

Mutual Recognition of Institutional Quality Assurance

Presentation to 2013 Education Summit

Auckland

20 March 2013

Dr Jan Cameron

Director, Academic Quality Agency for New Zealand Universities

1. Mutual Recognition Defined

During 2010-2012 the Asia-Pacific Quality Network (APQN) undertook a pilot project to develop a methodology whereby external quality assurance agencies might establish mutual recognition of their institutional quality assurance processes and outcomes. A similar project is being undertaken in Europe through the European Consortium for Accreditation in Higher Education.

While qualifications frameworks form the basis of mutual recognition of qualifications, until now no comparable assessment occurs to recognise institutional quality. Rather, institutional quality is *assumed* when qualifications are compared. Establishment of mutual recognition of institutional external quality assurance (EQA) processes goes some way towards replacing the assumption with evidence.

By *mutual recognition* of external quality assurance is meant:

... an affirmation by each other that their aims and procedures (including standards) are comparable and that it is therefore likely that they would reach the same conclusion in reviewing and passing judgement on an institution or programme or a qualification.¹

In other words, if I went to that country and conducted a quality assurance assessment of a particular institution, would I reach similar conclusions as those reached by their local QA agency?

2. Why is mutual recognition of institutional quality assurance important?

One might ask, “is there a problem to be solved?”. I think the answer is a definite “yes”.

Firstly there is a proliferation of tertiary providers internationally. How do we know which ones are good and which aren’t?

Secondly, we need to consider the potential mobility of our students. How do they know which are good institutions and which aren’t?

What is the objective evidence we can offer – something beyond word-of-mouth advice and anecdotal experience?

In the context of the APQN project, a third reason that mutual recognition is important, I think, is that in our region, and the Pacific in particular, we have a number of very small jurisdictions, with similar aspirations to deliver high quality education. I think it makes sense to share our quality assurance activity, and our decisions or judgements, if we can.

¹ Woodhouse *INQAAHE Mutual Recognition Report of Working group 4* unpub. INQAAHE, 2001, p2. Parenthesis added.

3. What is mutual recognition about?

Mutual recognition is fundamentally about trust. In order to trust each other's decisions, partner agencies are believed to need:

- Consistency of objectives
- Similarity of QA approach
- Transparency of policies
- Rigor of procedures
- Broad alignment of standards
- Alignment of scope (at least in the areas to which mutual recognition applies).

In addition, agencies need confidence that partner agencies are not at risk of third party influence, for example, pressure from governments or other bodies to achieve particular outcomes.

As with any form of trust, trust in QA processes has to be developed and tested. That was the exercise undertaken in the APQN Mutual recognition project – how might agencies develop trust in each other and in each other's processes?

Following the protocol developed by the European Consortium for Accreditation in Higher Education (ECA), it is recognised that there are three key steps in the process of establishing mutual recognition:

- Mutual understanding of the quality assurance organizations;
- Mutual recognition of the quality assurance procedures;
- Mutual recognition of accreditation/quality assurance results and decisions.²

If you know you have trust in the quality assurance system and processes there is a good basis for trusting that system's assessment of its providers.

4. How does mutual recognition of quality assurance processes work?

To illustrate how mutual recognition assessment might work, and why institutional QA is a necessary underpinning to recognition of qualifications, we can take the example of students studying for a research degree, a Masters by thesis, or PhD.

If an institution or employer is looking at enrolling or employing a person with an overseas research degree, how much investigation goes into the integrity of that degree and the academic processes underpinning it? Certainly an employer or potential academic supervisor is likely to look at the thesis, and look at the academic transcript, as actual or indicative academic outcomes. But how much do they know about the university's processes for arriving at these outcomes?

In New Zealand, academic institutional audit asks a number of questions which we believe correlate with reliable outcomes for research students. By "reliable" I mean that these outcomes have academic integrity. So, for example, academic audit of a university might look at:

- Whether the university has an effective delegation structure for managing (for example) admission; enrolment; graduation requirements; transfers. Or can just anybody do it? What is the quality control mechanism?

² Adapted from Rolf Heusser "ECA -Methodology and results" Pp 4-5 in *The Benefits of Mutual Recognition of Accreditation and Quality Assurance Decisions* ECA, The Hague, 2008.

- How supervisors are appointed; how a university ensures they are appropriately qualified and trained to supervise;
- How supervision is managed, monitored and addressed if there are problems; for instance, what happens if a supervisor goes on extended leave?
- How student progress is monitored and addressed if there are problems (eg taking excessively long to complete a project);
- How students are resourced to do their research;
- How students are supported in other aspects of their academic careers – eg opportunities to publish; to participate in conferences; to gain tertiary teaching experience;
- The thesis examination process; how examiners are appointed; how staff are trained to be effective examiners;
- How academic integrity is managed – that is, processes for preventing, identifying and penalising academic dishonesty.

In each of these processes the concern is to ensure the university has appropriate academic processes to ensure the work a student produces is of a standard expected in a university of good standing internationally. With such processes a subsequent employer or professional body or other university should have confidence that the work has been well supervised, is the student's own work, has not been corrupted by academic dishonesty or inappropriate examination procedures, and so on.

