Cross-border quality assurance: case study of Hong Kong and Macao

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to set out the experience of the Hong Kong Council for Accreditation of Academic and Vocational Qualifications (HKCAAVQ) in carrying out cross-border quality assurance (QA) in Macao.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper draws on case studies of two very different QA exercises conducted by HKCAAVQ in Macao in 2015 and 2016. The first was a program accreditation conducted as part of a pilot of the external QA standards and process developed by the Macao Government's Tertiary Education Services Office (GAES) for potential use by all higher education institutions (HEIs) in Macao. The second was a learning program review (LPR) conducted by HKCAAVQ following a request by a HEI in Macao using QA standards and processes developed by HKCAAVQ.

Findings – The key findings from the case studies are that an agency engaging in cross-border QA needs to have a clear rationale for their engagement, ensure that they are "fit-for-purpose" in terms of the context of the employing jurisdiction and the expectations of their HEIs and have a clear understanding of the relevant legal framework.

Originality/value – Cross-border QA is likely to grow in importance and activity in the coming years. The example of Macao provides a useful reference point for governments, HEIs and external quality assurance agency considering engaging in cross-border QA activities.

Keywords Hong Kong, Cross-border, Macao, HKCAAVQ

Paper type Case study

Introduction

Internationalization of higher education not only involves the mobility of students, academics, institutions, and programmes, but also the movement of quality assurance (QA) services. National accrediting agencies in Asia are attempting to internationalize themselves through internal and external approaches (Hou, 2012). This paper focuses on cross-border QA in the process of internationalization and sets out the experience of the Hong Kong Council for Accreditation of Academic and Vocational Qualifications (HKCAAVQ) as an external QA agency in carrying out two cross-border exercises in Macao. Such experience can serve as a reference for higher education institutions (HEIs) or QA agencies in other countries/regions planning to engage in cross-border QA.

Literature review

The Observatory on Borderless Higher Education Report says internationalization has become an increasingly important phenomenon in higher education (Middlehurst and Woodfield, 2007; Altbach and Knight, 2007). During the past several decades, internationalization has emerged as an important goal of higher education (Childress, 2009).

Yang (2002) also argues that internationalization and university development are linked to each other. Not only do HEIs engage in the process of internationalization, but QA agencies around the globe have also become more internationally active through engaging in cross-border QA exercises. The European Commission (2009) states that cross-border QA is increasingly important in face of globalization, economic integration and increased academic and professional mobility (cited in Bernhard, 2012).

Arum and van de Water (1992) define internationalization as multiple activities, programmes, and services that fall within international studies, international educational exchange and technical cooperation (cited in Knight, 2004). Cross-border QA is one of the internationalization activities and strategies, but there is little published work as cross-border QA is still a younger field of research. Cross-border QA is conducted by foreign QA organizations in the local environment (World Bank, 2007 cited by Hou, 2012). The European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (EAQA), European Students' Union, European University Association, European Association of Institutions in Higher Education (EURASHE) and European Quality Assurance Register (EQAR) for Higher Education define cross-border QA as follows:

> Cross-border QA refers to external QA activities of a QA agency carried out in a country other than the one in which it is based or primarily operates. For higher education institutions, this may be a voluntary process or part of the national mandatory external QA (EAQA *et al.*, 2017, p. 2).

In this paper, the above definition is used to illustrate how HKCAAVQ as an external QA agency carried out two cross-border QA exercises in Macao.

Why does cross-border QA matter? As a result of globalization, HEIs operate in a competitive landscape, *vis-à-vis* other institutions from all over the world. Maringe and Foskett (2010) state that most universities recognize the importance of developing teaching and instructional programs that are both locally and internationally relevant, to recruit students in a global market and to prepare all students for lives in a globalized world. HEIs are being asked to help meet major global challenges, to educate students in their disciplines with a sense of global competence and engagement, and to contribute to local and national economic competitiveness (Morris, 2009). Many governments have found that traditional academic controls are not adequate for today's challenges (El-Khawas *et al.*, 1998). The engagement in cross-border QA activities therefore becomes one of the internationalization strategies to make higher education more globally competitive.

