Report on APQN interns workshop
28 February 2012

The concept of internship is for someone to learn about a particular job or profession through a short period of work experience within an organisation that is experienced in the field. As part of its capacity-building role, APQN has supported interns from quality agencies (EQAs) to work for short periods in another EQA.

By February 2012, 15 individuals from 11 countries had experienced APQN internships in several different agencies. Nine were able to be present at the workshop on 28 February 2012 in Siem Reap, Cambodia, along with two other individuals from within HE institutions.

At the conclusion of each internship, each intern wrote a report on what s/he had learned and on what s/he hoped to implement in their home agency. On the basis of these reports, the workshop was structured around the consideration of the following features of the host agencies that interns had mentioned:

1. Administrative structure of the EQA,
2. Aspects of quality review (whether accreditation, audit, etc.),
3. Institutional actions and interaction with the EQA, and
4. Other topics.

Then the group considered:

5. Using the internships, and
6. Improving the internships

It might have been expected that the greatest learning would have been in the second of these topics, but in fact the first one proved most fruitful. This might be because all EQAs concentrate on creating and implementing policies and procedures around their core (review) functions, so these are further developed, whereas the support systems are highly dependent on the presence of people who are familiar with **both** the management of organisations **and** the particular needs of quality agencies.

As interns discussed what they learned and what they do and the processes of their respective agencies, it was often difficult to separate the learning through the internships from discussion of processes used by the various agencies. The latter aspect of the discussion was itself valuable, and in relation to the former aspect, the overall level of appreciation for APQN's internship program was very significant.

The group noted that, beyond the specific learning for and improvement of the intern's home agency, the exposure across the region to the work of other agencies is providing the opportunity to enhance mutual understanding and comparability across the region. Many interns reported on involvement in the host agency's training of assessors. This experience, plus the use of the training material, can help the region to move forward in a compatible direction of improved quality.

1. Administrative Structure of the EQA

The administrative and functional structure of an EQA can be made more efficient and effective with IT support, database management, electronic file-keeping and electronic record-keeping, etc., particularly when the size of the institutions to be reviewed is large. Agencies need adequate IT support for efficient data functions, and staff need to be oriented towards effective use of the IT facilities.

IT tools are valuable for all EQAs, and some interns stressed their value for small ones with few staff, while other interns felt that their use to cope with large systems is a particular strength. Such tools can lead to greater efficiency of the EQA processes if the IT is used as necessary to maintain the records, conduct surveys, manage the databases, etc. One intern reported that, having observed another agency's storage system, his own agency is increasingly keeping documents electronically to avoid accumulating piles of paper. Not only does putting more material on-line reduce the storage requirements, it means the material can be made more readily available across the agency. The resulting ready availability of all the necessary information has also made the QA section of the agency more efficient and able to cover more work.

Several interns mentioned that their host had a very good record-keeping structure and filing system, which they are trying to emulate.

Much admired by interns was the use of databases. Different agencies use databases to record assessors and the range of information about them; to record the institutions and their characteristics; and to record institutions and the reviews they have undergone and the stage of each review.

Depending on the size of the agency, the IT system might need to be strictly partitioned, or might be relatively open to all staff of the EQA. Whichever the case, it is valuable to have a 'shared drive' or equivalent, accessible to all relevant staff. This is a risk management step that facilitates the backup processes when a staff member is suddenly and seriously ill or otherwise unavailable.

The workload pattern of some EQAs does not lend itself to advance scheduling of the review activities, but participants agreed that this should be done where possible. It is found that this gives a better response by the institution in preparation for the visit, including provision of the necessary documents and records. Where possible, the schedule can also record the planned dates of the pre-accreditation, accreditation, and post-accreditation activities.

Some agencies allocate different jobs to different staff / assessors, and different roles vis-à-vis the institutions, and the schedule can also be used as a mechanism for recording this.

Interns commented positively about when an agency has a good library. At least one agency makes it accessible to the HEIs.

The sharing of guidelines and QA processes is helpful. Learning is often in terms of small details of operation, rather than one agency adopting the practices of another holus bolus. Nonetheless, one agency reported that it changed its organisation structure as the result of a report back by an intern.

2. Aspects of Quality Review

Manuals are needed, for both institutions and assessors.

The importance of assessor / reviewer training was stressed. Interns shared their experiences of different systems. NAAC (India) and AUQA (Australia) provide a great deal of training for assessors, especially focused on interview techniques. The aim of this is that the reviews be conducted in a positive and congenial spirit with the personnel from the institution, and assessors can get useful responses from staff and students. Assessors are also trained in document analysis. Comment was made on sharing review work among a team of reviewers / assessors, with each presenting to the whole group the results of their own reading and analysis. Comment was made on the form of the assessor training, and

whether it should be comprehensive, covering all topics that a reviewer is likely to encounter, or more focused.

NAAC's assessors are from within India, and this makes the training feasible. Timor Leste is too small a system to use domestic assessors. However, NAAAA (Timor Leste) uses overseas assessors who are experienced reviewers (and re-uses reviewers so they become familiar with Timor Leste itself).

