

Higher Education Quality Assurance Principles for the Asia Pacific Region

The need for quality assurance principles for the Asia-Pacific Region

The internationalisation of higher education creates the need for countries and regions to demonstrate and assure the quality and standards of their higher education systems and programs. Recently, there has been increased regional and international cooperation on the development of agreed guidelines and standards to support quality assurance. This interest has been directed towards development of three initiatives comprising: the *International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE) Good Practice Guidelines*; the *UNESCO/OECD Guidelines for Quality Provision in Cross Border Higher Education*; and, the *European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA), Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area*, which were developed as part of the Bologna Process.

The Asia Pacific region is one of the most economically dynamic parts of the world. Commitment to open trade, investment and economic reform has encouraged many countries in the region to attract international students and become exporters of higher education services. Many Asia Pacific countries have allocated substantial financial and human resources to develop 'world-class' higher education systems. To further this aspiration, it is essential to encourage international collaboration in higher education quality assurance. Through adoption of an agreed set of quality assurance principles for the region, Asia Pacific countries would be able to demonstrate a firm commitment to development of higher education systems that are consistent with international standards.

The motivation for developing quality assurance principles for higher education is to strengthen collaboration and cooperation in quality assurance in the Asia Pacific region. The principles are envisaged to:

- contribute to the establishment of regional alignment in quality assurance issues and practices
- provide an agreed reference point for consistency and benchmarking in quality assurance
- facilitate regional student and academic mobility and exchange
- encourage mutual trust, confidence and understanding of higher education systems in the broader Asia Pacific
- improve transparency and accountability of higher education institutions and practices
- align the region with international developments in quality assurance.

Context

The Asia Pacific region is characterised by a diversity of economic, social and political systems, cultural traditions and values, languages and aspirations. This diversity is reflected in the structure and organisation of higher education across the region and national approaches to quality assurance.

In this context it is important to acknowledge the considerable diversity in quality assurance arrangements in the Asia Pacific region and provide a basis for establishing agreed frameworks that harmonise local approaches. The need to address these conditions motivated the hosting of a workshop under the Brisbane Communiqué in Chiba, Japan on 18 February 2008 in conjunction with the Asia-Pacific Quality Network Annual Conference. The workshop provided an opportunity for more than 35 participants from 17 countries to discuss the establishment of principles applicable to the particular context of quality assurance in higher education in the Asia-Pacific region. An important outcome from the meeting was the development of the draft 'Chiba Principles' for quality assurance in higher education in the Asia-Pacific.

Reflecting this important goal, the 'Chiba Principles' emphasise a generic approach that has relevance for all higher education institutions, quality assurance agencies and quality assessment practices in the region regardless of the level of development, size and national context. It is expected that the principles will be supplemented by context-specific approaches linked to particular national needs.

The 'Chiba Principles' are designed to provide guidance to both higher education institutions and quality assurance agencies interested in enhancing policies and practices. They are intended to complement national quality assurance approaches and frameworks relating to recognition of qualifications (both domestic and international), institutions, courses and programmes and national registers of institutions, courses and quality assurance agencies.

A premise underlying the principles is that prime responsibility for quality assurance rests with the individual higher education institution. The principles are also applicable to the entire higher education sector (both public and private) and are broad enough to be inclusive of different quality assurance dimensions including arrangements at institutional level or at program level or both. Institutions should not consider these principles mandatory or inflexible. They are intended to provide institutions with a source of guidance on best practice principles for assuring quality in operations and outputs.

It is also recognised that each country's higher education system might connect with different elements of the principles and that adjustments and refinements in practices and policies may be necessary for some institutions. The principles should therefore be regarded as an agreed point of reference for continuous enhancement, for developing shared understandings of each country's higher education systems and for aspiring towards international best practice.

In the interest of bringing the region into alignment with international developments and international benchmarks, the principles are not only informed by the findings of a major study carried out by the Asia-Pacific Quality Network on quality assurance arrangements in higher education in the Brisbane Communiq e region, but also by international codes of best practice in higher education quality assurance.

Purposes of the principles

The purposes of the principles are to:

- safeguard and promote public confidence in the quality of higher education in the region
- assist institutions in enhancing the quality of their provision
- improve the quality of academic programs for students and other beneficiaries of higher education across the region
- ensure that there is clarity and transparency in quality assurance processes and outcomes
- encourage a culture of quality improvement
- provide a measure of accountability, including accountability for the investment of public and private funding
- generate reliable public information and reports about the higher education institution, its programs and awards and quality assurance processes that are helpful to potential students, employers, parents, governments, higher education institutions and professional bodies, both nationally and internationally
- inform and assist the work of quality assurance agencies
- support and enhance the cooperation of quality assurance agencies and other key players across national borders.

Stakeholders

Internal and external quality assurance processes should be informed and supported by collaboration and engagement of key stakeholders. The range of stakeholders may vary on a national basis but would in most cases include higher education institutions, students, teachers, researchers, professional bodies, employers and government departments and/or ministries. The implementation of the principles should be informed by the needs of the various stakeholders.

Reporting

Reports on the outcomes or results of quality assurance processes should be transparent and related to the goals of the institution or the agency. For example, institutional reports should reflect the distinctiveness of the institution and its mission in relation to (but not limited to) factors such as graduate employability, community service, research and innovation, culture and tradition.

Accountability

The 'Chiba Principles', as with other regional principles, standards and guidelines, operate on the basis of individual national responsibility for higher education and autonomy of quality assurance practices.

Structure of the principles

The 'Chiba Principles' provide the region with a set of quality assurance principles that guide processes to support institutional quality assurance and quality assurance agencies. A basic premise of the 'Chiba Principles' is that each country has a quality assurance framework for higher education in place and these principles underpin the quality assurance elements of that framework.

The 'Chiba Principles' are detailed in Figure 1:

- *Institutional Quality Assurance*: key principles guiding institutions in assuring their own quality.
- *Quality Assurance Agencies*: key principles guiding the structure of quality assurance agencies and their management if they are to effectively conduct assessments for the accreditation and auditing of institutions and programs.

The 'Chiba Principles' also provide a set of guiding principles for the assessment of institutions and/or programs by both the institutions themselves and quality assurance agencies. This is represented by the intersecting area of the diagram.

- *Quality Assurance*: a set of principles which outline the process and content of quality assurance common to the activities of both the institution's internal practices and assessment by external quality assurance agencies.

It is recognised that in some Asia Pacific countries the government has responsibility for some of areas of quality assurance. In such, a scenario it is the government's responsibility to ensure that its quality assurance practices are consistent with international best practice.

The broadness of the principles also allows for the differing roles of quality assurance agencies – accreditation, audit; and accreditation and audit – and for the different units of evaluation – institutional; program; and/or both.

Reviews

Higher education institutions and quality assurance agencies should as a principle of good practice review their missions and objectives and the efficiency and effectiveness of their approach to quality assurance on a regular basis. The implementation of the quality assurance principles should also be reviewed to ensure that there is consistent application and that they remain relevant to institutional and agency objectives.

Future work

These principles are merely a starting point for enhancing quality assurance policy and practice. The principles provide a broad overview, however there is much detail under each principle that could be further developed to reflect the particular circumstances of each national system. Creation of a glossary of key terminology would also contribute to common understanding in the region.

Figure 1

A FRAMEWORK FOR HIGHER EDUCATION QUALITY ASSURANCE PRINCIPLES IN THE ASIA-PACIFIC REGION

