

Mutual Recognition

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1 INQAAHE and the development of Quality Assurance

When the International Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in HE (INQAAHE) was founded in 1991, its purpose was to provide support to and facilitate information-sharing between quality agencies, to help new agencies develop and to help existing agencies to do their job better. Over the years, it has taken many actions in pursuit of these objectives. These include discussions of mutual recognition, performance of quality assurance agencies, advising members on the status of institutions and agencies, training QA agency staff, and sharing information and ideas through the Journal and the Bulletin. The topic of this presentation is mutual recognition (MR) and two mechanisms that can support its implementation.

Terminology

Accreditation An evaluation of whether an institution qualifies for a certain status (or the actual conferring of that status). In principles, the result of an accreditation is a yes/no or pass/fail decision, but gradations may be possible.

Certification of an EQA means an affirmation, by a qualified third party, that the agency meets some agreed criteria. Such criteria may include that the agency's aims are appropriate and adequate, and its procedures are effective in achieving those aims.

EQA or EQAA External Quality Assurance Agency (ie external to the institutions it reviews)
QA Quality assurance. (The same abbreviation is sometimes used for 'quality assessment'.)

Recognition of an EQA means an acceptance by another body or agency that the agency's decisions and judgements are valid. Such recognition may mean that the other body or agency trusts the first agency's decisions for some purposes of its own.

2 Mutual Recognition (MR)

INQAAHE has studied aspects of the recognition by external quality assurance agencies (EQAs or EQAAs) of each other's work and judgements, such as: rationale, mechanisms, benefits, problems. This is often called mutual recognition, and in 2000 INQAAHE created and supported a working group on this topic (Woodhouse, 2001). The following is the definition that was used (Woodhouse, 2004):

Mutual recognition by two or more external quality agencies is an affirmation by each that it accepts the decisions and judgements of the other (either entirely or for some defined purposes). Such recognition may be based on the agencies having comparable aims and procedures, so it is likely that they would reach the same conclusion in reviewing and passing a judgement on an institution, program or qualification (cf. The Washington Accord between engineering associations).

MR stands on two bases, namely

1. the quality of activity of the EQAs and
2. the scope of activity of the EQAs.

INQAAHE's Guidelines of Good Practice (GGP), and other possible equivalent codes of practice, are linked to the first of these in that an agency may be more likely to recognise the decisions of another agency that has been independently judged to be of good quality, eg by complying with the GGP (Section 6).

A commonly used crude categorisation of the scope of activity is whether the agency operates at institution or program level. Some people would claim that MR is only possible within either of these categories. A more detailed and specific approach looks at the indicators used by any agency, as these may afford the possibility of comparison and hence recognition without being hindered by the institution / program divide. Some indicators are described in Section 7 and their use in Section 7+1.

3 Benefits of Mutual Recognition of EQAs

The aim of mutual recognition of EQAs is not primarily to benefit the agencies themselves, but to achieve beneficial results for institutions and their students and graduates in terms of mobility, credit transfer, acceptance of qualifications etc.

Possible benefits of mutual recognition include:

- understanding and knowledge of and by each agency
- collaboration between agencies
- authorisation of agencies to operate across country boundaries
- enrichment of agencies' activities
- appreciation of the quality parameters underpinning institutions and programs
- basis for judgements on the quality of institutions and programs in other jurisdictions, by employers and prospective students
- understanding of curricula, standards and criteria across country boundaries

Benefit to students.

MR can provide a basis for institutions to grant academic transfer and credit for prior studies at institutions in different jurisdictions. When two institutions are subject to the same quality agency, there is a presumption (albeit no guarantee) that a student may transfer between them with credit for prior studies. MR by two agencies of each other's

decisions would extend this presumption across approved institutions of both agencies. Thus, MR could well contribute to portability of learning. It might establish a global threshold that can be understood by employers, students and others.

Benefit to institutions.

If an institution is approved by agency X, and seeks approval by agency Y, and there is a MR agreement between the two agencies, then agency Y should, if possible, grant approval. At most, it should only check factors not checked by agency X. Depending on the nature of the 'shortfall', 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. This circumstance most often occurs when an institution, accredited in one country by that country's EQA, wants to offer course in another country. If the two agencies have a MR agreement, the institutions may not need to go through a further full accreditation process. Thus, MR can assist institutions to operate across national and regional boundaries.

Benefit to graduates.

Inasmuch as approval of an institution by an EQA provides some assurance about the characteristics of the institution's graduates, within the agency's region or country, recognition of that agency by another extends the scope of that assurance to the second agency's region. MR is highly beneficial to graduates, who may find this a major aid to practicing in other countries. This affirmation of graduate quality is also a benefit to employers.

