

INTERNATIONAL NETWORK FOR QUALITY ASSURANCE AGENCIES IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Networks of Quality Agencies: Working Together

Introduction

1. Since its founding in 1991, the International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE) has grown rapidly, as quality assurance (QA) agencies seek the benefits of mutual learning and support. This world-wide interaction is particularly valuable as QA agencies recognise that many issues facing them, especially the more fundamental ones, are global in nature. INQAAHE is widely representative, openly democratic, evidently cost-efficient and definitively inclusive, and provides a forum and advocacy for the global QA community.
2. A more recent trend, over the past five years or so, is the gathering of QA agencies to form other networks, on the basis of geographical regions or other agency characteristics (such as agencies in small states, or agencies for professional accreditation). INQAAHE itself has fostered this trend. Many networks have emerged in connection with INQAAHE conferences, and some networks have declared themselves to be 'in association with' INQAAHE.
3. From its inception, INQAAHE has been proactive in reaching out to incipient quality agencies to assist their growth and solicit their involvement in the wider global community. Now, in addition to continuing its support of individual agencies, INQAAHE works with regional networks as they arise and also acts to promote and help create them.

The dynamics behind communities of interest

4. Why have Regional Networks come about? Firstly, geo-politics, which dictate that for matters to do with education systems, the QA agencies have to follow the lead of the governments either at national and/or the regional level, particularly so if funding is involved. Examples include the Bologna process in Europe and the Brisbane Communique in Asia, while in South America, there is MERCOSUR (economic) and RIACES (QA). Initiatives towards common guidelines and standards, or a formal register of QA agencies, reflect a commitment towards integration, which is part of a larger agenda. There are also in some cases regional policies supporting the flow of graduates in the labour market.
5. Next, geographical proximity: the diversity of culture, systems, languages, and different stages of development of quality assurance procedures can make a regional approach a preferred mode for QA. For example, when an agency needs help, it may go to a nearby source which shares common characteristics or culture. For attendance at workshops and seminars, agencies may find one that is in another part of the world too far and too expensive, or the discussion topics too remote for their own needs and interests. In general, it is natural that a 'neighbourhood' approach may be seen by agencies as friendly, relevant and more affordable.
6. Thirdly, there are groupings of quality agencies from distant countries that come together around a common interest. An example is the Small Island Developing States, which includes Barbados, Mauritius and Fiji. Professional accrediting agencies often gather as a

group, though there are often enough of them in one country that the group is national rather than international.

7. Looking at existing networks (such as AfriQAN, ANQAHE, APQN, CAMES, CANQATE, CEEN, EAQAN, ENQA, RIACES) one can detect common interests, but also local priorities.

The global role of INQAAHE

8. Many QA issues are global. Governments and international organisations such as the World Bank, UNESCO and OECD expect that the QA agencies can speak with a common voice in relation to issues which are considered to be of interest to the QA community, such as guidelines for cross-border provision, funding for capacity building in QA and dealing with disreputable higher education providers and quality assurance agencies. INQAAHE is an advocate for quality assurance with no special sectoral interest except that of QA itself.
9. Despite regional diversity, there are common elements in QA which demand a global approach. For example, in transnational education, interests transcend even regional boundaries. A code of practice for transnational education (eg the UNESCO/OECD Guidelines) must be global, since the major providers are in different regions and the receivers are scattered all over the world. The same goes for the identification of bogus QA agencies and 'qualification mills'. INQAAHE provides a forum for **all** agencies to talk and share.
10. Also, in professional subjects, certain issues, like good QA practices, are universal. While it is true that a regional approach might have a sharper local focus or a higher level of local participation, uncoordinated efforts can also mean duplication and waste of resources. Collaboration can assist with forward planning and reduce the need for rapid reaction.
11. Nonetheless, INQAAHE does not need to be responsible for all projects with a 'universal' element. Some could be done regionally under central coordination; or, having been done in one region, adapted for other regions. For example INQAAHE could identify, through its links with the other networks, agencies that might join forces on a project and encourage these efforts with support, and enhanced prospects of global participation.
12. It has always been one of INQAAHE's objectives to facilitate the sharing of information and experience of its members. This important objective is primarily achieved through conferences, fora, workshops, the journal and the bulletin, and the networking that occurs at events. Existing or imminent services include the Guidelines for Good Practice, the Good Practice for Quality Agencies database, the Clearinghouse and the query service.
13. In the future it could also be an important role for INQAAHE to perform a role of inter-regional facilitator, and to assist in sharing experiences and information between networks, eg in regard to topics such as strategies for securing external funding, organising network secretariats, recruitment of members and liaising with governments.
14. It is also part of INQAAHE's role to continue to reach out to agencies, especially any not covered by a more local network. Their representation has to be through INQAAHE and it is incumbent upon the INQAAHE to ensure that in any proposed mechanism for decision-making or sharing of resources, the voices of these members are heard and their interests protected.

15. In general, as more networks of agencies are established, agencies not yet belonging to one may feel the need to create one, even if the 'neighbourhood' or 'kinship' factors are not as strong. INQAAHE can help in this process.
16. INQAAHE has strength in its collegiality and inclusiveness. It has a light governance structure and does not seek to impose many rules. Developing and changing to accommodate new situations, such as the one discussed in the paper, requires intense effort from members of the Board, full involvement of member agencies and interaction between all the networks.

