Asia-Pacific Quality Network

Mutual Recognition of Quality Assurance Outcomes

Outcome of Phase 1 of the Project – August-November 2010

DRAFT UNDER DISCUSSION LEADING TO PHASE 2

Project Team

1. Dr Antony Stella, Audit Director, Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA), Australia (Project Leader)

2. Dr Jan Cameron, Director, New Zealand Universities Academic Audit Unit (NZUAAU), New Zealand

3. Professor Zita Mohd Fahmi, Malaysian Qualifications Agency (MQA), Malaysia

4. Dr.M.S.Shyamasundar, Deputy Adviser, National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC), India

Those who shared their reflections and comments at the preparatory stage and would be involved in future consultations:

1. Mr Rob Fearnside, Deputy Executive Director, Hong Kong Council for Accreditation of Academic and Vocational Qualifications (HKCAAVQ), Hong Kong

2. Ms Anne Holmes, Acting Executive Director, National English Language Teaching Accreditation Scheme (NEAS), Australia

-o0o-

Mutual Recognition of Quality Assurance Outcomes
Outcome of Phase 1 – August-November 2010

Content

Mutual Recognition of Quality Assurance Outcomes

Outcome of Phase 1 of the Project – August-November 2010

Summary of what has been done so far…

In 2010, additional GIQAC funds provided to APQN made it possible to initiate the discussions on mutual recognition (MR) among selected APQN members - AUQA, MQA, NAAC and NZUAAU. The project group held its first meeting at MQA on 21 October. Two other members of APQN - NEAS and HKCAAVQ - joined the reflections on the context and challenges of MR among the selected project group members.

Three of the project team members have more than one type of QA responsibility and cover university level and non-university level higher education institutions. The team decided to focus on the whole of institutional level QA approaches and limit the analysis to the university level institutions. For this scope, the project team has started a mapping exercise of the QA policies and practices that are appended to the report. (Appendix 1)

In addition to the mapping, the project team members agreed that they need to know more about the rigour of the QA activities of each other by observing each others' QA practices. Given the short time period available for the utilisation of the additional funding the project team was unable to conduct the observation visits during October-November 2010. But the guidelines to plan and conduct the observation visits and aspects to be highlighted in the report on the findings have been discussed. (Appendix 2)

The group also discussed the challenges in moving towards mutual recognition (Appendix 3). The project team has developed a detailed plan for the next phase of the project (Appendix 4).

The deliverables of phase 1 are:
- the mapping of the relevant policies, practices and outcomes of the QA approaches of the four APQN members selected for the project
- guidelines for the observations of each other's QA exercise
- report on the issues that emerge from phase 1 of the MR project
- plan for the next phase of the project

Mapping of Quality Assurance Frameworks				
QA Aspects	**Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA), Australia**	**Malaysian Qualifications Agency (MQA), Malaysia (formerly LAN in 1997-2007)**	**National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC), India**	**New Zealand Universities Academic Audit Unit (NZUAAU), New Zealand**
Year of establishment	2001	MQA 2007	1994	1993
Established by	Australia is a federation of six states and two territories. AUQA was established jointly by these eight governments and the Commonwealth government.	Govt. MQA is a statutory body.	Govt	HEIs
Funded by	Both. Operational cost from govt and cost recovery for audits from auditees.	Both (annual grant and fees)	Both. Most expenses from govt funding and institutions pay an accreditation fee which is does not recover the costs.	HEIs
HEIs under its purview	40 University level institutions + 9 State Accrediting Agencies + around 100 other HEIs	20 public HEIs, 42 private universities and university colleges, 400+ private HEIs, 24 poly techniques+ 34 community colleges and other HEIs	All HEIs in the country – 500+ Universities and 26000+ Colleges	8
Nature of the Process	Voluntary but mandatory for federal funding	Voluntary by MQA Act but mandatory by government polices	Voluntary but some state governments have made it mandatory.	Mandatory
Major Functions	Quality Enhancement, Self Improvement, More Public Information	Certification Accountability, Self Improvement, Quality Enhancement	Assessment, accreditation, quality sustenance and enhancement	Self Improvement, Quality Enhancement, Accountability

Mapping of Quality Assurance Frameworks				
QA Aspects	**Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA), Australia**	**Malaysian Qualifications Agency (MQA), Malaysia (formerly LAN in 1997-2007)**	**National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC), India**	**New Zealand Universities Academic Audit Unit (NZUAAU), New Zealand**
Scope	Both private and public. Both university and non-university level HEIs. Includes state accrediting agencies.	Both private and public universities and non universities.	Both private and public. Both university and non-university level HEIs.	Universities only. All are publicly funded.
Public Vs Privates	Applies same standards.	Applies same standards.	Applies same standards.	Applies same standards.
Unit For QA	Institution	Institution, faculty, program, themes, aspects. (The Project is limited to the institutional QA approach.)	Institution	Institution
Self-assessment Report (SAR)	Yes	Yes	Self- study Report – All HEIs; Self –appraisal report –Teacher Education Institutions	Yes
Guidance to prepare SAR	Detailed Guidelines, Training	Detailed Guidelines	Detailed Guidelines, Awareness Programs	Detailed Guidelines
Who participates in the preparation of SAR	Management staff, Administrative staff, Teaching staff, Students	Management staff, Administrative staff, Teaching staff, Students, Involvement of others is encouraged	Internal Quality Assurance Cell (Management staff, Administrative staff, Teaching staff, Students)	Management staff, Administrative staff, Teaching staff, Students, Graduates/Alumni
Inputs considered other than SAR	Government reports and reports of professional organisations	Surveys of stakeholders, government reports, reports of professional	All documents available in the institution concerned during the site visit; Feedback from State	Publicly available material (eg Annual reports; website material) plus additional material