In Asia higher education is playing an increasingly important role in economic and social development (Coates and Shah, 2017). However, Bernhard (2012) argues that the quality of higher education on average has declined in most countries under a mass higher education system. Benchmarking and QA can be an essential means to enhance transparency and to work against degree mills (CE, 2009 cited in Bernhard, 2012). Therefore, cross-border QA is one of the internationalization strategies to address quality issues. Regionally or internationally recognizable education quality standards can also be established to further enable student mobility.

The term QA refers to the policies and procedures necessary to ensure that the quality is being maintained and enhanced (Woodhouse, 1999). Some countries have adopted and adapted quality systems from other parts of the world (Coates and Shah, 2017). Some countries could benefit from foreign experience and knowledge to improve the quality of their tertiary education system (World Bank, 2007). Cross-border QA becomes a good strategy for those countries or areas which have not fully established the QA policies and systems to upgrade standards and strengthen quality of higher education. This is consistent with the OECD's capacity-building approach to internationalization to help HEIs to build capacity through the transfer of educational know-how in curriculum design and QA (Asteris, 2006 cited in Santiago *et al.*, 2008).

One of the benefits of engaging in cross-border QA is to strengthen local institution's internationalization policies and improve the recognition of their qualifications (European Association for Quality Assurance (EAQA) in Higher Education *et al.*, 2017). Many countries in Asia have ambitious internationalization goals to enhance the quality of their higher education systems. Several countries, such as Singapore, Malaysia, and Thailand aim to establish themselves as regional higher education hubs, and others have systems and policies in place to attract international students, increase higher education and research spending and grow their own reputations as first class higher education providers. For example, South Korea has built a comprehensive cross-border QA and accreditation framework (British Council, 2011). Thus, cross-border QA has become a prevalent internationalization strategy among Asian higher education.

Teichler (2004) argues that universities are "international" by nature. However, internationalization efforts are not restricted to individual institutions or universities, but also to QA bodies, which issue certificates of accreditation to courses and learning institutions at many levels. Many Asian QA agencies have begun to pay more attention to internationalization (Hou, 2012). Collaboration between QA agencies through engaging in cross-border QA appears to be one of several important international activities. From QA agencies' perspective, one of the benefits of engaging in cross-border QA is to expand their national and international profile and gain learning opportunities to improve their own processes and methodologies (EAQA, 2017). For example, the development of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) through the Bologna Process has contributed to an increase of cross-border exchanges and cooperation in higher education and supports the enhancement of trust and confidence among higher education systems. In the framework of the Bologna Process, cross-border QA is supported.

Background of the study

Under the principle of "one country, two systems" enshrined in the Basic Law following the transfer of sovereignty over Hong Kong from the UK to the People's Republic of China, Hong Kong is a Special Administrative Region able to operate its own higher education system and external QA arrangements. In addition, Hong Kong is an active member of various regional QA networks which has provided an opportunity for sharing good practices and raising awareness about QA practices through the networks (Coates and Shah, 2017).

HKCAAVQ provides QA and assessment services to non-self-accrediting education and training institutions, course providers and the general public in Hong Kong. In addition to its statutory roles, HKCAAVQ also provides advisory and consultancy services in education qualifications and standards to government bureaux and other organizations in Hong Kong and the Asia-Pacific region. HKCAAVQ has been working together with partner organizations (11 as of September 2017) in Europe and the Asia-Pacific under bilateral Memoranda of Cooperation/Understanding to share international good practice and enhance quality culture regionally and globally.

Macao is also a Special Administrative Region of the People's Republic of China with similar but separate powers over education to that of Hong Kong. Hong Kong and Macao share a common language and similar culture and history and similar education system/demographic student/school profile/in-bound non-local students. There is considerable collaboration at different levels of education between Hong Kong and Macao.

