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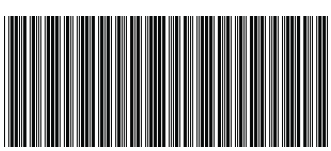

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THE DEVELOPMENT PROSPECTS OF THE ASIA-PACIFIC QUALITY REGISTER AND DATABASE OF EXTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE RESULTS (DAQAR)

-Prof. Galina Motova, Ph.D., D.Sc.

Director of the National Centre for Public Accreditation
Oksana Tanikova, Ph.D.
Deputy Head of the Accreditation Office of the National Centre for Public Accreditation

Abstract:
This paper explores the importance of external reviews, their benefits, and key challenges related to the recognition of QA agencies by international networks. The evaluation conducted by the Asia-Pacific Quality Register (APQR) could be one of these recognition tools. APQR was established in 2015 on the initiative of the Asia-Pacific Quality Network (APQN). The number of APQN members who have underwent this review, meanwhile, is relatively low. This paper explores the reasons why Asia-Pacific QA agencies do not feel the need to be evaluated by APQR. The launch and enhancement of the Database of External Quality Assurance Results (DAQAR) is aimed at promoting the transparency of quality assurance results (reports, decisions, the list of study programmes, etc.) might encourage QA agencies to get recognition from APQR and upload the accredited programmes in DAQAR. The National Centre for Public Accreditation (NCPA) shares its experience in preparing for and undergoing the APQR review. The authors also explore the development of the Asia-Pacific Quality Register and the launch of the Database of External Quality Assurance Results (DAQAR) as a tool of the Asia-Pacific Quality Network's evolvement towards the transparency of external quality assurance procedures carried out by the APQR-registered agencies.

1. Introduction

Quality assurance and recognition of HEIs and QA agencies worldwide is one of the crucial issues when discussing the quality of higher education. Having internationally recognised QA agencies is important in promoting the recognition and portability of study programmes that foster global education cooperation and promote global education excellence. While the national requirements for QAAs vary, agencies preparing for an external review face similar challenges across regions.

The National Centre for Public Accreditation (NCPA) has successfully underwent the APQR review twice and is eager to identify challenges, best practices and develop strategies to disseminate good practice in the Asia-Pacific region. NCPA plays a key role in developing and maintaining a comprehensive DAQAR database that contains the results of accreditation for study programmes and higher education institutions. This database is of utmost importance as it provides valuable information and insights into the quality and standards of education across various institutions. It serves as a reliable source of information for students, educators, policymakers, and other stakeholders to make informed educational decisions.

2. Global studies and overview

International experience. Who Accredits the Accreditors?

International experience and the recognition of accrediting organisations are of paramount importance. When it comes to accrediting bodies in higher education across different countries and regions, it is important to understand the diversity of the players on the market. There are various types of accrediting bodies, each with their own specific roles and responsibilities.

Accreditation of accreditors is a globally recognised mechanism with extensive experience in implementation. In general, the phenomenon of accreditation of accreditors can be observed at the national and regional levels. The examples of the regional level are the European Quality Assurance Register (EQAR) and the Asia-Pacific Quality Register (APQR). As for the national level, it can be presented by three countries: the USA (CHEA), Germany (GAC), and Australia (TEQSA).

The Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) is indeed a pioneering network of accrediting organisations. Established in 1996, CHEA serves as a national advocate for self-regulation throughaccreditation and provides guidance and support to accrediting organizations. It represents 95 institutional and programmatic U.S.-recognized accrediting organisations and includes the database with over 8,200 accredited colleges, universities, and higher education institutions with over 44,000 accredited programmes, making it the largest institutional membership organisation in the United States focused on accreditation. Its diverse membership base indicates the widespread trust and reliance placed on CHEA's expertise and guidance.

The German case is presented by the German Accreditation Council (GAC). The German Accreditation Council assumes its overall responsibility for the accreditation system by ensuring the consistency and coherence of its accreditation decisions, supporting the states in the further development of the German quality management system, promoting international cooperation in the field of accreditation and quality assurance, and thus contributing to the realisation of a common European Higher Education Area. There are 11 QA agencies that have been authorised by GAC to operate in Germany, with the database of over 16,000 accredited programmes.

database of over 16,000 accredited programmes.

The Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA) is Australia's independent national quality assurance and regulatory agency for higher education. It includes 198 higher education providers with self-accrediting authority grants and higher education quality assurance bodies (HEQABs). To ensure that higher education providers meet the required standards of quality, TEQSA also accredits and re-accredits external quality assurance agencies, including accrediting bodies, that assess and evaluate higher education providers.