It is obviously possible for EQA X to recognise the decision and judgements of EQA Y, without the converse recognition occurring – ie, recognition need not be mutual. In this case, the benefits flow in one direction but not the other.

4 MR within Countries

Most of the discussion of MR relates to crossing national boundaries, but some countries have multiple EQAs with geographically different constituencies, then the MR considerations apply within the country. In the USA, for example, some EQAs have a geographically restricted scope within the country, but the decisions of any agency are accepted in the other US regions as well. This MR is primarily of benefit to the students and graduates, who have a good change of recognition of their partial or completed qualifications.

The situation in Australia shows not only that MR is advantageous to institutions, but that it can be built on an independent Code of Practice to which the agencies are known to adhere. Each Australian state has an accrediting agency for HE institutions that are not universities. Concerns arose that the eight agencies were applying different standards, which meant that institutions could go 'agency shopping'. Also, the agencies did not recognise each others' work, so if an institution were established in one state and wanted to set up in another it would have to go through another accreditation process from scratch. In 2000, the state and federal governments agreed a set of Protocols for state

agencies, and it is one of the tasks of the Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA) to audit all the agencies against these Protocols. The hope is that as all agencies are confirmed as meeting the protocols, they will mutually recognise each other's actions and decisions. This would result in more security and less work for the institutions.

The Protocols were revised in 2007 and the specifications of the different types of institution are now much more detailed. Even so, when an accredited institution wants to set up in another state, the agency in the second state tends to check too much.

This example falls within one country, but increasingly HE institutions are forming international networks, which therefore cut across the jurisdictions of several agencies. The academic operations of these networks may be much assisted by mutual recognition between the respective agencies. (Universitas21 has set up its own quality agency which addresses this problem.)

5 Considerations Relating to MR

Agencies exhibit a great deal of difference in purpose and scope. For example, some agencies review at the level of institutions, some at the level of programs of study, and some at the level of qualifications (degrees, etc.). Some agencies bear the burden of basic sifting (e.g. separating the legitimate from the fraudulent) while others deal with institutions where that sifting has already occurred; the latter can often focus much more on improving the good than weeding out the bad. There is also a significant difference between agencies whose work is or is not directly tied to financing; the former may be more able than the latter to shape an evaluative agenda that drills down to programs.

MR must take account of these differences, but they are not insuperable. Sceptics often say that even if MR happens, there would have to be one set of agreements between agencies that review at institution level, and a separate set for program review agencies. However, this is not necessarily so. Suppose agency X checks at institution level, while agency Y checks at program level. Y might nonetheless be willing to recognise the quality of programs in the institutions under X, because it is satisfied that X's checks are sufficiently comprehensive that they permit firm statements about program quality in its institutions. Conversely, agency Y may use its work on program review to build a more holistic picture of each of its institutions. Agency X may then be happy to accept Y's views, not only on Y's programs but also on Y's institutions.

What this hypothetical situation illustrates is that MR would not be automatic. Any agency contemplating recognising another would take into account a range of information, which would almost certainly include direct discussion and possibly investigation, and would certainly include the other agency's adherence to any Code of Practice, and status in relation to an international certification process.

Also, two agencies may have different requirements, often based on characteristics or priorities of their respective societies. Therefore, while agencies A and B agree that each

is equally competent and rigorous, A may have requirements that B does not check, so a 'B accreditation' cannot automatically be accepted by A as a valid accreditation within A's jurisdiction. What should be possible, however, is that A checks only those factors that for it are gaps in B's work (just as the Australian state EQAs for non-universities do a 'gap check').

6 Guidelines of Good Practice (GPP)

Over the 1990s, INQAAHE grew with the incidence and evolution of quality assurance and now is the professional association in the QA field. In 2002, INQAAHE formally recognised the emergence of a QA profession, and INQAAHE's role as the professional association for EQAs. Consequent on this, it began to set down a professional Code of Practice or set of Guidelines of Good Practice for EQAs and their staff. The GPP were formally adopted in 2003 and thoroughly revised in 2007. Agencies are encouraged to use the GPP for self measurement. Some agencies also have been independently reviewed against the GPP. (Member agencies of INQAAHE that have been independently found to be in alignment with the GPP can be added to a list of such 'compliant' agencies on the INQAAHE website.)