The paper draws on two case studies of cross-border QA exercises conducted by HKCAAVQ in Macao in 2015 and 2016. The first was a program accreditation conducted as part of a pilot of the external QA standards and process developed by the Macao Government's Tertiary Education Services Office for potential use by all HEIs in Macao.

The second was a learning program review (LPR) conducted by HKCAAVQ following a request by a HEI in Macao using QA standards and processes developed by HKCAAVQ.

Overview of higher education in Macao

The following information is extracted from the Macao Yearbook 2015 published by the Government Information Bureau of the Macao Special Administrative Region (2015):

> The Tertiary Education Services Office.
>
> Established in 1992 and currently headed by the Secretary for Social Affairs and Culture of the Macao SAR Government, the Tertiary Education Services Office (GAES) is a government department that coordinates, follows up and develops tertiary education in Macao[1].
>
> Higher Education Institutions in Macao.
>
> Macao started to develop modern tertiary education around 30 years ago. Since there were only a few tertiary education institutions in those early days, the range of programs and disciplines offered by these institutions were relatively limited. However, as the number of institutions increased, and society demanded different types of expertise, the types of programs have diversified.
>
> Currently, Macao has ten tertiary education institutions. Four of them are public and six are private.
>
> Public:
>
> (1) University of Macau (UM);
>
> (2) Macau Polytechnic Institute (MPI);
>
> (3) Institute For Tourism Studies (IFT); and
>
> (4) Academy for Public Security Forces of Macao (ESFSM).
>
> Private:
>
> (5) City University of Macau (CITYU);
>
> (6) University of Saint Joseph (USJ);
>
> (7) Kiang Wu Nursing College of Macau (KWNC);
>
> (8) Macau University of Science and Technology (MUST);
>
> (9) Macau Institute of Management (IGM); and
>
> (10) Macau Millennium College(MMC).
>
> About 16 percent of the Macao population has a higher education degree. The ten higher education institutions combined enroll about 30,000 students. Students are from Macao, Mainland China and abroad. At present, there are around 275 programs in operation. The top five programs in terms of student enrollment are business and management, tourism and entertainment, law, journalism and communication, and languages and literature.

The Government of the Macao Special Administrative Region and the HEIs recognized the importance of QA. Since 2012, they have been working to develop a Quality Assurance Framework. In this framework, evaluations are to be conducted at the institutional level, and

the program level. At the institutional level, there are the institutional accreditation and institutional quality audit. At the program level, there are the program accreditation and program review.

Macao is a small jurisdiction and because of the scale of its higher education system and the costs involved in setting up and maintaining its own external quality assurance agency (EQAA), a policy decision was therefore taken by the government to explore the engagement of EQAAs from outside of Macao to provide QA services to their HEIs at both institutional and program levels.

The Macao Government has no plan to set up its own accrediting body in the near future. Instead, the government will let HEIs approach appropriate EQAAs themselves. However, before the appointment of an EQAA, the HEI has to receive prior approval from the government. In addition, the results of the evaluations by EQAAs will have to be confirmed by the Macao Government.

To cater for the needs and characteristics of Macao, the government has developed four sets of QA guidelines that stipulate the standards and procedures of each of the evaluation exercise, they are the "Guidelines on Institutional Accreditation," "Guidelines on Institutional Quality Audit," "Guidelines on New Program Accreditation," and "Guidelines for External Quality Assurance Agencies." The "Guidelines on Program Review" is under development at this point. The first pilot study on program accreditation was concluded at the end of 2016.

HEIs in Macao have a history of using cross-border EQAAs and international professional accreditation bodies to conduct independent reviews. The essential difference in the government proposal under the proposed new Higher Education Act is that while the "market" for EQAA services could still be maintained, the QA activities would be carried out under guidelines developed and approved by GAES and that the final decision-making power in all of the evaluation exercises would lie with the Macao Government.