Some agencies provide a template for the submissions from the institutions. One agency is, as a result of the internship, moving to on-line submission of SARs / submissions.

Positive comment was made on AUQA's use of statistics to support the review process, identifying issues to be investigated, and also showing where apparent differences are not significant enough to investigate. Participants noted the value of comparing / benchmarking with previous year's institution data.

Participants noted the value of structuring questions in advance for most of the visit interview sessions, together with a systematic approach to recording the answers. All of these processes should be set out in a Manual for assessors.

The role of the EQA staff member(s) in the review panel was discussed, and views varied on whether this person should or should not be a full member of the review panel, or only the contact, support and co-ordinator. Particularly in program review, institutions might not regard as a peer an EQA staff member without background in that discipline. However, an EQA staff member might be as well able as any other assessor to review at institution level (and indeed, EQA staff are often themselves honorary reviewers for other EQAs).

Another point of learning has been to recognise the major role of the chair of the review panel. Some agencies have special training for chairs. Others use as chairs only people who are experienced reviewers and have shown themselves to be good at the task.

As part of agencies' own QA, it is good practice to evaluate the review process and the assessors themselves. This may be done by surveying the various participants, including the assessors and the interviewees. Following the internship, HEC (Pakistan) introduced SurveyMonkey (open source software for the creation and analysis of surveys) to survey institutions and panels after the reviews.

NAAC publishes the review reports. HEC (Pakistan) does not yet publish reports but, learning from the internship, expects to begin doing so when all institutions have been reviewed. In Bangladesh, institutions have to publish much basic information (eg number of lectures, staff, facilities, etc.) on their websites.

Some interns reported consideration of requiring institutions to provide an annual progress review report.

3. Institution Relations

Most EQAs have relations with their institutions in addition to the review / accreditation activities. These include workshops, publications, consultancy, etc. Agencies can find it difficult to combine and balance the roles of inspector and facilitator. Agencies need to devote time if they wish to achieve the latter, 'soft', relationship.

One relationship that seems to be becoming increasingly important is that with the internal quality system of the institution. In HE systems at an early stage of QA development, where HEIs largely do not have systematic internal QA practices, several agencies have placed great emphasis on helping (or requiring) the institutions to establish 'internal quality cells' or 'quality enhancement cells' to build institutional understanding of and capacity for QA. These are also termed QA units in some system, or institutional effectiveness units.) Effective IQ cells can foster a spirit of self-assessment, and assist in its implementation. This simultaneously builds institutional capacity in both IQA and in facing EQA. In many countries, institutions need assistance in this. EQAs have written guidelines and run workshops. In at least one case, the EQA is able to fund the creation of IQ cells.

Some EQAs look to the IQ cell, and many EQAs look more generally to the IQA system, as the point of liaison with the institution.

Pakistan provided resources to institutions to assist the creation of and maintain the support for an IQ cell. It is seen to be necessary to bring the IQA cells to a level of independence after a certain time, and not permit them to continue to rely on the EQA. (This desire for continued reliance might be less to do with immaturity of the IQ cell and more to the desire of the institution not to lose these extra external funds.)

An institution colleague present reported that the ranking carried out by the EQA has created a healthy sense of competition between universities with IQ cells.

The group noted the different categories of institutions in different countries. One division is along the public / private line. It is notable that in some countries one group is more heavily regulated while in other countries the government feels better able to regulate the other group. (Eg private universities are regulated in Bangladesh, but the public ones have more freedom, while in Timor Leste the opposite is the case.)

In other cases, the main dividing line is in terms of institutional maturity, with the less mature institutions perhaps subject to finer-grained external oversight, eg program review. One EQA reported introducing this distinction after observing it in the internship. In these situations, the EQA may take an active role in assisting the weaker institutions to develop, perhaps to the more independent status.

Other EQA activities include:
➢ Encourage institutions to see the value of accreditation, through stressing it benefits, both internal and external (this is particularly necessary when accreditation is voluntary, but even when it is compulsory, a positive attitude on the part of the HEIs will likely produce better results)
➢ Convene regular meetings of institution officers (eg CEOs, quality managers, etc.)
➢ Specify HE minimum admission criteria
➢ Set standards for compliance
➢ Provide curriculum guidelines
➢ Promote codes of practice
➢ Monitor advertisements for compliance with EQA requirements
➢ Provide consultancies for institutions (eg workshops on carrying out self-reviews and on writing self-assessment reports). (There was discussion on whether, and if so under what circumstances, such consultancy could be provided to an individual institution.)
➢ Financial relation with institutions, eg who pays for the accreditation / audit, possible grants to institutions, impact of quality reviews on base funding, etc.

4. Other topics

Interns also noted the following features in various agencies:

> ➢ Database of good practices in quality assurance.

> ➢ Explicit activities for enhancing the social interaction and mutual support between staff of the agency.

> ➢ Active attention to relationships between the EQA and other organisations.

> ➢ Relations between professional and general accreditors.

> ➢ Use of qualifications frameworks.