GPP Headings

SECTION I. THE EQAA: ACCOUNTABILITY, TRANSPARENCY, AND RESOURCES

1. The Governance of the EQAA
2. Resources
3. Quality Assurance of the EQAA
4. Reporting Public Information

SECTION II. INSTITUTIONS OF HIGHER EDUCATION AND THE EQAA: RELATIONSHIP, STANDARDS, AND INTERNAL REVIEWS

5. The Relationship Between the EQAA and Higher Education Institutions
6. The EQAA's Requirements for Institutional/Program Performance
7. The EQAA's Requirements Institutional Self-Evaluation and Reporting to the EQAA

SECTION III. EQAA REVIEW OF INSTITUTIONS: EVALUATION, DECISION, AND APPEALS

8. The EQAA's Evaluation of the Institution and/or Program
9. Decisions
10. Appeals

SECTION IV. EXTERNAL ACTIVITIES: COLLABORATION WITH OTHER AGENCIES AND TRANSNATIONAL/CROSS-BORDER EDUCATION

11. Collaboration
12. Transnational/Cross-Border Higher Education

(<http://www/inqaah.org>)

7 Indicators of Quality in Higher Education

In 2002, the National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC) of India convened a meeting in Bangalore of representatives of several EQAs and other relevant bodies in the Asia-Pacific region. The purpose of the meeting was to identify common 'indicators of quality in higher education' to enhance comparability between qualifications obtained in different countries. These indicators have now been further developed by a Project Group of the Asia-Pacific Quality Network led by Dr Antony Stella (Stella, 2007). (Dr Stella, a prime mover of the NAAC project, is now with the Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA).)

The goals of any standards must relate both to the EQA itself (which must exhibit integrity and accountability) and its institutions (to help them to change and improve).

Indicators to assess the quality of HEIs

1. Integrity and mission

- Honesty and transparency in policies and procedures
- Interaction with the community and stakeholders
- Clarity in mission
- Understanding of aims and objectives by all constituents of the institution
- Equity and reservation for the disadvantaged groups

2. Governance and management

- Autonomy of governance
- Clarity in organisational structure
- Delegation of powers
- Institutional effectiveness
- Comprehensive Strategic plan
- Effective Documentation
- Modernisation of administration

3. Human resources

- Transparent recruitment procedures
- Adequacy, qualification and competence of staff
- Awards, honours, membership, prizes, medals of learned societies of staff
- Effective retention strategies
- Support for staff development
- Recognition and reward
- Appropriate staff workloads
- Welfare schemes
- Transparent grievance redress

4. Learning resources and infrastructure

- Ownership of land and buildings
- Availability, access and sustainability of laboratories, lecture halls, library and information technology facilities

- Resources spent on the library and computing facilities matching demands
- Adequate health services, sports and physical education and halls of residence
- Effective campus maintenance
- Optimum utilisation
- Community use of institutional facilities
- Commercial use of institutional facilities

5. Financial management

Transparency, and integrity in the following:

- Funding sources
- Ownership of resources
- Sustainability of funding
- Resource mobilisation
- Resource allocation
- Accountability
- Liquidity
- Budget for academic and developmental plans
- Unit cost of education
- Strategic asset management
- Matching of receipts and expenditure

6. Student profile and support services

- Transparent admission procedures
- Student profile – gender, age, social strata, geographical distribution, foreign students, enrolment by levels of study, age ratio, staff/student ratio, out-of-state enrolment, distribution of entry grade
- Drop out and success rate
- Progression to employment and further studies
- Student achievement
- Student satisfaction
- Provision for personal and academic counseling
- Participation of staff in advising students
- Availability of merit-based scholarships
- Other scholarships and fellowships
- Provision for informal and formal mechanisms for student feedback
- Student representation in academic decision-making
- Provision for student complaints and academic appeals
- Support to student mobility
- Recreational activities for students
- Placement rate of graduates
- Employer satisfaction with graduates
- Graduate earning
- Alumni association and alumni profile

7. Curricular aspects

- Conformity to the goals and objectives

- Relevance to societal needs
- Integration of local context
- Initiation, review and redesign of programs
- Range of program options
- Feedback mechanism on program quality
- Interaction with employers and academic peers
- Demand for various course combinations

8. Teaching-learning and evaluation

- Teaching innovations
- Use of new media and methods
- Range of co-curricular activities
- Skill and competence development
- Projects and other avenues of learning
- Linkage with institutions, industries and commerce for teaching
- Linkage for field training
- Monitoring student progress
- Continuous internal assessment
- Use of external examiners
- Timeliness of examination schedule, holding of examinations, evaluation, declaration of results
- Remedial and enrichment programs