At the international (regional) level, the practice of accrediting accreditors is implemented by the European Quality Assurance Association. Accreditation agencies that have undergone external review and confirmed their compliance with established standards are included in the European Quality Assurance Register that represents a database of higher education institutions and study programmes accredited by these agencies.
DEQAR was officially introduced at EQAR's 10th anniversary celebration in 2018. DEQAR not only collects the reports and decisions, but also provides information about the national QA frameworks of the European Higher Education Area countries, helping to understand the reports in their context. The quantity of the reports in DEQAR with institutions and countries covered by August 28, 2023 is indicated in the table below. They cover both EHEA and non-EHEA area.

	Reports	Institutions	Countries
EHEA	83222	3284	49
Non-EHEA	7011	1017	54

* https://www.eqar.eu/qa-results

APQN landscape
Higher education in the Asia–Pacific region is very dynamic. Asia Pacific is the largest region in terms of HE student population, with more than 47 million students at over 6,000 HEIs, thus being the major contributor to international student mobility. The Asia Pacific Quality Network (APQN) is the voice of the QA community from 53 countries/territories in the Asia Pacific region, with 274 members as of July 27, 2023. The detailed information on APQN membership and country of origin is presented in Figure 1.
The Asia-Pacific region as a whole remains diverse in terms of education and QA systems, so the launch of the Asia-Pacific Register serves as a reliable source of information on the quality of Asia-Pacific higher education and its quality assurance systems.

APQN, with its mission statement to enhance the quality of higher education in the Asia Pacific region through strengthening internal and external quality assurance in all kinds of organisations and extending the cooperation among them, plays a crucial and unique role in improving the QA mechanism, exchanging theory and practice experiences, promoting substantive cooperation, establishing a Consultant Bank, reviewing the Asia-Pacific Quality Register (APQR) and Asia-Pacific Quality Label (APQL) in this region (www.apqn.org/about APQN).

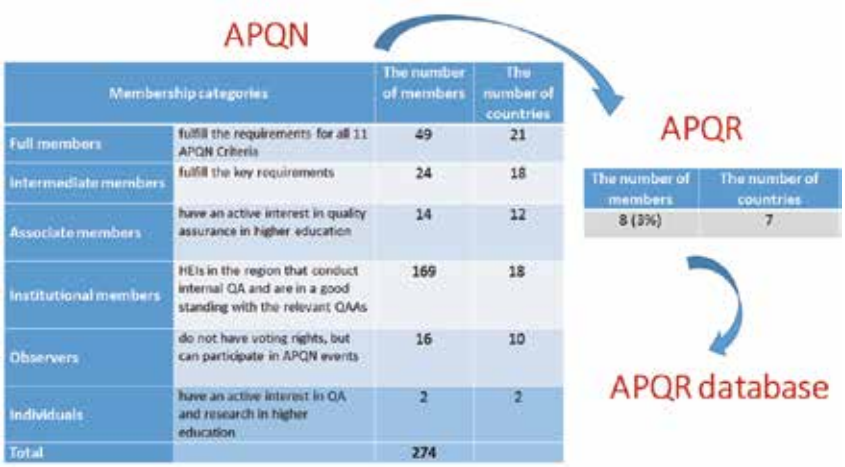

Figure 1. APQN and APQR statistics on membership and country origin

APQR milestones
The Asia-Pacific Quality Register (APQR) is a register of external quality assurance agencies (QAAs) that demonstrates certain thresholds of maturity compliance to the key APQN criteria that are harmonised with international requirements and Chiba principles. The Asia Pacific Quality Network has endorsed a proposal for the establishment of the Register as part of its Decennial Agenda in 2012. The first formal review was carried out in 2015, with the Fiji accreditation agency being the first registered member of APQR.

As of July 2023, APQR comprises 8 QA agencies from 7 countries: Indonesia, Mongolia, Russia, the Republic of Kazakhstan, Malaysia, the Kyrgyz Republic, and Samoa, and tends to expand further. Inclusion of a QA agency into APQR is based on the agency's compliance with the criteria for recognition under the APQR-Chiba Principles. APQR technology and criteria underwent changes and now comprise 11 criteria.

The table below discloses the content of APQR criteria and their overlap with international requirements (APQN Constitution and Chiba Principles) based on the research made by Zhang, J. and Patil, J. (2017), "Who guarantees the quality of the quality assurance agencies? The exploration of the establishment and growth of the Asia-Pacific Quality Register (APQR)", Higher Education Evaluation and Development, Vol. 11 No. 2, p. 62), European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ENQA-ESG, 2015), International Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in Tertiary Education (INQAAHE-ISG, 2022) and CHEA International Principles, including CHEA International Quality Group International Quality Principles (U.S.-CIQG, 2015).

