

Subject	External Quality Assurance
Module	Networks Of External Quality Agencies
Topic	3.7 Asia-Pacific Quality Network (APQN)

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1. Introduction



The past decade is significant for network formation in EQA. In this chapter we will look at the emergence of the Asia-Pacific Quality Network (APQN) -- an association of QA agencies in a region that contains over half the world's population. You will also learn about the Brisbane Communiqué Initiative and reasons for a lack of coherence and common purpose across the region. The topic ends with an overview of the ASEAN Quality Assurance Network (AQAN), its aims and purposes.

Objectives: Asia-Pacific Quality Network (APQN)

Upon completion of this topic, you should be able to

- trace the progress of APQN since its emergence as an association of QA agencies in the Asia-Pacific region
- identify the reasons for a lack of collaboration among the APQN member agencies
- identify the aims and purposes of AQAN

2. Creation of Asia-Pacific Quality Network (APQN)

APQN is another network that emerged from regional discussion groups at INQAAHE conferences. It gained the necessary momentum to establish itself in 2001. The actual founding event was in January 2003 at a conference convened by the Hong Kong Council for Academic Accreditation.

APQN, like INQAAHE, took an unusual step (among networks) by not immediately adopting a governance structure. Instead, the inaugural meeting concentrated on actions. It identified half a dozen projects of interest to the participants, and named leaders for each project. The project leaders then became the core of the first Board.

The Projects included:

- Qualifications frameworks (led by the Philippines; resulting in a major publication on the structure and establishment of qualifications frameworks, of use in any country contemplating creating or revising one)

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- QA for e-learning (a continuing project being led by Japan)
- Indicators of quality (following work initiated by India in 2001)
- Mutual recognition of EQA decisions and judgements

Problem of Regional Definition: Africa and South America are defined by their coastlines. Asia, however, has definitional questions at the western end: are Turkey and the Gulf states in or out? Then there is the 'Pacific' factor. An 'Asian network' would have left Australia and New Zealand and many small island states to form a not-very-viable network, so it was agreed that this would be the 'Asia-Pacific' network. But that introduced a definitional question at the eastern end of the region: the Asia-Pacific Economic Co-operation group (APEC) includes all countries on the Pacific rim. The definition of the region eluded a solution for some time, until it was decided to use a UNESCO definition -- but it is based on nations that are members of UNESCO. Hence it omits some nations squarely in geographic Asia, and it changes from year to year. Eventually, the Network was defined as running from the Ural Mountains in the west through the Pacific Ocean, including its islands, but not to eastern Pacific coastlines.

The coverage of the Network is about half the world's population, including the two most populous nations but also some very small nations. It has not been easy to determine how best to serve such a diverse constituency. However, APQN was very fortunate, for in 2002, the World Bank was considering the funding of quality activities for an entire region rather than individual countries. A study of the Asian region led the World Bank to provide a grant of US\$360k per year for three years (2005-2007) for capacity-building in QA in developing countries of the Asian region. The World Bank decided that APQN was the right vehicle to be responsible for the appropriate use of these funds. APQN got off to a better start than almost any other network, though APQN constantly had to remember that it was a network for service to its members, and not just for the grant -- which came with certain restrictions on its use and could not be counted on beyond three years. In fact, the grant continued in a slightly different form: In 2007, the World Bank decided to combine these funds under a scheme called the Global Initiative for Quality Assurance Capacity-Building (GIQAC), administered by UNESCO.

One condition of the World Bank grant was the requirement to have an audit in 2008 of the effect of the grant. This audit determined that APQN had been very successful in capacity-building, largely due to the significant funding level.

3. APQN and the Brisbane Communiqué

APQN was selected by APEC to conduct a study of QA processes and needs in the APEC countries, as 16 of the 21 APEC countries were also in APQN. Then in April 2006 the ministers of education of the Asia-Pacific region (the same as APQN's region) signed the Brisbane Communiqué on co-operation in four areas, including QA in higher education. The APQN was asked then to extend its study to the entire region.