9. Research, consultancy and extension

- Institutional support for research
- Staff active in research
- Research students by field of study
- Ph.D. awarded per academic staff
- Research project per academic staff
- Research projects sponsored by industry
- Public sector research funding
- Ratios of research expenditure and income
- Research assistantships and fellowships
- Staff supported by external research grants
- Existing research equipment
- Usefulness of research results for education
- Social merits of research
- Interdisciplinary research
- Student involvement in faculty research
- Research quality - Citation of publications, Impact factors, Patents and Licenses
- Benefits of consultancy to industry and the public
- Community-oriented activities

10. Quality assurance

- Internal quality assurance
- Institutional research on quality management

- Coordination between the academic and administrative functions
- Outcomes of external quality assessments
- Academic ambience
- Educational reforms

8 Possible Methods of Establishing MR

As mentioned in Section 2, MR is based on both the scope and the quality of the activity of the EQAs.

8.1 Scope

The work on MR might start with a comparison of the criteria for the award of the main higher education qualifications, on the basis of the outcomes associated with each level of qualification. By comparing these outcomes it might be possible to determine whether or not qualification P offered in country A is broadly comparable with qualification Q offered in country B (although ensuring this occurs even within one country is not easy!). The indicators of quality can be used as a 'translation mechanism or framework' as each party maps its system against the same set of indicators. If the intended outcomes are broadly comparable, the next question is whether the processes of the QA agencies in each country are sufficient to ensure that, in general, the outcomes intended are actually achieved.

Use of the indicators may facilitate MR between agencies that check at institution level and those that check at program level, as both types should be able to speak authoritatively about the quality of outcomes. Furthermore, this first task of comparing and (mutually) recognising qualifications may already have been done by other bodies (such as vice-chancellors' committees, rectors' conferences, government agencies, professional associations), giving the EQA a head start on the next level (namely quality of EQA).

The major example of successful transnational MR is the Washington Accord. This works because all the agencies are in the same professional area (engineering) and hence their quality indicators are highly similar across nations.

8.2 Quality

Independent certification or recognition, or even successful self-assessment, of an EQA against a widely agreed Code of Practice such as INQAAHE's GGP might mean that other agencies are willing to accept its judgements and decisions. If two agencies are so certified, there is a firm basis for MR, as the two agencies can have confidence that their respective processes are adequate to assure the standards of qualifications in the country concerned, ie whether the QA processes are fit for purpose.

In the absence of this, an alternative approach such as the following, based on The Washington Accord concept (see reference), could be used bilaterally.

To determine whether to recognise the activities of agency Y, agency X would

- scrutinise Y's documents describing the scope and nature of Y's process;
- discuss with officers of Y how these processes are carried out; and
- observe at least one actual review event;

and vice versa. The intent would be for each agency to be confident that the criteria, policies and procedures used by the two agencies in accrediting/approving institutions or programs are comparable.

To maintain the currency of the recognition, the agencies may wish to continue mutual monitoring and information exchange by whatever means are considered most appropriate.

These may include:

- regular communication and sharing of manuals and publications, and other information about accreditation criteria, systems and procedures,
- observing each other's review events, and
- observing meetings of each other's boards and/or commissions responsible for the accreditation process, and meetings of the governing bodies of the agencies.

This approach directly compares QA processes themselves.

Once it is ascertained that qualifications P and Q are broadly comparable, and that the QA processes in countries A and B are sufficient for their purpose, individual institutions in the two countries could then have reasonable confidence in allowing credit in respect of each others qualifications, or units of them (provided always that there was a reasonable match in terms of intended learning outcomes).

9 Action

Recognition of agencies as legitimate EQAs is not the same thing as recognising institutions and programs. However, institutions or programs accredited by an EQA that itself has satisfied an independent check against international criteria are known to have stood the test of a credible external review.

There are an increasing number of projects relating to MR in several parts of the world. At this stage, only little common experience can be inferred. They involve discussions between groups with similar background. They lie within a situation where the political pressures are consonant with MR. They presuppose and betoken mutual trust between the agencies, and enhance confidence in the evaluation procedures. Successful MR is expected to provide real advantages to graduates. They usually relate specifically to qualifications.

None of this is easy. However, it is potentially very useful to the institutions and other bodies to which we are answerable, and that therefore it is irresponsible of quality agencies not to try to achieve these benefits.

With increasing mobility of students, institutions, graduates and employers across national boundaries, and with most quality agencies being either nationally or sub-nationally based,

consideration of the possibilities, difficulties, advantages and drawbacks of Mutual Recognition of the activities of quality agencies is no less important for us in the Asia-Pacific region than it is for Europe. This note provides some context for the relevant ideas, including possible approaches and associated considerations.

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10 References

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