APQR Criterion	Description	Intersection with other international standards
1. Organization	The QAA is a full member of APQN or is a QA body which is valid entity recognized by the appropriate authority in the relevant country/territory/region, and is accountable to stakeholders	Chiba Principle ESG 3.2 ISG 1.1 (Baseline Standards)
2.Operations	The quality assurance agency undertakes QA activities (at institutional and/or program level) on a cyclical basis	APQN Constitution No. 1 ESG 3.1
3.Mission and objectives	The mission statement and objectives of the agency are understood consistently by its stakeholders	APQN Constitution No. 2 ISG 1.1 (Baseline Standards)
4.Staff and reviewers	The profile of the agency staff and the profile of the reviewers the agency uses are consistent with the mission statement	APQN Constitution No. 3 and No. 4 ESG 2.4
5.Independence	The quality assurance agency is independent and has autonomous responsibility for its QA operations. The judgments and recommendations of the agency's reports cannot be changed by third parties	APQN Constitution No. 5 ESG 3.3
6.Resources	The agency has sufficient resources to run its operations in accordance with its mission statement and objectives	APQN Constitution No. 6 ESG 3.5, ISG 1.2 (Baseline Standards)
7.Process and criteria	The description of the processes and criteria applied by the agency are transparent and publicly available and normally include: self-evaluation, site visit, public report and follow-up measure. The published standards and criteria are applied consistently and rigorously	APQN Constitution No. 7 ISG 2, ESG 2.2 Quality Enhancement Continuum INQAAHE Principle (section 3) CIQG International Quality Principles
8.Appeals	An appeals mechanism is available for the institutions	Chiba Principle ESG 2.7, ISG 3.3 (Baseline Standards)
9.Quality assurance	The agency has effective quality assurance measures in place to monitor itself and is subject to occasional review	APQN Constitution No. 8 ESG 3.7, ISG 1.3 (Baseline Standards)
10.Monitoring and evaluation	The agency undertakes research on internal and external quality assurance and provides information and advice to the higher education institutions	Chiba Principle ISG 1.3, 2.4 (Baseline Standards)
11.Agency linkages	The agency cooperates and collaborates with other quality assurance agencies (QAAs) and key players across national borders	Chiba Principle, ISG 4.2 (Baseline Standards), ISG 6 (Baseline Standards)

The APQR review is very much similar to the EQAR review and includes an on-site visit to a QA agency with a review panel composed of up to five members. Among them are the APQN Board members, representatives of other QA networks and associations, and highly qualified experts. The agency prepares the self-evaluation report, which is carefully verified by the review panel. The key meetings with different stakeholders (QAA staff, QAA Board members responsible for the decision-making, representatives of the reviewers' pool, including international experts and representatives of HEIs evaluated by a QAA) are held, and they are often supported by video presentations, documents and facilities of the QAA.
The on-site visit primarily focuses on the verification of information that the review panel obtained from the self-evaluation report and the official website of the quality assurance agency. The review team members use different evaluation methods, such as interviews with the key stakeholders, study of the documents and feedback results, QA website analysis, etc. So the qualitative evaluation and face-to-face communication contribute to gathering the in-depth information that allows a deeper understanding of the QAA's current situation. A view from the outside helps to identify the difficulties, analyse them, define the areas for improvement and offer recommendations. A separate valuable contribution is the composition of the review panel, which includes experts from different spheres (executive staff of QAA, experts with experience in QA and international affairs) from different countries. Combining the expertise of experts from different countries with broad quality assurance experience and QA skills contributes to the development of the agency and enhances its credibility.

NCPA experience: challenges and opportunities
The National Centre for Public Accreditation (NCPA) has been officially registered in the Asia-Pacific Quality Register since March 23, 2018 and successfully reconfirmed its status in April 2023. The main motives of NCPA behind registering in APQR included fostering a high level of trust in the quality of higher education in the Asia-Pacific region, boosting reliability in Russian education, attracting foreign teachers and students to Russian higher education institutions, and promoting Russia's high-quality study programmes abroad.

NCPA is the only Russian accreditation agency that is registered in both the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR) and the Asia-Pacific Quality Register (APQR). In May 2023, the APQR Council reconfirmed NCPA's membership in APQR for five years from that date. The Council concluded that NCPA carries out its activities in compliance with the APQR-Chiba principles.

