing important role as facilitator of trust as well as exchange of good practices among EQAAs.

Moving beyond this informal recognition, there is emphasis on formal recognition of EQA bodies which seek to operate regionally or internationally. European Quality Assurance Register (EQAR) is the most prominent example where most of the European EQA bodies have undergone formal registration procedures. EQAR provided legitimate basis for cross border QA activities. Asia Pacific Quality Register (APQR) is established as a stakeholder initiative in Asia Pacific region. Many of the international operators in QA are based in USA which are recognised by national recognition bodies like Council of Higher Education (CHEA) and/or USDE. Several unrecognised and dubious players acting as international/global QA agencies. India is also on verge of launching multiple QA bodies regime. Similar to degree mills, now we are faced with menace of accreditation mills. These two different trends have necessitated a need of formal regional as well as international mechanism of recognition of legitimate EQAAs.

Learning from European Experience: European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR)

Quality assurance is the cornerstone of “the Bologna Process” in Europe. According to “*Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area*” in 2005, the European Association of Quality Assurance (ENQA) proposed the establishment of the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR). EQAR officially began its operation since March 2008 and promotes the long-range goals and objectives of European higher education. EQAR’s registered members cover public, private and professional QAAs across the Europe. EQAR’s mission addresses on further development of the European Higher Education Area by increasing the transparency of quality assurance, and thus enhancing trust and confidence in European higher education (EQAR, 2015). Also, it facilitates the identification of the credibility and professional quality of both international and national QAAs, as well as the QA field that they receive. Since its establishment till date, 42 QAAs has been registered and among which 8 QAAs in German, 3 in Spain, 7 in Holland, separately 2 in Belgium, France, Switzerland and the United Kingdom, 1 in Austria, Finland and other 14 European countries. In global scope, we can see that some countries have established an accreditation system of the QAAs, one of the representative is Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) in the United States. CHEA is a national advocate and institutional voice for promoting academic quality through accreditation, CHEA is an association of 3,000 degree-granting colleges and universities and recognizes 60 institutional and programmatic accrediting organizations (CHEA, 2015). From the international perspective, the role of the EQAR is equivalent to a national accreditation system to an external QAA, helping the governments, HEIs, students, parents and other stakeholders know the right choice for their educational needs. EQAR has greatly promoted student mobility by providing a basis for the increase of trust among higher education institutions, reduced opportunities for “accreditation mills” to gain credibility (EQAR, 2015), and what is more it has brought the experience of the pioneer of the registration system to the world.

The Genesis of Register in Asia Pacific: Asia Pacific Quality Register (APQR)

After learning good experience from EQAR, in April of 2013, the annual general meeting (AGM) of the Asia Pacific Quality Network (APQN) has endorsed the proposal of the establishment of Asia Pacific Quality Register (APQR) as part of its Decennial agenda. On June 25-27 of the same year, APQN organized a 3-day pilot review to Quality Assurance and Accreditation Council (QAAC) in Sri Lanka, APQN President Patil Jagannath as coordinator, Dr. Pillai Latha as the review chair. On the basis of the pilot review, the APQR project went on developing under the leadership of APQN president. After 2 year’s consultation with various stakeholders, the document of “*Asia Pacific Quality Register (APQR)*” was officially issued in special meeting at Macao during 22-23 January 2015. Thus APQR comes into effect from January 2015. (APQN, 2014) In April 17-19, 2015 APQN Conference and AGM was held in Yunnan University in Kunming in China, the attendance of 192 participants from 28 countries in the world added to the credibility of APQR. APQN president mentioned in the opening ceremony: “Now..., the dream project of APQR is finally a reality...the work done by us at APQN has been globally admired and recognized.” (Jagannath Patil, 2015) It is fair to say that after three-year hard-work with perseverance, APQR finally came into birth, having achieved a breakthrough in the registration system of education QAAs in the Asia Pacific region.

The Implementation of the Asia Pacific Quality Register (APQR)

APQR is an international, non-governmental, regulatory and constrained activity to the QAAs. Its registered members for inclusion will cover public, private and professional QAAs in the Asia Pacific region (in the future it might be expanded to institution members made up of HEIs).

At the Kunming conference in April 2015, the APQR Council (APQRC) was formed which is responsible for reviewing and approving the expression of interest (EOI) of the applicant QAA. Very soon, APQRC decided to carry out the “substantive review” of the first formal register according to the EOI from the Fiji Higher Education Commission (FHEC). So far APQR has reviewed and listed four agencies on Register and another four are yet various stages of review.

The Review Criteria of APQR

All evaluation, assessment, accreditation, review and other QA activities are bound to have standards, guidance or criteria. Good standards and guidance can guarantee QA activities achieving the desired objectives in accordance with the

established QA development mission. APQR Standards and guidance for inclusion is especially crucial because APQR is a meta-evaluation to QAAs.