Mapping of Quality Assurance Frameworks				
QA Aspects	**Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA), Australia**	**Malaysian Qualifications Agency (MQA), Malaysia (formerly LAN in 1997-2007)**	**National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC), India**	**New Zealand Universities Academic Audit Unit (NZUAAU), New Zealand**
		organisations	Government / Universities / Public	provided by the University – some as part of the portfolio and some on request (eg Plans).
Involvement of international experts	Membership in review panel, observer, joint development of procedures, meetings, formal information exchange	Limited foreign members in review panel, joint development of procedures, meetings, formal information exchange	Observers, joint development of procedures, meetings, formal information exchange	Membership in review panel, joint development of procedures, meetings
Register of Reviewers	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Reviewer profile	Experts in general HE, international members, QA staff	Subject experts, experts in general HE, international members, employers/industry representatives, QA staff, Representatives of professional organisations	Experts in general HE, employers/ industry representatives, QA staff, Representatives of professional organisations	Experts in general HE, international members, employers/ industry representatives, QA staff, Representatives of professional organisations
Identifying Reviewers	Nominations from HEIs, government, and governing body; Identified by agency staff and through advertisements	Nominations by the HEIs and government; Identified by agency staff and through advertisements	Identified by agency through various means –Nomination from HEIs, government, governing council and executive committee; Identified by agency staff and through advertisements	Identified by agency staff and by nomination from universities (occasional requests).

Mapping of Quality Assurance Frameworks				
QA Aspects	Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA), Australia	Malaysian Qualifications Agency (MQA), Malaysia (formerly LAN in 1997-2007)	National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC), India	New Zealand Universities Academic Audit Unit (NZUAAU), New Zealand
Who appoints reviewers?	Governing Board	Governing Board-the Agency	Assessors are selected from the Collegium of assessors database by the academic staff of the agency; the final team composition is approved by the Director	Auditors are appointed to a Register by the NZUAAU Board; auditors are appointed to panels from the Register by the executive staff of the agency.
Role of HEI in review panel composition	HEIs are consulted. They can record reservation.	HEIs are consulted. They can record reservation.	HEIs are consulted. They can record reservation.	HEIs can record reservation.
Panel size	3-5 including an Audit Director	4-6 + Agency QA officer	3-4 for Colleges and 5-12+ for Universities depending upon the size of the HEI.	4-5+Audit Director of the unit
Policy on Conflict of Interest	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Use of only trained Reviewers	Yes	Yes	Yes / Occasionally we take new members along with trained members	Yes
Checks and balances to ensure objectivity of the QA process	Training, panel composition, presence of agency staff	Use of documented criteria. HEIs' role in panel selection, HEIs comment on the report, HEIs evaluate the panel report; validated by the special committee	Training, panel composition, presence of QA agency staff	Director's presence in all panels, HEIs comment on report, Approved by Board as having followed procedures

Mapping of Quality Assurance Frameworks				
QA Aspects	**Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA), Australia**	**Malaysian Qualifications Agency (MQA), Malaysia (formerly LAN in 1997-2007)**	**National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC), India**	**New Zealand Universities Academic Audit Unit (NZUAAU), New Zealand**
Dissemination of QA policies	Manual, publications, training	Printed guidelines, web site, refresher course, seminar, circulars	Printed guidelines, web site, seminar, work shop, publications, circulars, State level QA Cells.	Audit manual
Checking complaints Handling of HEIs	Yes	Yes Student feedback on teaching and learning, facilities, welfare etc is considered.	Yes – HEIs have their own mechanisms Student feedback on teaching and learning, facilities, welfare etc is considered.	Universities have procedures to handle student complaints.
Who is responsible for the report	The agency staff who joins the panel, in consultation with the panel	Mainly chairman and secretary supported by contributions by panel members	Chairperson of the team in consultation with all the panel members	Agency staff with the Panel Chair. Panel members consulted.
Report conclusions	Commendations, Affirmations, and Recommendations for further attention	Commendations, affirmations, recommendations, suggestion for corrective action	Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Challenges, recommendations /suggestions for corrective action	Recommendations, Commendations Affirmations
Follow-up	The institutions provide a progress report 12 months after the publication of the audit report. The AUQA staff member visits the institution to discuss actions taken.	Yes Depends on the conditions stated in the certificate of accreditation /provisional accreditation	Yes Annual Quality Assurance Report (AQAR) is submitted every year by accredited institutions.	Yes – Panel Chair and Director visit the HEI after 3 months of public report. Timetable (18 months) for a follow-up report is decided then. Next cycle expects summary report on previous cycle's recommendations.

		Mapping of Quality Assurance Frameworks		
QA Aspects	**Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA), Australia**	**Malaysian Qualifications Agency (MQA), Malaysia (formerly LAN in 1997-2007)**	**National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC), India**	**New Zealand Universities Academic Audit Unit (NZUAAU), New Zealand**
Validity of Outcome	Five years	In general 5 years. Varies depending on conditions specified.	Five years	5 years
Appeals	Yes. AUQA Board will handle formal appeals and take appropriate steps. No appeal during past five years.	Yes. Authority – Minister for HE. Process- formal written representation. Outcome- Approved or rejected. Post QA reporting –depends on conditions imposed	Yes. Separate independent committee constituted by QA agency will handle formal appeals and take appropriate steps.	Yes (approved 2010). Appeals to NZUAAU Board in first instance.

Framework for Evaluating and Reporting on

QA Agencies' Quality Assurance Processes

1. **Assumptions**
   - Our concern is with quality assurance of institutions, not programmes.
   - Our concern initially is with universities only, not with other tertiary education institutions.
   - If our conclusions are to lead to statements about the *country's* quality assurance then we need to be able to assume that the agency evaluated is the only agency responsible for all the country's institutions *or* that any conclusions are qualified to account for only those institutions falling within the oversight of the agency.
   - The INQAAHE Guidelines provide the basis of our evaluation criteria, in particular guideline 6, "The EQAA's Requirements for Institutional performance" and Section III "EQAA Review of Institutions: Evaluation, Decision and Appeals".
   - Our concern is with process, not with the actual conclusions reached from that process (though we are concerned with the robustness of those conclusions). We are evaluating the agency's processes, not the institution being audited.
   - The observations are in the form of a series of bilateral assessments by the observer agency of the observed agency, which might then collate to a multilateral assessment.