The virtual site visit followed the standard format and activities of an on-site review: preliminary analysis of the self-evaluation report and relevant documents, zoom-based interviews with stakeholders and NCPA staff, and preparation of an external review report with key findings and recommendations. Successful completion of an externally organised review is an important milestone for the agency, as now NCPA is eligible to upload its accredited programmes to the Database of Quality Assurance Results in the Asia-Pacific region (DAQAR).

DAQAR. Fostering Trust in a Globalised World.
The Database of External Quality Assurance Results of the Asia-Pacific Quality Register (DAQAR) is an open source of the results of accreditation in the Asia-Pacific region including the results from EQAR as well. DAQAR offers access to review reports and decisions on HEIs and study programmes externally reviewed by APQR-registered agencies.

As of July 12, 2023, the DAQAR database includes 202 higher education institutions (HEIs) and 3,635 review reports from 8 agencies:
Indonesian Accreditation Agency for Higher Education in Health, IAAHEH (Indonesia)
-Independent Agency for Accreditation and Rating, IAAR (Kazakhstan)
-Eurasian Centre for Accreditation and Quality Assurance in Higher Education and Health Care, ECAQA (Kazakhstan)
-National Centre for Public Accreditation, NCPA (Russia)
-Agency for Quality Assurance in Education (Kyrgyzstan)
-Mongolian National Council for Education Accreditation, MNCEA (Mongolia)
-Samoa Qualifications Authority, SQA (Samoa)
-Finance Accreditation Agency, FAA (Malaysia).

Only 3% of the Network's total members are registered in APQR, which raises the question of why Asia-Pacific QA agencies do not feel the need to register in APQR and communicate their results internationally.

We think there are several reasons for developmental inhibition:
-A crucial factor in the developmental inhibition of a centralised database like DAQAR is the lack of information and weak promotion. If stakeholders are not aware of the existence and benefits of the database, they may not use it effectively. Insufficient promotion efforts can result in limited participation and engagement from agencies and other stakeholders. Therefore, a breakthrough in promoting DAQAR globally is necessary to increase its attractiveness and encourage wider dissemination.

-The process of mutual qualification recognition is still in its developmental stage. This means that the recognition of qualifications between different countries or regions may not be fully established or streamlined. As a result, agencies may have weak motivation to engage in the database, as the recognition of their accreditations may not hold the same value or significance across borders. This inhibits the development and utilization of the database on a global scale.

-QA agencies may face technical difficulties in implementing and using the centralised database.

-Implementing and maintaining a centralised database like DAQAR requires additional workload for QA agencies. They need to allocate resources, both in terms of time and human resources, to input, update, and manage the data in the database. This extra workload can strain the capacity of agencies, especially if they already have limited resources. The burden of additional responsibilities can act as a deterrent for agencies to actively participate in the database, slowing down its development and utilisation.

Understanding the current difficulties faced by QA agencies, the following solutions can be implemented through the following actions:

-In order to make DAQAR more attractive and available to different stakeholders, active promotion efforts should be undertaken. This would involve raising awareness about the benefits and functional capacity of the database among higher education

institutions (HEIs), governmental bodies, students, QA agencies, QA experts, and researchers. Through targeted marketing campaigns, workshops, conferences, and collaborations with relevant organisations, the promotion of DAQAR can encourage wider adoption and use.

-Development of the Asia-Pacific Network of National Information Centres (APNNIC) on academic mobility and recognition. APNNIC provides free information on the recognition of qualifications to facilitate student mobility. According to APNNIC, 12 countries have already established such information centres, which is a sign that the issue of qualification recognition is on the agenda of the national authorities. The same goals are reflected in the Tokyo Convention, which aims to facilitate international mobility and the recognition of qualifications in higher education. By aligning the goals of DAQAR with those of APNNIC, the database can become a helpful tool for facilitating diploma recognition in the Asia-Pacific region.

-To address the technical complications faced by QA agencies, the DAQAR team provides comprehensive support. This includes offering consulting services, methodological guidance, technical assistance, and 24/7 information support. By assisting agencies in navigating the technical aspects of the database, the DAQAR team can alleviate the challenges faced by agencies and ensure smooth implementation and usage.

-Recognising the additional workload placed on QA agencies, the DAQAR team is developing and implementing various tools to streamline processes and save time. These tools include user-friendly interfaces, and automated data uploading features. By providing agencies with such tools, the DAQAR team can help reduce the extra workload and enable agencies to input and update information in a faster and more efficient manner.