It was in the context of the pilot study on the proposed program accreditation guidelines that HKCAAVQ as the EQAA conducted a program accreditation of a bachelor degree of a Macao HEI against the accreditation criteria and standards set out in the guidelines on new program accreditation developed by HKCAAVQ for GAES.

Separately, HKCAAVQ was approached by another Macao HEI, on their own initiative, to conduct a LPR for three of its bachelor degrees in business. This institution had previously engaged different QA agencies and professional bodies to conduct external review for the institute and various programs.

Research methodology

International education is now a hugely competitive market, and national governments and individual providers often see agencies as key tools for developing positional advantage:

RQ1. What are the implications for agencies in seeking to meet these expectations?

RQ2. As some agencies position themselves to offer services outside their national jurisdictions, are we also now seeing the emergence of a competitive international market in QA itself?

RQ3. Competition within countries is also intense in many places; is QA seen as a help or a hindrance?

Based on interviews with the HKCAAVQ Registrars that conducted the two exercises listed above, the case studies of a pilot program accreditation and a LPR in HEIs in Macao are used for illustrative purposes in answering the key research questions above.

In 2016, the EURASHE published a "Roadmap for Cross-Border QA." This roadmap is presented in the format of guiding questions and key considerations to be taken into account before engaging in and carrying out cross-border QA and includes the following:

(1) Engaging in cross-border QA:

- What is the rationale for engaging in cross-border QA?

- Which QA agency is fit-for-purpose for this specific case?

- What is the legal framework prescribing?

- What other aspects (beyond the legal framework) need to be considered beforehand?

- Has the institution communicated its decision to undergo cross-border QA to relevant stakeholders?

(2) Carrying out cross-border QA:

- What sort of preparation supports successful cross-border QA?

- How are the peer-review experts selected and trained?

- Are the practical specificities of carrying out cross-border QA clear for both parties?

The experiences in the two case studies will also be used to address some of the key factors identified in the conceptual framework of the EURASHE Roadmap.

Description of two case studies
Case 1: pilot program accreditation for GAES
In the context of the pilot study on the program accreditation guidelines, the academic accreditation and assessment unit of HKCAAVQ was invited to serve as the EQAA to conduct program accreditation for an HEI in Macao against the accreditation criteria and standards set out in the guidelines on new program accreditation developed by GAES. The HEI seeking the program accreditation is a private university in Macao and was similarly invited by GAES to participate in the pilot study. A new program adopting English as the medium of instruction and scheduled to be delivered in the following academic year was chosen to be the subject of accreditation.

The guidelines were developed by the consulting arm of HKCAAVQ under contract to GAES and because of commercial-in-confidence considerations cannot be reproduced in this paper. Notwithstanding, the guidelines are based on the Approach-Deployment-Results-Improvement quality audit methodology and adopt the principle of peer review through the use of expert peer-review panels to evaluate the programs through consideration of a self-evaluative accreditation submission and a site visit.

The accreditation standards and criteria, as well as the accreditation process, were understandably new to both HKCAAVQ (as EQAA) and the HEI concerned. Thus, GAES commissioned the consulting team to provide briefings to the HEI, HKCAAVQ, as well as each of the panel members. Thereafter, HKCAAVQ liaised with the HEI direct, while keeping GAES informed of the decisions at various stages of the accreditation process.

To ensure that the evaluation outcome aligns with international standards, an EQAA is required by the guidelines to form a panel comprising overseas experts from different

jurisdictions, in addition to experts from Hong Kong, Mainland China and/or Macao. Ultimately, the panel for the pilot study comprised of a panel chairman from Australia, an overseas academic from the UK and two academics from two of the government-funded universities in Macao. A designated staff member from HKCAAVQ served as the panel secretary.

To clearly signify that the decision-making power of all evaluation exercises lies with the Macao SAR Government, the accreditation report included the following in the section covering accreditation outcome and decisions:

> On the basis of the findings documented in previous sections, the Panel's overall recommendations are as follows.