2. **Status of the Agency**
   - Is the agency recognised by relevant national and/or state government(s) as providing authoritative quality assurance of institutions? Are there any other [competing] agencies which [also] do this for this group of institutions?
   - Is the agency recognised by the institutions it quality assures as having legitimacy and authority?
   - Is the agency an APQN member (ie is the mutual recognition project relevant)?
   - Is the agency independent (a) of government; (b) of the institutions? How is this independence ensured?

3. **Criteria for evaluation of process**
   3.1 **Panels – critical issues are (a) are Chairs and panel members appropriately experienced? (b) are panel members and Chairs independent?**
   - How are panels appointed?
   - What are the panel members' credentials/experience? Is there a balance of perspectives?
   - Is there an overseas external member? How is this person selected?
   - Are panel members trained?

- How are chairs selected? (Are they independent of government and the institutions?)
- How is conflict of interest managed?
- How is confidentiality managed?
- Do panels receive clear guidelines on the audit/review process and expectations of auditors/reviewers? Are these followed?
- What is the role of agency staff during the audit/review process? Who writes the report?

3.2 **Specifications for the Review – critical issues are (a) are the review criteria/standards/questions clear as to what is expected? (b) are they appropriate for a university? (c) are the evidence requirements clear and appropriate?**
- Is the framework followed by the institution for the review appropriate?
- What is the process whereby the panel seeks evidence (apart from the site visit)?
- What evidence is sought and provided?
- What is the self-review process; in what form is the outcome of self-review communicated to the panel?
- Is this an accreditation review or does any other compliance requirement rest on the review outcome?

4. **Review Process – critical issues are (a) that the evidence sought and provided is appropriate; (b) that questions are to appropriate people; (c) that panel members behave appropriately.**
- How are the questions to be explored during the site visit determined?
- How is the list of interviewees determined; by whom?
- Do the interviewees appear to be the most appropriate people for the questions asked?
- How do panel members conduct themselves during interviews (eg leading questions? Own-institution comparison or other biases evident? Hobby-horses?) Does the Chair direct panel members?

5. **Review Decisions and Conclusions – critical issue is that conclusions are relevant, fair, evidence-based and robust.**
- How does the panel/Chair ensure that the evidence used to reach conclusions is robust (ie not spurious or trivial) and triangulated?
- Does the panel/Chair ensure that deliberations are not influenced by third parties, by panel members' prior knowledge or experience of the institution, or by intrusions from institution staff?
- Is the panel/Chair able to manage seemingly contradictory evidence?
- Is the evidence used to reach conclusions transparent to the institution?
- Are the conclusions clear and concise?
- Are conclusions fair and relevant for the institution; are recommendations feasible?
- What feedback happens to the institution at the site visit (or immediately after)?

- What is the post site visit process for facilitating institution comment on conclusions?
- Is there an appeal process?

6. **Conclusion for bilateral recognition**
   - Does the observer have confidence that, allowing for contextual constraints, this agency's processes are exploring similar activity within similar standard expectations as those which would be explored by the observer's agency?

-o0o-

The Context and the Challenges of
Mutual Recognition of Quality Assurance Outcomes
among the Project Group Members

1. Background

Discussion around mutual recognition (MR) among quality assurance (QA) agencies is relatively recent in the Asia Pacific region. There have been collaborations and cooperative agreements in QA, mostly within regional groups such as the South Pacific, or economic blocks such as the ASEAN. There are also examples of bilateral cooperation. But, discussions around formal recognition of the QA work of each other in a systematic manner are new. As external quality assurance evolves as a profession by itself and as QA networks provide a platform for the QA professionals to share knowledge and work collaboratively on challenging issues, MR is coming to the forefront of many discussions.

There is a desire among QA agencies and QA professionals to make increased use of each other's work and eventually discuss possibilities of more formal cooperation. However, this is not free from challenges. Formal cooperation to use each other's QA work requires that the agencies have a thorough understanding of and trust in each other's processes. An understanding of the processes is a necessary component to have confidence in the outcomes of the processes. Analysing ways to facilitate this 'understanding', and 'trust' is the purpose of this project.

This project builds on the work already done by other QA groups. Significant ground work has been done by a number of interested groups and this project considered the following as the most relevant for the purposes of this project:
- INQAAHE's work during 2000-2001
- APQN's purpose and work since 2004
- Work done in Europe (ENQA and ECA)
- The Washington Accord

1.1. INQAAHE
In May 2000, the INQAAHE Board established a working group to look at aspects of the recognition by QA agencies of each others' work. In 2001, the work of the group resulted in a report on the approach to MR and the associated challenges. (weblink is not active. Will be included in the next version)

1.2. APQN

One of the purposes of APQN is 'to facilitate links between quality assurance agencies and acceptance of each others' decisions and judgements' (APQN Constitution v7, section 2 on Purposes 4.4). As a step towards achieving this, in 2004, APQN established a project to discuss this issue and five countries were represented in the project group – Australia, Hong Kong, India, Malaysia and New Zealand. After initial discussions, in 2005, the project group developed a discussion note. Discussions continued for the next couple of years but the project did not proceed due to lack of funding. The additional funding from GIQAC has now enabled APQN to take this project forward.

1.3. ENQA and ECA

In 2002, ENQA published a project report on the experiences of five Nordic countries that wished to explore a method for mutual recognition of quality assurance agencies. The project involved the participating countries preparing a self-study report covering areas such as ownership and evaluation method. On the basis of the self study report, an expert panel visited the QA agencies and prepared a feedback report on the main strengths and weaknesses identified through the self-study and the visit. The feedback report did not address the recognition issues directly but it helped to understand the type of information required to address the issues relevant to mutual recognition. The project resulted in a recommendation that the process followed in the project be reviewed to carry out a recognition review.