The launch and enhancement of the Database of External Quality Assurance Results (DAQAR) on promoting the transparency of quality assurance results (reports, decisions, study programmes etc.) might encourage QA agencies to get recognition from APQR and enter their programmes in the DAQAR.

Why do Asia-Pacific Region Universities and QA agencies need recognition? Benefits of being registered in APQR.
1. There is a need for the academic society to have a single centralised data storage system that enables various stakeholders to access information regarding review outcomes and accreditation results. It promotes transparency, accountability, quality assurance, collaboration, student mobility, and informed decision-making. It benefits academic institutions, students, governmental bodies, and other stakeholders, leading to the overall advancement and improvement of the education sector.

2. Higher education institutions access databases with the results of accreditation most frequently for several reasons. They rely on this information to evaluate the quality and credibility of other institutions. It helps them make decisions regarding collaborations, partnerships, and student exchanges. Accessing accreditation results allows them to ensure that they are engaging with reputable QA agencies that meet certain standards. On the other hand, governmental bodies, ministries, and other national authorities are also interested in accessing such databases. They rely on accreditation results to monitor and regulate the quality of education provided by higher education institutions within their jurisdiction. These bodies use the information to make decisions regarding funding, policymaking, and the recognition of qualifications. They often require institutions to meet specific accreditation standards to ensure the quality of education and protect the interests of students.

3. DAQAR has the potential to improve access to quality assurance reports and decisions on higher education institutions and programmes that have been externally reviewed by agencies registered with APQR. Through DAQAR, APQR can contribute to enhancing the transparency of external quality assurance throughout the Asia-Pacific region and facilitate future diploma recognition processes and the development of the source for scientific research.

Recommendations to develop the Asia-Pacific Quality Register:
1. Revision of APQR standards: to achieve a uniform interpretation of the criteria, it is necessary to revise the APQR standards. This would involve clarifying and standardising the criteria used for accreditation assessments. By ensuring a consistent understanding and application of these criteria, the accreditation results recorded in the register would be more reliable and comparable across different institutions and countries in the Asia-Pacific region.
2. Improvement of the assessment procedure: the procedure itself needs to be improved by establishing clear regulations that take into account the national context. This would involve developing guidelines and protocols for conducting accreditation assessments, ensuring transparency, fairness, and consistency in the process. By providing a clear and regulated assessment procedure, the register can maintain its credibility and trustworthiness.
3. Seek support from intergovernmental organisations: to expedite the development of the Asia-Pacific Register, it is crucial to seek the support of intergovernmental organizations. Unlike the European Register, which has an effective support mechanism facilitated by UNESCO through agreements like the Brisbon Agreement, the Asia-Pacific region may require similar support toaccelerate the development process. Raising the issue of the Register's development at the governmental level and seeking support from intergovernmental organisations can provide the necessary resources, expertise, and guidance to establish and promote the register effectively.

By implementing these recommendations, the development of the Asia-Pacific Register of Accreditation Results can be enhanced. The revision of APQR standards ensures a uniform interpretation of criteria, the improvement of the assessment procedure enhances transparency and fairness, and seeking support from intergovernmental organisations expedites the development process. These steps will contribute to the establishment of a reliable and recognised register that promotes quality assurance and facilitates mutual recognition of qualifications in the Asia-Pacific region.

4. Conclusions

The paper may be of interest to the national QA agencies and experts responsible for QA willing to undergo the APQR review and get experience from other QA agencies already listed in APQR. National governing bodies can get valid information from DAQAR as a source of the results of accredited HEIs and programmes by APQR-registered quality assurance agencies. DAQAR is a relatively new instrument in the sphere of higher education in the Asia Pacific region that helps raise awareness and improve recognition of all APQR-registered agencies and provides all stakeholders (students, QA agencies, governing bodies, national and international networks, etc.) with an open access to the results of accredited HEIs and study programmes.

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Authors Bio:

Prof. Galina Motova, Ph.D., D.Sc. Director (Deputy Director) of the National Centre for Public Accreditation (2010 – present).
Vice-President of Asia-Pacific Quality Network (2019 – present).
Editor-in-chief of the journal "Accreditation in Education" (2005 – present).
Dr. Motova has 27 years of work experience in the field of quality assurance. Author of more than 250 publications.

Oksana Tanikova, Ph.D., Deputy Head of Accreditation Office of the National Centre for Public Accreditation (2011 – present). Member of the Guild of Experts in Higher Education, Russia. Certified ENQA and APQR expert. Responsible person for the cooperation with foreign experts in the framework of accreditation procedures and joint international projects with China. Author of more than 40 publications.