In some countries, the (or an) EQA has total responsibility across the HE sector for planning, funding, monitoring, QA, etc. (eg Pakistan HEC). In other countries, responsibility is split (eg in Cambodia, ACC carries out a compliance check to diagnose the problem, while the MoE then prescribes the medicine. In Australia, AUQA carried out quality audits, while – for most institutions other than the universities – the federal government held the institution responsible for acting on AUQA recommendations.). Relations will clearly vary across such different situations.

Often there is a notional accountability / improvement split of responsibility, but this does not always reflect reality. Eg AUQA was tagged as 'improvement' and ACC as 'compliance', while the Australian government is tagged as 'enforcement' (ie compliance) and Cambodian MoE as 'QI'.

In Malaysia, MQA is supported by the public service department since for public sector employment graduates must come from accredited organisation.

5. Using the Internships

Interns return home excited by what they have seen, but they are but one person in their whole home agency. Some interns are quite senior in the agency, and so have influence in having some of their new ideas implemented, but the nature and purpose of the internships means that the intern is more often a junior member of the home agency staff who does not have a great deal of influence. The group therefore discussed how to get the intern's new ideas known, understood and, if possible, used back home;

Reports

Interns should write at least one and probably two or three reports on the internship. One is needed for APQN or other facilitating / funding agency. This is essential in return for the support. Then the host agency should receive a report that provides some evidence that its

efforts have been of value. Also, the intern might have some suggestions for the host agency. Thirdly, the home agency needs a report that provides evidence that the intern's time away has been valuable to the intern and her/his agency. It is likely that these three reports can be the same, or differ only by a few sentences. (If the intern wishes to raise serious concerns about the home agency's operations on the basis of what s/he has seen, it may even be that there needs to be two reports to the home agency, one that could be read by all staff of the agency and one for the senior management.)

Seminar

Following the report to the home agency, the intern should present a seminar / workshop to colleagues on the internship learning experience. This could be based on the (public) report to the agency. Interns unanimously agreed that this step is essential. Otherwise the intern is left to give their message repeatedly to individual in the home agency, and this message can easily be dismissed or forgotten. The report and seminar might include specific detailed recommendations for action – and some of the intern's feedback might be along the lines of 'unlearning', not just learning.

Following a wide participation seminar, the intern's thoughts have become part of the home agency's corporate knowledge, and it is easier for the intern (and others) to refer to them whenever appropriate. It might also form the basis for further active discussion of the most attractive ideas.

It might be possible and desirable to include participants from outside the home agency in the seminar.

Follow-Up Report

At the end of each internship, all interns reported an increase in their knowledge and a triggering of new ideas. While this is a good outcome, internships are also intended to have a broader and longer-lasting impact on the intern and on her/his home agency. Such an impact is likely to be possible and/or become visible only after a period of time. Indeed, recognition of this reality was the main reason for holding the workshop. If possible, therefore, interns should be asked to provide a second report about two years after the internship. This report should refer to the earlier report written at the end of the internship, and say which of the intended improvements have been achieved, and which have not, with a brief comment on reasons. The requirement to produce such a report can act as a reminder and incentive to build on the intern's experiences to the extent possible.

Systematically obtaining and considering such follow-up reports might be difficult, given its implication for record-keeping and communication by the sponsoring body (eg APQN), but APQN could note the idea for implementation if possible.

Another, less systematic and comprehensive, follow-up mechanism would be to have a meeting at each APQN conference of whichever interns happen to be present. This could be just an hour or so, not a whole day workshop.

6. Improving the Internships

Finally, the group discussed what might be done differently in future in relation to the internships.

Guidance
APQN should prepare a short 'internship booklet' giving guidance for interns and for the home and host agencies.

Length
Interns were unanimous that the internship should last a full 10 working days. 10 days absence from home, with travel time and a weekend included in that period, leaves a very short period of actual internship.

Scope
Interns suggested that the best use of the two working weeks might be obtained through the following scope:
Week 1 – study the host's EQA system
Week 2, part 1 – observe a review visit
Week 2, part 2 – visit and talk to the IQA unit / IQ cell in one or two institutions.

Number
Interns who had participated in an internship in company with another home colleague found great value in discussing the experience, and its possible meaning and applicability back home, while having the experience. It was suggested that if APQN or other body fund an intern, the home EQA should try to fund a second to accompany her / him.

Matching

Participants noted that round the table was one agency with only three staff and another with 500 (though the latter is also a planning and funding agency). Maybe there is a need to match size, complexity and scope of the home and host agencies? Interns might also wish to check the host EQA's roles vis-à-vis other organisations, as mentioned above. Having said that, such matching should not be adhered to rigidly as often learning comes from seeing a totally different context. Also, in general, a large agency is better able to host and a small agency more in need of learning from outside.

Self-Preparation

Interns should set provisional objectives in advance of the internship. These might be personal objectives of institutional ones (ie for their agency). During the internship, these objectives can be used as a guide and a goal, but interns should also be open to learning that they could not foresee. They might also find that the pre-set objectives are unrealistic in the light of the nature of the host agency and its practices.

Host Agency Reflections

The reflections of the host agency should also be sought and kept by APQN / the sponsoring body, along with the intern's report. This could lead to two-way learning.

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