The European Consortium for Accreditation (ECA) has been working on MR since 2003. It was founded in 2003 with the aim of reaching MR agreements by 2007. The ECA approach of MR is based on an intensive process of trust building through information exchange; commonly agreed tools and instruments; external evaluations of members and cooperation projects aimed at MR. The need to involve the governments and recognition bodies has been highlighted by the experience of ECA. Currently, ECA is working towards a European methodology for accreditation procedures of joint programmes. Five pilot projects have been conducted and the report is in progress.

1.4. The Washington Accord

The Washington Accord, signed in 1989, is an international agreement among bodies responsible for accrediting engineering degree programs. It recognizes the substantial equivalency of programs accredited by those bodies and recommends that graduates of programs accredited by any of the signatory bodies be recognized by the other bodies as having met the academic requirements for entry to the practice of engineering. Although its scope highly limited, its approach and processes offer many good lessons of experience for the other QA groups. (http://www.washingtonaccord.org/washington-accord/)

With this background, it is important to give a definition to the key terms so that the discussions that follow will be clearer.

2. Defining the Terms

The INQAAHE working group agreed to the following definitions:

Recognition of an external quality assurance (QA) agency means an affirmation, by a body qualified and authorised for the purpose, that the agency's aims are appropriate and adequate, and its procedures are effective.

Mutual recognition (MR) by two or more QA agencies is an affirmation by each that their aims and procedures are comparable (so it is likely that they would reach the same conclusion in reviewing and passing a judgement on an institution or a programme or a qualification) (cf. The Washington Accord between engineering associations).
This is the definition the APQN discussion on MR followed in 2004. For the purposes of this project, this definition will be followed.

3. Goals and Benefits of MR

The INQAAHE report (2001) identified the following as goals of mutual recognition:
° understanding and knowledge of and by each agency
° collaboration between agencies
° research into QA processes and their effects
° enrichment of agencies' activities
° appreciation of the quality parameters underpinning institutions and programmes
° basis for judgements on the quality of institutions and/or programmes in other jurisdictions
° basis for granting credit for prior studies
° basis for accepting qualifications

To this list 'quality assurance of quality assurance agencies' can be added as a benefit. Involvement in MR could be an opportunity for the QA agencies to go through their own processes and practices and have them reviewed by experts not only against their own procedures but also those of the agency with which recognition is being sought. Such processes could also provide the basis for joint projects, increased understanding and knowledge of and by each agency and eventually increased cooperation between the agencies.

There is a common understanding in the quality assurance community that quality assurance is not a goal in itself, but a means to achieve improved quality of institutions, programmes, courses and educational services. Further, mutual recognition is not a means in itself but a process whereby mutual recognition of judgements on the quality of a number of aspects can be achieved including MR of qualifications and credit transfers when enough understanding and trust is built.

In summary, MR can be at various levels and it is not just about recognition of qualifications or recognition of QA decisions. Whatever is the goal or expected benefit, the underlying question is the 'trust' the QA agencies are able have on each other's QA processes and outcomes. Building trust requires clarity on the minimum requirements as well appreciation for diversity. It also requires a realistic understanding of what is possible in short term and how to build on short term achievements towards achieving a long term objective.

4. Steps towards MR

4.1. Acknowledging diversities

QA agencies vary a lot in their approaches, policies and practices. They serve different purposes and are located in different national contexts. Some of them have an institutional approach to QA and some have program level QA and some have both approaches. In addition to the differences in the unit of QA (institution vs program of study vs qualification) there are other significant differences that need a consideration. They include cases where external quality assurance is the equivalent of ministerial recognition of institutions belonging to the national system and which therefore is a regulatory approach. In other countries QA is a process over and above the regulatory mechanisms. Further variation comes in situations where the outcome of external quality assurance has serious implications for the funding and survival of the institutions and programs although this is by no means universal. Added to this variation, what is monitored through internal institutional QA and what is steered by external QA differs among countries. In brief, to serve the different purposes of quality assurance different countries take different national approaches to external QA.

There are also variations in the definition of terms used in QA and the same term, say 'accreditation' may mean different things and serve different purposes in different countries. These variations arise out of the national contexts in which quality assurance systems have to operate. What is understood as the scope and methodology of external QA in one country may be very different to what the same terms denote in another country.

The survey conducted among the APEC economies in 2006 indicated that variations are seen in aspects such as:
- Unit of Quality Assurance: Institution vs Programs
- Nature of the QA Process: Mandatory vs Voluntary
- Aspects considered for QA
- Role of Institutions in Constituting the Review Team
- Role of Agency Staff in On-site Visit
- Disclosure of QA Outcomes
- Implications of QA Outcome
- Appeals Mechanism

- Post-QA Follow-up

The survey done in 2008, among the broader Asia Pacific countries, endorsed the above list. Any discussion on MR should be mindful of these diversities and have the flexibility to accommodate these inherent variations.

4.2.   Building on Common Elements and Support for Good Principles and Practices

The surveys done in 2006 and 2008 highlighted the commonalities among QA agencies as well. Whatever their approach to quality assurance in terms of the aspects listed above, the quality assurance systems of the APEC region and the broader Asia Pacific have the following common critical core elements:

- Review based on pre-determined criteria;
- QA process based on a combination of self-assessment and external peer review; and
- Final decision by the quality assurance agency.

In addition, all systems are supportive of good principles such as objectivity in peer judgment and transparency in QA decision-making. For example, the International Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE) has promulgated Guidelines for Good Practice for quality assurance agencies. European Standards and Guidelines that are more relevant to the QA stakeholders of Europe is another example. The Brisbane Communique initiative in the broader Asia Pacific also developed a set of guidelines.