APQR is one kind of QA mechanisms based on self-evaluation and peer review. It is also one of the important means of self-management for QAAs. APQR criteria for inclusion are as follows:

Table 1 Criterion for the APQR

Criterion	Description
1. Organization	The QAA is a full member of APQN or is a QA body which is valid entity recognized by the appropriate authority in the relevant country/territory/region, and is accountable to stakeholders.
2. Operations	The quality assurance agency undertakes quality assurance activities (at institutional and/or program level) on a cyclical basis.
3. Mission and Objectives	The mission statement and objectives of the agency are understood consistently by its stakeholders.
4. Staff and Reviewers	The profile of the agency staff and the profile of the reviewers the agency uses are consistent with the Mission Statement.
5. Independence	The quality assurance agency is independent and has autonomous responsibility for its QA operations. The judgments and recommendations of the agency’s reports cannot be changed by third parties.
6. Resources	The agency has sufficient resources to run its operations in accordance with its mission statement and objectives.
7. Process and Criteria	The description of the processes and criteria applied by the agency are transparent and publicly available and normally include: self-evaluation, site visit, public report and follow-up measure. The published standards and criteria are applied consistently and rigorously.
8. Appeals	An appeals mechanism is available for the institutions.
9. Quality Assurance	The agency has effective quality assurance measures in place to monitor itself and is subject to occasional review.
10. Monitoring and Evaluation	The agency undertakes research on internal and external quality assurance and provides information and advice to the higher education institutions.
11. Agency Linkages	The agency cooperates and collaborates with other agencies and key players across national borders.

(Source: www.apqr.co/index.php/eligibility-criteria/criteria-process)

The above 11 criteria are based on the 8 criteria from “*APQN Constitution*” which form the basis to determine the types of APQN membership, as well as the principles from “*Higher Education Quality Assurance Principles for the Asia Pacific Region* (known as “*Chiba Principle*”). As we know, the ‘*Chiba Principles*’ declared by APQN in February 2008 emphasize a generic approach that has relevance for all HEIs, QAAs and quality assessment practices in the region regardless of the level of development, size and national context, which are helpful to potential students, employers, parents, governments, higher education institutions and professional bodies, both nationally and internationally.

Global Quality Assurance Register (GQAR)

Experience of EQAR in Europe and APQR in Asia Pacific points towards the most convenient way forward. QA agencies are inclined to approach local or regional body either because it is legal requirement or because of other issues of socio economical relevance and preference. Guidelines of Good Practices (GGP) alignment of INQAAHE or other international recognition is mainly desired so as to increase visibility around the globe and aspire for higher benchmarks. Cost and/ or time involved in the process may be one of the limiting factors for agencies to go for multiple reviews. The membership of regional and international QA networks is now considered critical requirement for establishing credential of EQAAs bodies which operate nationally as well as internationally. There are several quality assurance bodies at the national and regional levels which are involved in assessing institutions in various countries. This includes key quality networks and agencies from Asia, Europe, America, Australia, UK, Africa such as Asia-Pacific Quality Network (APQN), Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) from USA, European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education, (ENQA), Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education UK (QAA – UK), and Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA), Australia and NAAC from India among others. The International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE), a worldwide association of 300 organisations active in quality assurance in higher education is ideally placed to work with the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) on developing a Global Quality Assurance Register (GQAR).

Possibilities of GQAR

MoU among different national, regional and international bodies that, providing certain guidelines, peer review activities done by one body will be considered by other for grant of recognition or listing on register would be a great facility for agencies. All agencies which are engaged in review and recognition of accreditation agencies can join together and provide a listing of quality assured accreditation agencies on a single platform - 'The Global Quality assurance in higher education [GQARHE]. And GQARHE can provide one-stop solution for those who are looking for recognised QA bodies. Also, it can contribute towards alienating Accreditation mills, which are becoming a global menace these days.

Challenges of Global Register

One key challenge is the comparability of criteria or standards adopted by different review bodies. These are evolved over time in different contexts and socio-economic or even in varied legal systems. In some systems, good standing with government is a key requirement. Whereas some systems advocate field or market based independence and autonomy. How such delicate issues would be addressed in mutual recognition is a challenge. The biggest challenge is that different bodies have started at different point of time and a lot of significance and involvement is attached with the review process. Accepting review by other agency could be an issue. There could also be a feeling of competition or encroachment on domain or territory. Another issue could be financial stakes involved. It is possible that revenue or fees from review may be an important source for finance for a few bodies. In such cases, doing away with own review and relying on other review could be an issue. Even if mutual recognition is possible, there could be concerns of revenue sharing. A major challenge is who will take initiative and what will be role and the stakes for multiple, high-profile stakeholders if they need to come together. (JP, 2016)

Some options for launch of GQAR

INQAAHE being the global network with rich experience of 25 years is ideally placed to offer this service to global higher education community. Alternately all bodies engaged in review, recognition or listing of accreditation agencies can come together to form an alliance and launch GQAR as joint global initiative. If we could pool intergovernmental bodies like UNESCO to support this venture, it would be great service to QA agencies, institutions and students all over the world. The general assembly of INQAAHE held in Fiji welcomed this new initiative of INQAAHE. (JP, 2016). Asia Pacific Quality Register (APQR) also has mooted idea of Global Quality Register, as alliance of all regional register. (JP & Jianxin Zhang, 2016)

Ideas for the Future

The prime focus of various alliances of HEIs, QA Networks, Regional associations and bodies like UNESCO can include common agenda such as –

- Sharing information and resources in higher education quality assurance
- Developing strategies for creating global resources in quality assurance
- Global information portal on HEIs and qualifications
- Global Quality Assurance Register [GQAR] in higher education.
- Mutual and automatic recognition of quality assured qualifications including credit transfers anywhere in the world based on international conventions and protocols.
- Joint Initiative against degree and diploma mills
- Capacity and goodwill programs to build the bridges of trust

With these common objectives, various bodies and QA networks can develop strategies to facilitate the role of review, recognition and information dissemination among the stakeholders of quality in higher education around the globe.

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