> Having considered the panel's recommended accreditation outcome and decisions as well as associated evidence and considerations documented in the final draft accreditation report, the Government of Macao SAR accepted the following accreditation outcome and decisions:

- Approval
- Conditional approval
- Non-approval.

As HKCAAVQ has no accreditation authority in Macao, the accreditation outcome was reviewed and endorsed by GAES in the capacity of the proposed Higher Education Evaluation Committee before the accreditation report was finalized and issued to the HEI.

Case 2: LPR for Macao HEI
The second case study involved the conduct of a LPR in another HEI in Macao. HKCAAVQ conducts LPR as a consultancy project outside Hong Kong. LPR is similar to the accreditation in Hong Kong in the aspects of guiding principles (transparency, evidence-based, fitness for purpose and peer review), panel formation, process and procedures. However, noting that HKCAAVQ has no accreditation authority in Macao, the LPR outcome will comprise "Observations" and "Recommendations" only.

The guidance notes on LPR sets out the criteria and standards for reviewing the programs. These criteria and standards are adapted from those used in the accreditation of local programs operated by institutes/operators in Hong Kong, excluding requirements regarding the Hong Kong Qualifications Framework. The LPR has ten criteria as follows:

(1) program objectives and learning outcomes;

(2) program content and structure;

(3) admission requirements and student selection;

(4) teaching and learning;

(5) student assessment;

(6) staffing and staff development for learning programs;

(7) financial and physical resources for learning programs;

(8) QA (including program development and management);

(9) workplace attachment and student support services; and

(10) student records and information management.

The panel of the LPR is composed of eight members from different disciplines pertaining to the programs under review, and/or with substantial QA experience in a higher education setting, including the HKCAAVQ staff member serving as a full member on the panel. To ensure that the panel is representative enough to benchmark the accreditation subject (HEI/program) against international standards and practices, the majority of the panel members came from different overseas jurisdictions operating different mainstream education systems where Macao students further their studies.

The panel chair verbally conveyed to the senior management of the HEI the panel's broad observations at the last session (exit meeting) of the site visit. Details about the panels' conclusive views were captured in the LPR report in the form of recommendations to HKCAAVQ, which has the final authority on the LPR exercise.

While the two cross-border QA activities were both conducted by HKCAAVQ and shared a lot of similarities in terms of the guiding principles and major processes, there are obvious differences in their nature and outcomes. Table I presents the main differences between two cases.

Results

International education is now a hugely competitive market, and national governments and individual providers often see agencies as key tools for developing positional advantage. What are the implications for agencies in seeking to meet these expectations?

	Case 1	Case 2
Initiation	Government-initiated project with EQAA and HEI preliminarily identified by GAES	Voluntary engagement of cross-border QA initiated by the HEI
Purpose	Pilot study for the guidelines developed by GAES	Benchmarking with international standard
Legal framework	New program accreditation mandatory under the proposed Higher Education Act	Evaluation process conducted by HKCAAVQ under a Consultancy Service Agreement, pursuant to sections 4(1)(g) and 4(2)(b) of HKCAAVQ Ordinance (Cap 1,150)
Subject under review	New program scheduled to be launched in the following academic year	Existing program(s)
Accreditation/review standards and criteria	Program accreditation guidelines developed by GAES	Essentially adopted from existing HKCAAVQ standards and criteria
Panel composition	Discipline and QA experts from overseas and Hong Kong, with HKCAAVQ staff member serving as panel secretary	Discipline and QA experts from overseas and Hong Kong, with HKCAAVQ staff member serving as panel member-cum-secretary
Accreditation/review outcome	Approval, conditional approval, or non-approval, as well as recommendations for continuous improvement	Recommendations to the HEI for continuous improvement
Reporting	The accreditation report covered accreditation outcome and decisions (e.g. conditions and/or requirements for approval, program title and qualification, mode of delivery, specialization, etc.)	The findings of the panel presented in the form of "Recommendations" and "Observations"
Decision-making authority	Accreditation outcome and decisions subject to endorsement of the Macao SAR Government	Final decisions made by HKCAAVQ with respect to panel's recommendations

Table I.
Main differences between the two evaluation cases

The pilot study on the program accreditation guidelines under the Proposed Higher Education Framework of Macao was designed to test the accreditation and standards as well as the process by which a mandatory external QA procedure could be introduced through the jurisdiction's legal framework. The development of the knowledge and understanding of QA among GAES staff through the process and the building of the quality culture in the pilot HEI were added value in the process.