These commonalities in methodologies and support for good principles provide a sound platform for the QA agencies to discuss the possibilities and benefits of trusting each other and working together on QA matters.

4.3.   Developing a Realistic Expectation

QA agencies engage in discussions on MR with a number of expectations and perceptions and some of them maybe contrary to what a process could achieve realistically. MR does not mean that two or more QA agencies would simply accept each other's QA outcomes. Accepting each other's QA decision may be a long term goal but there are a number of intermediary stages where they can collaborate with each other and use each other's information, processes and personnel on QA issues.

One example is the cooperation that is becoming necessary in QA of transnational education (TNE). With institutions becoming very global with distributed operations across national boundaries, MR between QA agencies will help in reducing the QA overload on the institutions. If an institution is approved by a trustworthy QA agency X, another QA agency Y should not have difficulties in accepting agency X's approval and take a light touch approach towards its dealings with the institutions in its jurisdiction. It may not be able to totally exempt the institution from the QA touch but, by acknowledging the determinations of another trusted worthy agency, it can limit its role to only check factors not checked by agency X. If feasible, it may be more efficient for agency Y to ask agency X to carry out further checks on its behalf, as agency X is already familiar with the

institution. Alternatively, agency X may rely on the QA touch of agency Y for relevant aspects and keep its monitoring on those aspects to the minimum.

Thus, MR in QA of TNE brings benefits to both institutions and QA agencies of the countries involved. But this approach may not work if MR is pursued to explore mere recognition of qualifications between the higher education sectors of these countries. Institutions of higher education can use MR between QA agencies as a basis for judgements on the quality of institutions or programmes in other jurisdictions and use that information as basis for granting credit for prior studies or for accepting qualifications from those institutions. But the decision on credit transfer and recognition of qualifications are with the stakeholders and not with the QA agencies.

The implication is that the agencies that pursue MR should have a clear understanding of what they want to achieve.

5. Where to start?

The INQAAHE report points out that MR for QA issues related to institutional approach is probably much easier to develop than MR of programmes or qualifications, as standards or criteria for a HE institution are more general and shared in different countries'. MR at the program level may be effective for student mobility and credit transfers but one should note that it is the institution that exercises many academic responsibilities and rights including decisions on credit transfer. It is reasonable to assume that institutions that have been successful in a rigorous external QA process would have the capacity to monitor program quality. However, it should be noted that one approach cannot replace the other and each approach serves some unique purposes.

As mentioned before, MR between QA agencies cannot guarantee automatic credit transfer since institutions have the prerogative to decide on student mobility and credit transfer. But MR could contribute to creating a conducive ambience for groups of similar institutions to consider facilitating student mobility and credit transfer. It also widens the options available for students to choose from institutions acknowledged to be of adequate quality.

Considering this rationale, to make a beginning, this project has taken institutional approach to QA as the starting point. At a later stage when the project can accommodate programmatic QA, the project will need to consider issues specific to program quality such as common criteria or standards, common curricula, etc. The experience of ECA, ABET and MERCOSUR shows that this is resource intensive but it is possible.

QA agencies that have engaged in MR discussions have followed the well accepted methodology of scrutinising each other's documents, understanding each others' processes, and observing each others' main events and QA decision making activities. The

purpose is to explore whether they would be able to affirm that the criteria, policies and procedures used by the agencies in taking QA decisions are comparable and trustworthy. This project is built on similar understandings.

Based on the above discussions the project aimed to do the following:

1. Instead of a self review of QA agencies and visit by expert panels, it was decided that a 'mapping of QA framework' on key QA elements will be developed. The purpose to facilitate the understanding of each other's QA policies, processes and practices through this framework and supporting documents.

2. While desk study of the framework and supporting documents will provide a good understanding of the plans and approaches, an understanding of how well they are implemented is critical to building trust. This would involve observing key QA decisions related activities such as a peer review visit, training of peers, meeting where the QA decisions are approved etc.

3. While the present stage of the project may not lead to an immediate MR between the project members, it can result in a statement affirming the possibilities and benefits of MR which will facilitate the involvement of other stakeholder groups such as governments and recognition bodies in the next stage of the project.

The project participants were asked to reflect on five key questions and a few open ended points to sketch out the expectations, challenges and contextual factors that will shape the course and success of the project. The summary is given below.

6. The Key Questions

6.1. Question 1. Do we understand and know enough about each other? Are we compatible enough in terms of objectives, policies and procedures?

o NZUAAU pointed out that change of personnel in QA agencies results in lack of knowledge to make a judgment about each other's procedures (other than what one could find on websites). Therefore, it was recommended that there would be value in tabulating the QA aspects related to objectives, policies and procedures of the participating member agencies.

o NAAC recorded that the project members were compatible enough in terms of objectives, policies and procedures. However, their knowledge with reference to internal dynamics of the higher education systems in the respective countries may be limited. Therefore it was felt that there was a need to orient each other about the QA policies and procedures. Preparation of a Glossary of QA terms among the project members for better understanding and ensuring access of that Glossary to all stakeholders was suggested.

o AUQA commented that AUQA and NZUAAU know well about each other. Their QA processes are rigorous enough and they share many similarities. Both agencies follow the audit approach. They were seen as compatible in terms of overall objectives, policies and principles. However, the specific focus of their audits differs from cycle to cycle. AUQA now audits the institutions once in five to six years against two themes. For NZUAAU the cycles are shorter and the focus varies in every cycle. NZUAAU has just completed the 4th cycle of institutional audit and is now exploring shorter, more focussed and more frequent "theme audits". This might lead to a slight deviation in future from the 'whole of institution' approach although the theme audits will still have the institutional approach. AUQA and NZUAAU have an active Memorandum of Cooperation (MoC) on the Good Practice Database that is managed by AUQA.