These studies show some commonalities as well as great differences between the member states of the region. Also, there is no region-wide political or government network on which to base a network for QA activities (although there are sub-regional groupings such as ASEAN, SEAMEO). Thus, there is a lack of coherence and common purpose across the region. One common response to a regional needs survey conducted by APQN in 2005 is a desire for EQA documents to be available in English to facilitate mutual understanding, learning and cooperation.

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Although most members of APEC are in APQN, the presence of the nations of the eastern Pacific rim in the former (notably the USA) changes the dynamic. The Brisbane Communiqué has not had the desired impact on deep collaboration and regional development. The Gulf States are better covered by the Arab Network (ANQAHE); Central Asia is likely to have its own network; and one can envisage in the foreseeable future a viable 'south Asian network' (depending upon the political relationships between the relevant parties).

4. ASEAN Quality Assurance Network (AQAN)

The Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) is a pre-existing 10-nation group, totally within the APQN region. It exists to serve mutual economic, trade, educational and cultural interests, and has recently turned its attention to QA in higher education. It has plans to form its own QA network. In July 2008, the 10 ASEAN nations (which have secretariats for various functions, including education) agreed to establish a the ASEAN QA Network (AQAN) to build a QA framework, to build capacity, share good practice, and facilitate recognition of qualifications (by 2015).

In relation to the mutual recognition of EQA decisions and judgments, APQN set an aspirational target of mutual recognition across the region by 2010. Some work has been done on this, but the different nature and stages of QA systems across the region have made this a very difficult task. University Mobility in the Asia-Pacific (UMAP) is a scheme to encourage students to conduct some of their studies at other educational institutions in the region (on the European Erasmus model), but it does not appear to have had a wider influence on the more general recognition of programs and qualifications. AQAN has now been created, with an intent to recognise qualifications across borders. Working from a pre-existing group of nations with mutual economic and trade interests, one can be optimistic that there will be movement towards APQN's target (albeit past the aspirational target date).

5. Discussion

Discussion: Homogeneous or Heterogeneous Networks?

Consider the following questions:

- How similar do EQA agencies need to be within one network, or does it not matter?
- How similar do national cultures have to be for agencies to be in the same network, or does it not matter? Conversely, how homo- or heterogeneous should a network be?

6. Discussion

Discussion: Natural Non-Regional Groups

Consider the following questions:

- What are some 'natural' non-regional groups (cf. small states, speakers of a given language)?
- What makes a group natural?
- For these groups, what would be the benefits of, difficulties in and obstacles to creating a network? How would you go about the task?

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7. Summary

This topic covered the following main points:

- APQN emerged from regional discussion groups at INQAAHE conferences and was established at the 2001 INQAAHE Conference.
- It was difficult to define the Asia-Pacific region and its coverage. Finally, the network was defined as running from the Ural Mountains in the west through the Pacific Ocean, including its islands, but not the eastern Pacific coastlines.
- APQN had an auspicious start when it received a World Bank grant (2005 to 2007) for QA capacity-building in developing countries in the Asian region. An audit in 2008 concluded that APQN had been very successful in this respect, largely due to the significant funding level.
- In April 2006, the Brisbane Communiqué set co-operation in motion in four areas, including QA in higher education. This has not had the desired impact on collaboration and development, mostly for several reasons:
 - Many differences between the member states of the region.
 - No region-wide political or government network on which a network of QA activities can be based.
 - Different nature and stages of the QA systems across the region and overlaps between agencies are contributing factors. Eg. the Gulf States are better covered by the Arab Network (ANQAHE).
 - Thus, a lack of coherence and common purpose across the region.
- The ASEAN QA Network (AQAN) was established in July 2008 to build a QA framework, build capacity, share good practice and facilitate recognition of qualifications (by 2015).