HKCAAVQ aims to be a nationally and globally recognized independent QA body in education and training, dedicated to high quality accreditation, assessment and consultancy services. The objectives in the HKCAAVQ strategic plan include providing consultancy and QA services for the education and training community beyond Hong Kong. HKCAAVQ is regarded as an internationally recognized EQAA, and has been successfully audited against the guidelines for good practice of the International Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE).

Apart from positively assessing its expertise and capacity to conduct cross-border QA, engagement of HKCAAVQ as the EQAA in the pilot study had a strategic fit with its scope of activities.

With regard to the legal framework prescribing the cross-border QA, the EQAA should consult and liaise as appropriate with the jurisdictional regulatory bodies so as to have a proper understanding of the accreditation criteria and legal framework. Communication and mutual understanding are important.

If the EQAA is requested to make use of the guidelines issued by the jurisdictional regulatory body (as in this case), the EQAA should consider if it has a sufficient understanding of the guidelines. In case of doubt, the EQAA should seek clarification from the regulatory body. The EQAA should also ensure that the evaluation criteria contained in the guidelines are broadly comparable with international standards in light of the outcomes of the evaluation otherwise, the QA agency may risk jeopardizing its professional standing and integrity.

In conducting the pilot accreditation for GAES, HKCAAVQ as the EQAA interpreted and implemented the guidelines to the best of their understanding based on professional expertise and experience in other accreditation exercises. Due to the different interpretations of each party in a number of procedural steps, the process required considerable negotiation and hence took longer time than expected. Readability was hindered as Chinese and English guidelines are presented concurrently for each statement. Some templates required much adaptation for use by the panel; however, most milestones were achieved ahead of the stipulated deadlines in the service agreement.

Overall, with close communication between GAES, the HEI and EQAA, the accreditation exercise, and the site visit in particular, was completed successfully.

From the perspective of the HEI their participation in the pilot study enabled them to gain insight into the likely QA arrangements for program accreditation under the proposed Higher EducationQuality Assurance Evaluation Framework of Macao and also build their relationship with the regulatory body, GAES. From a program perspective where a maximum of 50 percent of the student population can be drawn from outside Macao (largely from Mainland China), the accreditation by HKCAAVQ as an EQAA provided an additional benefit of external recognition of the program. Participation in the pilot study was clearly viewed by the program leaders as a key means for developing positional advantage.

However, due to the nature of the pilot study and the necessary involvement of GAES and their consultants and the need for confidentiality, some of the ownership of the process by the HEI was lost. The exercise was largely conducted by the HEI through the agency of an institutional "champion" of the process and it was not clear as to whether the decision to undergo cross-border QA and the reasons for engaging HKCAAVQ were adequately communicated to the institutional community, including students. As a result, the

opportunity for building up institutional QA capacity was not taken up to the extent that it might have been.

In contrast to the pilot study, the HEI involved in the second case study of LPR had a clear purpose for engaging HKCAAVQ as the EQAA and the arrangement followed a number of deliberate activities designed to build up the institution's QA capacity. Notwithstanding, the desire of the HEI to benchmark the standards of their program with Hong Kong standards presented problems for HKCAAVQ in considering whether its procedures could remain the same in a cross-border context.

Specific adaptations were required based on the legal framework under which HKCAAVQ operates as set out in Table I and unlike the pilot study outcome of accreditation by the regulatory authority in Macao, the outcome of the procedure was a review report only.