o AUQA and NAAC know well about each other. There is an active MoC between AUQA and NAAC. Exchange of information and staff visits have been regular features of this MoC. The broad objectives and QA procedures are similar the QA outcome includes a public report. But NAAC has not covered the whole higher education of India and it does not have specific guidelines to examine the TNE operations of Indian HEIs.

o AUQA and MQA know well about each other. There is an active MoC between AUQA and MQA. When the Swinburne University was audited and the AUQA audit panel delegation visited the University's campus in Sarawak, Malaysia, AUQA invited MQA to observe the audit. The audit was observed by an MQA staff and an MQA auditor.

o HKCAAVQ commented that through the activities of APQN and INQAAHE they know more about each other than ever before and understanding has been promoted through conferences, forums and direct observation of each other at work. In terms of compatibility, HKCAAVQ agreed with the INQAAHE report (2001) that 'mutual recognition stands on two bases…the quality of the activity of the EQA and the scope of the activity of the EQA.'

o Hong Kong is an importer of TNE from three main destinations – the UK, Australia and to a lesser extent the US. All three have a wide range of self accrediting institutions operating within mature quality assurance arrangements delivered by EQA's whose quality is well recognised. However, the scope of EQA activity in the UK and Australia is based on audit and review at the level of institutions whereas in Hong Kong accreditation operates at the level of program and qualification. So while there is increasing commonality in terms of policies and procedures there are still significant differences in objectives, purpose and scope.

o The NEAS participant is new to the discussion and not yet in a position to comment on compatibility.

6.2. Question 2. What do we expect from each other to be able to trust each others' QA decisions?

o The project team agreed that understanding and knowing about each other is a beginning but trust only grows from interacting and working together and establishing a deep appreciation of each other's processes.

o The HKCAAVQ is of the view that bilateral relations is the best way to achieve this through formal memoranda of understanding, staff exchange and participation in exercises with partners. Over and above this of course, political sensitivities and requirements would also need to be accommodated.

o NEAS commented that independent external quality assurance of QA agencies is an important means of building confidence in each others' decisions. Results of any benchmarking activity is also a useful indicator. A quantitative, evidence based approach to quality assurance is likely to be trusted more than a qualitative (and possibly subjective) approach.

o Some specific criteria expected of the partner agencies are:
  ▪ Consistency in objectives
  ▪ Similarity in the QA approach
  ▪ Transparency in policies
  ▪ Rigor of the procedures
  ▪ Broad alignment in standards
  ▪ Alignment in the scope of QA at least in areas where MR is explored (eg TNE)

6.3. Question 3. In areas where we differ, are they very significant? Can those differences be adjusted or supplemented and how?

o NZUAAU felt that due to change of personnel in QA agencies there is a lack of knowledge about the policies and procedures of each other. Therefore NZUAAU was unable to identify authoritatively the areas of differences.

o NAAC commented on the broad similarities amongst the project members. Differences were noted in some areas viz., size of the higher education system, diversity and complexity of the higher education sector, cultural context, language, documentation required for QA and transparency in QA. It was agreed that these differences may be adjusted or supplemented through more discussions and exchange of information among the project members.

o AUQA recorded that, with NZUAAU, the differences are not significant. Even within the different foci of the audits, agreeing to include specific areas within the audit scope that are necessary for mutual recognition is not very difficult to achieve. The political environment of the agencies is different though.

o With MQA, there used to be differences due to different QA approaches but MQA has moved into institutional approach which is similar to AUQA audits. By comparing the information required from the auditees and the outcomes that arise out of the audits, it would be possible to see the gaps that need to be bridged. Bridging the gap is feasible.

o With NAAC, there are some significant differences. Indian HE system is known for its variability in quality. However, NAAC awards multi level grades and it would be possible to identify the grade level that aligns with the minimum standards acceptable to AUQA. For example, AUQA will be able to recognise that the Indian institutions that have been assessed by NAAC with grade 'A' are good enough to be involved in TNE partnership with the Australian universities. Another difference is the scope of the QA process. Since TNE is still evolving in India and the government policies around TNE are still being debated NAAC is yet to give an explicit attention to QA of TNE.

o HKCAAVQ's view is that the differences between HKCAAVQ and the EQA of their major TNE providers are significant but that should not stop the exploration of closer ties. The response from HKCAAVQ mentioned of an example where the financial audit of global accounting firms helped the purposes an audit body. The quality of the activity of the accounting firm was known and understood but there were differences in its scope of activity. By mapping the program of the audit body to that of the accounting firm, 'gaps' were identified. The audit body included them in their contracted work to the accounting firm and was able to seek supplementary information and include activities in the program. Thus, it was possible to have one financial audit serve two purposes.

o NEAS commented that aligning quality assurance policies, the relative weighting given to areas to be audited (eg qualifications relative to demonstrated teaching ability) and the method of collecting evidence (eg focus groups relative to written stakeholder feedback) are the most problematic areas.

o In summary, identifying the gaps and making adaptations to bridge the gaps is possible among the project members.

6.4. **Question 4. In spite of the mutual trust, in giving life to mutual recognition, what are the challenges we have to face that are beyond our control? Are we in a position to make any impact on those external factors?**

o In the case of NZUAAU, the major challenge is convincing government agencies and the universities themselves that MR is meaningful, credible and useful. The project needs to address the issue that while there might be MR of QA agencies that does not mean necessarily (depending on internal requirements) MR of institutions. If institutions can operate without requiring to undergo quality assurance from a QA agency, it is necessary to show our own institutions how the role of a QA agency

provides protection to assure quality. Many institutions don't have a good understanding of the MR discussions of the QA agencies and most operate by the working knowledge of those individuals inside institutions.