The questions before the QA community

17. It is clear from the above that there are roles for both a global comprehensive network and for networks that are focused on a region or on an aspect of special interest. Thus, the first question that arises is: "What 'belongs to' or can best be done by a global network, and what 'belongs to' or is best done by other networks?"
18. A second question is: "How can the various networks liaise and collaborate, to save duplication of effort?"
19. The question of how INQAAHE and regional networks should best work together to mutual advantage has been on INQAAHE's agenda for quite a long time. In 2003, for example, at the Dublin Conference, there was a dialogue amongst members. At that stage the more established networks were ENQA and CEEN, while APQN, CANQATE and RIACES were new. The discussion culminated in an agreement generally supporting a loose and evolving relationship between INQAAHE and the other networks. Discussion in the Workshop in 2004 in Oman recognised the need for some mechanism to further strengthen liaison and information sharing. Time slots were reserved for 'regional meetings' at the Wellington Conference (2005) and The Hague Forum (2006), but little progress occurred between the meetings. In 2007, the interaction was strengthened through the invitation by INQAAHE to all regional representatives to participate in a 'regional liaison meeting' at the Toronto Conference.
20. With more agencies coming together in communities of interest (regionally or otherwise), and with INQAAHE working with UNESCO and the other networks to make best use of a global grant from the World Bank for capacity-building in quality assurance, it is essential to establish ways of ensuring good communication and effective cooperation between all the networks of agencies. At the Toronto meeting, two Board Members of INQAAHE were given responsibility to increase and strengthen liaison with the regions. Reports from the regions were included in INQAAHE's 2007 Report, regions were invited to provide input to this paper, and regions are routinely asked to provide information on their activities for inclusion in INQAAHE's news bulletin.

What to do

21. INQAAHE wishes to strengthen its links with the other networks in order to be able to advocate for the interests of the totality of regional networks and their members. It also needs the operational and political input from the regions to help ensure that INQAAHE's agenda is aligned with the regional development and that of the members of the local

networks. On topics like strategic orientation, activities planning, budgeting and advocacy for the QA cause, the participation of the regional and other networks in the decision-making process is indispensable.

22. To achieve this, it is essential for INQAAHE, through its Board, to have good communication with the emerging networks, and for there to be participation by the networks in the decision-making of INQAAHE.
23. There is a range of options for implementing such communication and co-operation, and the views of other networks are invited. The INQAAHE Board considered, for example, whether INQAAHE should become a federation of networks, with the INQAAHE Board comprising regional representatives, perhaps with a designated seat for each network. This idea was rejected, as it would be disrupted by the creation of new networks, and the uneven distribution of networks both geographically and demographically; it presumes that all networks will wish to interact with INQAAHE in the same way; and it would leave INQAAHE in no position to advocate globally. After discussion, the INQAAHE Board set down the following principles and practices.

How to do it

24. 1. INQAAHE will continue to operate as a network of QA agencies. Necessarily this means that QA agencies should contemplate double membership, because membership of INQAAHE and another network will offer different benefits. This system needs explicit promotion by both INQAAHE and the other networks (eg networks can offer discount in membership subscriptions for double enrolment).
25. 2. A cardinal principle guiding the relationship between INQAAHE and other networks is that INQAAHE will seek to co-ordinate inter-regional co-operation, but not direct the work of the others. This means that local networks, while having their own membership, organisation and programs, and working to their own objectives, acknowledge that for matters of a global or universal nature, INQAAHE is better placed to take up the responsibility, as well as the leadership or co-ordination role.
26. 3. Some activities naturally fall at one level or the other, but others could equally well be carried out by INQAAHE or the local networks. For any particular activity, the choice may lean towards subsidiarity (ie carrying out tasks as locally as possible) or centrality (ie leaving INQAAHE to do what it does best, even if the task **could** be done at local level, such as setting up a database of consultants).
27. 4. INQAAHE has from its inception used the co-opted positions on the Board to ensure that all regions are represented on the Board. As far as possible, this mechanism will be used to achieve adequate representation of the other networks.
28. 5. The INQAAHE Board has formally designated two of its members as liaison officers for the region and other networks, and this practice will continue.
29. 6. At the Toronto conference, INQAAHE began a formal meeting with representatives of regional networks, and this will be continued as a consultative mechanism at all INQAAHE's major meetings (the annual Conferences and Fora), and also as and when necessary and possible.

30. 7. Recognising that different networks see their relationship with INQAAHE differently, INQAAHE will offer to sign a *memorandum of co-operation* with each network. These memoranda will set out the core characteristics of INQAAHE and the other network, contain some common statements of mutual support, and then set down the way in which that particular network wishes to relate to and work with INQAAHE.

Concluding Remarks

31. INQAAHE and the other networks co-exist with their intersecting roles and strengths. INQAAHE is eager to involve other networks in an open and continuing dialogue, to strengthen the bonds between all the groups. INQAAHE will continue to evolve and adapt to accommodate and assist in the emergence of new networks, as well as using its involvement in the global GIQAC grant from the World Bank for the best interests of QA world-wide.
32. The subject of educational quality is global, although the work of QA, in most part, is local. The QA community as a whole needs to see the symbiosis of both the global and the regional approaches as being both desirable and possible and work towards it as a common goal.

INQAAHE Board
October 2007