Prior to engaging in the LPR the HEI had undertaken an institutional review with another EQAA and included in its strategic plan a clear commitment to undertaking program review with another EQAA. The HEI has an internationalization agenda and is keen to build up the reputation of the institute and attract high quality students.

The HEI has also engaged professional bodies to conduct reviews of their programs that lead on to professional employment before undertaking LPR. In addition in the 12-18 months prior to the LPR the HEI engaged HKCAAVQ to provide training for relevant staff to prepare them for the exercise and help to build up the quality culture of the institution.

These training sessions and meetings between HKCAAVQ and the HEI helped to ensure an understanding of the institutional context and the QA process. The service agreement setting out the aims of the exercise and the responsibilities of all parties was also able to be satisfactorily negotiated over this time and taking into account that HKCAAVQ was able to conduct its QA activities in different ways in different contexts.

In this process, it was important for HKCAAVQ to be mindful of the awareness of external QA and culture of internal QA within the HEI. There can be very different understandings of even well accepted QA terminology. The HEI, newly engaged with the HKCAAVQ accreditation model and process, found it helpful to receive assistance/facilitation prior to undertaking external QA.

HKCAAVQ is not an accreditation authority in Macao and cannot issue a statement of accreditation approval nor benchmark overseas qualifications to the Hong Kong Qualifications Framework.

With regard to the outcomes of cross-border QA, it is essential that the EQAA has informed the institution in advance the extent of recognition the institution would gain. Gaining international recognition is a key incentive for an HEI to engage an international EQAA to review their programs. There is an expectation that their programs can be benchmarked against well-recognized standards, and the outcomes can be explicitly stated. Therefore, maintaining a good balance between the constraints the EQAA faces and the HEIs' objectives is important for effective collaboration.

The official language of the HEI also needs consideration. It is directly related to the language used in the submission and working documents, and communication during the site visit. This is one of the deciding factors for the selection of appropriate peer-review experts.

In the review process, a more enabling approach is needed to facilitate the HEI in making continuous improvement, which reflects the spirit of QA. In the case of Macao, some interim measures were employed with a view to providing the HEI with opportunities to fill the gaps between their current operation and the established criteria.

All in all the outcome for the HEI and HKCAAVQ from the exercise was a positive experience, and subsequent LPR exercises have been undertaken and further ones are planned:

> And, as some agencies position themselves to offer services outside their national jurisdictions, are we also now seeing the emergence of a competitive international market in quality assurance itself?

In Europe, the EQAR for Higher Education was established to enhance transparency and information on credible QA agencies operating in Europe and to facilitate the recognition of their decisions. Amongst other objectives, HEIs could use the register to choose to be evaluated by a registered QA agency that suits their mission and needs.

The recognition of cross-border external QA activities of EQAR-registered agencies is designed to further stimulate the recognition of degrees and qualifications and enhance the European dimension to QA.

The Recognizing International Quality Assurance Activity in the EHEA project revealed that QA agencies have rapidly expanded their international activities, and HEIs are keen to take advantage from the opportunities of a cross-border external review. They recognize as main benefits the development of an international profile, a review that best suits their needs, and enhanced recognition of their degrees. However, the project found that the national frameworks are lagging behind: the number of countries that allow their HEIs to work with a suitable QA agency from abroad is small, although cross-border reviews are a reality in almost all EHEA member countries.

International evaluations or accreditations in these countries often happen in addition and parallel to the national, mandatory external QA, rather than being recognized as part of it. This leads to an unproductive duplication of efforts and does not contribute to promoting a genuine European dimension to QA (European Quality Assurance Register, 2014).

In the case of Macao, a competitive international market for both institutional and program QA already exists. In the case studies described above two different HEIs in Macao are both being pro-active in accessing international QA services but have selected different routes to achieve their goals.

In the pilot study, the HEI has taken advantage of the Macao Government's initiative to regulate the market through the establishment of standard guidelines and approval processes for international EQAA undertaking program review in Macao.