o The external factors that would have an impact on the success of MR is a long list that includes:
  - Size of the higher education system which leads to institutions that are yet to be covered by the QA agency
  - Diversity and complexity of the sector
  - Cultural context
  - Language
  - Documentation required for QA and levels of transparency in the sector
  - Resource implications to pursue MR
  - Variations in the way QA decisions could be interpreted and implemented differently from country to country.
  - Support from the ministries of education and the institutions of higher education
  - Legislative context
  - Ongoing restructurisation of the higher education system
  - Emergence of new players in the system
  - Frequent change of policy makers
  - Frequent change of political systems and subsequent change in Governments

o In spite of these challenges, NAAC is of the opinion that it is in a position to make some impact on these external factors, if the MR discussions result in concrete recommendations to the policy makers and other stakeholders.

o The challenge for AUQA will be the external regulatory environment and the transition stage of AUQA into a national regulator cum quality assurance body. However, AUQA is also of the conviction that it will be able to play an advocacy role in this new environment if the partner QA agencies are able to demonstrate the rigor of their QA approaches.

o Mutual recognition is not currently considered appropriate in relation to accreditation decisions in Hong Kong for TNE. It is the Education Bureau's policy decision for non local programs to be assured at the individual program level before entry of the respective qualifications into the Qualifications Register for Qualifications Framework recognition. The non-local programs have to be assessed against the local Qualifications Framework on an outcome basis. This specific requirement makes it impossible for the HKCAAVQ to make its accreditation decision on the basis of mutual recognition, as the audit/accreditation standards applied by the home quality assurance bodies will not be the legally required Hong Kong QF standards.

- In NEAS' view, changes in the operating environment (eg economic, legislative) can produce challenges. A change of personnel within an accrediting agency can have impact. Increased competition from newly arrived accrediting agencies makes a difference to policy decisions. NEAS also mentioned that it is difficult to assess the impact it could make without knowing the strength of the challenges. It recommended that a recorded documentation of shared principles that the agencies subscribe to may assist.

6.5. Question 5: How do we create awareness about the benefits of mutual recognition in our countries?

- NAAC suggests that conducting various seminars and conferences in different parts of the country about the benefits of mutual recognition, is seen as a useful strategy to muster the support of the policy makers and the institutions. Involving various stakeholder groups including leaders of HEIs, policy makers, regulatory bodies, statutory councils etc would convince them about the advantages of MR.

- Australian government is aware of the benefits of mutual recognition. If we can demonstrate that the mutual recognition recommendations are based on sound criteria and that this is workable, the concept will have the support of relevant people in Australia.

- HKCAAVQ agrees that mutual recognition is not an end in itself. We need to able to demonstrate that it can improve quality, increase mobility of students and staff across borders and lead to better provision.

- NEAS suggested that communicating to stakeholders the benefits arising from the QA agency being quality assured by an external QA agency would be helpful. Benchmarking the auditing processes, the review processes, the training of auditors, the precision of the standards and the appropriateness of the audit approach provide evidence which can be communicated to government, media and stakeholders. NEAS mentioned that the current focus on the internationalisation of education provides a positive environment for this communication.

- In summary demonstrating the benefits of mutual recognition and involvement of various stakeholders in the MR discussions are seen as strategies for creating awareness about MR.

6.6. Question 6: Benefits of MR

- NAAC considers the following as benefits of MR
  - Mobility of students
  - Mobility of staff across borders
  - HEIs offering courses both in its home country and abroad would not need to be assessed by both the QA agencies in the home country and abroad
  - Reduction of the workload in both QA agencies

- Improved knowledge and understanding of not only the QA agencies' procedures and practices but also of the HE systems in the countries cooperating.

o In TNE, if AUQA can trust the QA arrangements of the host country, AUQA indicates that it is willing to accept the QA information provided by the QA agency of the host country. This reduces assessment overload on the HEIs that have TNE operations. While this may be a long-term benefit, in the short term, sharing information about the quality issues of the HEIs that operate across national borders is seen as a valuable outcome. AUQA commented that even if such an effort reaches a stage when it may not be able to recognise each other's QA decisions due to external constraints, this would be a good benchmarking activity to check how good the QA agencies are.

6.7. *Comments: Next stages*

The project team agreed that there is value in pursuing the following steps:
- Information exchange by regular communication and sharing of manuals and publications, other information about QA criteria, systems and procedures etc
- Observing others' QA events such as QA visits, training of personnel etc
- Observing the implementation of key aspects of the QA process
- Observing meetings of others' governing bodies on QA decision making

Regarding the value of MR with respect to student and graduate mobility (including mobility of academic staff), a significant proportion of students go to Europe. This is good reason for attempting to align the MR discussions within APQN as closely as possible with Europe.

6.8. *Comments on contextual factors in scoping the project*

Focus on QA approaches related to universities
o In New Zealand, the universities operate separately from other tertiary institutions. There is no clear distinction between "higher" education and others (mostly private organisations, but polytechnics also offer programmes which could not really be defined as "higher' education). For the MR project, to make the scope of the project manageable, NZ's involvement has been confined to universities at this stage. Although NZQA has shown interest in the project, NZUAAU will be the primary partner for New Zealand and NZUAAU will liaise with NZQA on further inputs to the project in the current phase.

o A similar situation is true for India, Malaysia and Australia.

It was decided that only universities will be considered for the first few stages of the project.

<u>Approaches related to QA of institutions</u>

- o In New Zealand, for the universities, there are two separate agencies which handle QA. Programme approval and accreditation to offer programmes is managed by the Committee of the Vice-Chancellors (CUAP). CUAP is not independent of the collective of universities. But the programme approval process involves peer review and ensures individual universities are not self-approving or self-accrediting. Other quality assurance, mainly audit, is managed by NZUAAU which while established and funded by the universities is operationally independent and has separate governance. Going forward the project would benefit from having input from both CUAP and NZVCC; however, for the current phase only NZUAAU has been involved since the project focuses on institutional QA approaches.

- o In Australia, India and Malaysia there are similar arrangements beyond university level approaches and this project will involve only the institutional external QA of universities. From that point of view, inputs from HKCAAVQ and NEAS are valuable to the project but active observation visits etc will not be planned for those two institutions.