Assessment of the quality of these academic processes in another jurisdiction would provide grounds for establishing confidence that graduates of institutions in that other jurisdiction are, or are not, likely to have studied in a similarly robust academic context.

In other words, institutions need to decide whether they accept graduates on face value, or whether they rely on word-of-mouth about the quality or integrity of the academic processes of the originating institution, or whether they wish to gain more systematic and objective evidence. If they want evidence, then one way of gaining this is through asking whether there is mutual recognition of the overriding quality assurance processes of the jurisdiction.

5. In practice, how would this work?

In my experience with the APQN Project, we developed a protocol for testing for mutual recognition. That protocol included,

Review of the quality assurance frameworks:

- Scope of QA activity (ie does it cover all institutional processes or just some; all parts of the institution or just some faculties or programmes)
- Identification and appointment (registration) of reviewers.
- Panel composition, mode of appointment, training; whether there are external panel members (important for external benchmarking)
- Policy on conflict of interest
- Management of confidentiality
- Independence (a) of government; (b) of the institutions.
- Recognition by relevant national and/or state government(s) as providing authoritative quality assurance of institutions.
- Recognition by the institutions it quality assures as having legitimacy and authority.

Review and observation of the quality assurance process, including

- Nature of audit framework;

- How are audit questions determined?
- How are interviewees determined? Does the institution select who it prefers or does the agency direct who (ie what roles) will be interviewed?
- How is evidence sought, provided and evaluated? How robust is the evidence?
- Public accountability - Are the reports public?
- Is there an appeal process?
- Is there follow-up?
- Are there sanctions for non-compliance with recommendations?
- Can any person or organisation interfere in the process – eg the institution being assessed? a government official; a professional body?

In the context of our project, the ultimate questions or test of confidence before establishing mutual recognition are:

- Do we have confidence that, allowing for contextual constraints, the other agency's processes are exploring similar activity within similar standard expectations as those which would be explored by our agency?
- Would our agency have come to similar conclusions as those which the other agency made?
- Would we qualify our conclusions/mutual recognition in any way?

So if I take the example I used: if I found that my sister agency in another country did not explore the issues around supervision that I have mentioned, I would definitely qualify any mutual recognition, and suggest that any of our universities or employers recruiting graduates from that country conduct their own investigation to assure themselves that the outcome of research graduates has integrity.

6. The Benefits of Mutual Recognition

So what are the benefits of engaging in a mutual recognition exercise?

Mutual recognition of EQA processes has a number of potential outcomes, including:

- Providing an understanding and knowledge of and by each agency
- Providing a basis for collaboration between agencies
- Facilitating research into QA processes and their effects
- Facilitating enrichment of agencies' activities
- Ensuring an appreciation of the quality parameters underpinning institutions' programmes and research activity
- Providing a basis for judgements on the quality of institutions and/or programmes in other jurisdictions
- Providing a basis for recognising where credit for prior studies is likely to derive from quality assured processes
- Providing a basis for an assumption of institutional quality before accepting qualifications.³

Mutual recognition of the quality assurance or accreditation of institutions would add an important dimension to decision-making about academic transfer; scholarships; collaborative projects, etc. Mutual recognition would thus support mobility of students, staff and graduates, and thereby enhance the "portability of learning"⁴. It would be of benefit to institutions, graduates and students.

³ Woodhouse *loc. cit.*, p2.

⁴ Woodhouse *loc. cit.*, p1.

At a national level, mutual recognition of EQA could potentially reduce work overload by reducing the need for dual quality assurance processes for off-shore arrangements, whether these be about teaching partnerships or research collaborations or staff and student exchanges. It should give governments confidence of institutional acceptability when negotiating inter-country collaborations or recruitment. Mutual recognition would enable us to approach partner quality assurance agencies to gain assessments (their published reports) of the quality of institutions.

The long term objective of a mutual recognition exercise would be to establish a register of recognition within a country. This would mean that I could say, on behalf of AQA, that we have confidence that universities quality assured by agency X in country Y are likely to have to meet similar standards in their academic processes as do New Zealand universities. If you wish to know about the quality status of an institution you should therefore be able to trust the report on quality of that agency which AQA recognises.

There might need to be some caveats to such claims. In particular, it needs to be noted that in some countries there are several agencies operating as quality assurance agencies. Not all might have the same degree of robust evaluation that we in New Zealand might expect. Some might quality assure only parts of the sector – in New Zealand, for instance, AQA quality assures only the universities, and NZQA quality assures other tertiary institutions, but not the universities. So mutual recognition must be identified as between agencies, and the institutions quality assured by those agencies, not between countries.

I would like to see us arrive at a situation where government officials or university academic managers contemplating recruitment from overseas or contemplating signing memoranda with overseas institutions – especially if this is a new source country – might come to AQA and ask about that country's institutional quality assurance processes. An extra step in the process perhaps, but this is about risk mitigation as well as quality assurance.

Mutual recognition of quality assurance processes across international jurisdictions is time-intensive if done properly. But I suggest it need be no more time-consuming than is assessment of international qualifications frameworks, and is just as fundamental to our confidence in comparability of academic achievement. They are two sides of the same coin nationally, and I believe should be two sides of the same coin internationally.