Under these arrangements the EQAA and the HEI have to take account of the necessary steps to achieve recognition by the Macao regulatory body of any recommendations following the completion of the cross-border QA process.

Equally they have needed to consider the arrangements for the EQAA's follow up procedures for any recommendations or conditions and how these marry with the jurisdiction's proposed regulatory requirements.

Essentially, what the Macao Government is attempting to do through the pilot study on the program accreditation guidelines under the proposed Higher Education Framework of Macao is to establish a "managed market" for international QA services whereby the HEIs can choose an EQAA that is fit-for-purpose given the nature of their programs, institutional goals, language requirements, etc., while at the same time the selected EQAA must operate within the regulatory framework of standards and processes.

In the LPR, the HEI had undertaken accreditation by professional bodies of its relevant programs first before seeking out program review by HKCAAVQ. Although the accreditation by the professional bodies was more in the nature of a compliance review, they provided a "health check" for the HEI and stimulated their preparation for program review.

These preparations included attending and conducting conferences on QA with the Asia Pacific Quality Network and attendance by staff at INQAAHE conferences. For jurisdictions like Macao, the international market for QA includes training and conferences as well as direct QA services.

HKCAAVQ was identified as a fit-for-purpose EQAA by the HEI as it sought to benchmark its program standards against those in Hong Kong and internationally. The choice of HKCAAVQ as a well-recognized EQAA that regularly used international

panels in its accreditation exercises was deliberate in order to meet their internationalization goals and build up the reputation of the institute and its programs. However, for another program area, the HEI intends to use another well-recognized international EQAA in order to ensure that the program standard can be benchmarked within Macao as this EQAA has already conducted reviews of these programs in other Macao HEIs:

Competition within countries is also intense in many places; is QA seen as a help or a hindrance?

There is no doubt that both of the HEIs in the case studies saw external QA by an internationally recognized EQAA as helpful and essential for achieving their goals of internationalization, reputation building and benchmarking of professional programs to improve the employability of their students within their region.

However, in conducting the exercises it was recognized that there is potential for developing a more robust QA culture within the HEIs. The knowledge and understanding of outcome-based teaching and learning is limited and there is a capacity gap in terms of experience in QA systems and processes. This lack of QA knowledge and experience, rather than QA of itself, may be regarded as a "hindrance" to the future development of the HEIs given their strategic goals and the policy intent of the Macao Government to require all programs of Macao HEIs to undertake program accreditation using the program accreditation guidelines under the proposed Higher Education Quality Assurance Evaluation Framework of Macao.

Conclusions

Each country context is unique and has its own purposes for QA (World Bank, 2007). Engaging in cross-border QA creates significant challenges for the EQAA and for the HEIs involved. Not least among which is the necessity for close communication with the jurisdictional regulatory bodies, which is essential to the conduct of successful cross-border QA. As such, apart from preliminary meetings between the agency and the institution for ensuring a shared understanding of the jurisdictional and institutional context for the forthcoming QA process, it is good practice for the QA agency to meet regularly with the jurisdictional regulatory body to ensure that both parties have a common understanding of the key issues involved.

The experience of HKCAAVQ is that there are also significant benefits to be gained. For the EQAA, these benefits include enhancement of their own reputation and recognition of their effectiveness and capacity. It is also professionally rewarding for the staff and panel members involved in that it expands their own range of knowledge and experience and allows them to contribute to the development of QA in another jurisdiction.

Internationalization is a useful tool for helping institutions upgrade standards and strengthen quality in teaching and learning (Knight, 2005). Cross-border QA is likely to grow in importance and activity in the coming years to enhance the quality of higher education. Hou (2012) states that Asian QA agencies are required domestically to play vital roles in both the national and the international context. The example of Macao provides a useful reference point for governments, HEIs and EQAAs considering engaging in cross-border QA activities.

Note

1. Further information about GAES can be found in their website: https://gaes.gov.mo/eng/overview/introduction

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