7. Summary

- o There is a desire among QA agencies and QA professionals to make increased use of each other's work and eventually discuss possibilities of more formal cooperation.

- o Desire for more formal cooperation is not free from challenges. Formal cooperation to use each other's QA work requires that the agencies have a thorough understanding of and trust in each other's processes.

- o Building trust requires clarity on the minimum requirements as well appreciation for diversity. It also requires a realistic understanding of what is possible in short term and how to build on short term achievements towards achieving a long term objective.

- o To take steps towards this direction, 'mapping of the QA frameworks' on key QA elements will be useful together with supporting documents.

- o While desk study of the framework and supporting documents will provide a good understanding of the plans and approaches, observing key QA decision related activities such as a peer review visit, training of peers, a meeting where the QA decisions are approved etc will facilitate building trust.

- o The above activities can result in a statement affirming the possibilities and benefits of MR which will facilitate the involvement of other stakeholder groups such as governments and recognition bodies, as the project develops.

- The QA mapping of QA frameworks and the discussions on the project plan for the four project group members reveal the following:

    a) All of them have many similarities and there are also differences that need to be discussed in terms of bridging the gaps.

    b) There are areas where the project members are not sure that they know enough about each other. There is a desire to observe the implementation of the QA processes.

    c) Rigor of the QA processes and procedures, transparency in decision making and quality of quality assurance are seen as the criteria for building 'trust'.

    d) Project members agree that where there are gaps in the comparison between the QA frameworks of two or agencies it is possible make suitable adaptations, seek more information and bridge the gaps.

    e) The project members are aware of the challenges which are related to the external factors including the political and legislative contexts.

    f) Demonstrating the benefits of mutual recognition and making fact based statements on the benefits of mutual recognition are seen as strategies to convince the governments of the benefits of MR.

    g) It is important to involve the governments and other relevant stakeholder groups in the next stage of the project.

    h) For the next stage of the project, observing reviews and QA decision making meetings need to be the key events. The guidelines for observations should build on good practice sin QA and the INQAAHE GGPs will be used as the reference point.

Project plan for the next stage has been built on these conclusions.

-o0o-

Phase 2 of the Project - 2011

1.   The Plan

Phase 2 of the project aims to build on the deliverables of phase 1 and it involves observation visits, sharing experiences with the APQN members in the APQN AGM and reporting the outcome.

Following are the activities planned for phase 2:

1. Each member agency's QA exercise will be observed by two other members of the project team.

2. NZUAAU and MQA will observe NAAC.

3. AUQA and NAAC will observe MQA. (This is tentative. TBC)

4. Given the similarities between the approaches of AUQA and NZUAAU, and the small number of audits that are conducted in these two countries, one project member will observe AUQA and the other will observe NZUAA.

5. As the visits happen the outcomes will be discussed and finetuned for the next visit. After every observation visit, a teleconference will be organised to share experiences.

6. A mid-term meeting will be convened after three or four observations.

7. After all the four to six visits are conducted a final meeting will be held to finalise the report and the next stages.

8. In total this involves observation visits and two meetings of the project tem.

9. The deliverables are: four to six reports on the observation visits along the format developed for this reporting. One final report about the areas where the project members are comfortable about each other's procedures and the challenges in accepting each other's work to inform their QA decisions.

2. Timeline for observation visits and project team meetings

S. No.	Event	Participants	When and where
1	Observation visit 1	NZUAAU to observe the NAAC assessment visit	22-25 February 2011 at Uttar Pradesh, India
2	Face-to-face meeting at APQN AGM	All project team members	27 February 2011, Bangalore, India
3	Workshop to share experiences with the APQN members	Presenters: Jan, Shyam and Stella Participants: APQN members	28 February 2011, Bangalore, India
4	Observation visit 2	MQA to observe the NAAC assessment visit	7-10 March 2011, Tamil Nadu, India
5	Observation visit 3	NAAC to observe the NZUAAU audit	13-17 June 2011, New Zealand
6	Observation visit 4	MQA to observe the AUQA audit	14-18 June 2011, Melbourne, Australia
7	Mid-term meeting of the project team in New Zealand	Project members	19-20 June 2011, New Zealand
8	Observations 5 and 6 (This may not happen if the institutional audit does not materialise in 2011. In that case, the project will move to the next stage after four observation visits. Budget does not include expenses towards this visit)	AUQA and NAAC to observe together one MQA audit (TBC)	September 2011, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
9	Final meeting of the project team	Project members	October 2011, Melbourne, 2011

2. Budget

(This is an estimate developed by the project team. This will undergo changes by the Board)

- Four observation visits: Travel (average of 2000 and it will be less for some travels such as India-Malaysia and Malaysia-India), DSA for six days (300), accommodation for four nights (400), airport transfer and local travel (average 150 $), visa, material production, photocopying, other contingency (150) – 3000 x 4 = 12000

- The mid review will coincide with the observation of the AUQA and NZUAAU audits. Both agencies have audit schedules in June that is convenient to bring NAAC to New Zealand and MQA to Australia. After those June observation visits, the project team will meet in New Zealand on 19 and 20 June. Additional expenses for this 2-day meeting will be within 5000 USD.

- Final 2-day meeting for four people – Only three need to travel - Travel (average of 2000), DSA for four days (200), accommodation for three nights (300), airport transfer and local travel (average 150 $), visa, material production, photocopying, other contingency (150) – 2800 x 3 = 8400

- Staff time for the home office/Secretariat to coordinate and administer travel, accommodation and reporting – 2 days for each event for the 7 events mentioned in the table above – 164 x 14 = 2296

- Services in the field – five days each for 4 members – 164 x 5 x 4 = 3280

- Total 30976 US$.

3. **Deliverables**
- Reports on four observation visits
- Information dissemination on the outcome among APQN members at the APQN conference
- Overall report on areas of QA where project members are able to trust each other and areas that remain as challenges
- Proposal for the next stages

-o0o-