Discussion paper on

Asia Pacific Quality Register (APQR)

1. Introduction

The AGM of the Asia Pacific Quality Network (APQN) has endorsed the proposal of the establishment of Asia Pacific Quality Register [APQR] as part of it's Decennial agenda . APQR would be register of external quality assurance agencies [EQAAs] that demonstrate certain thresholds of maturity. An independent external review by peers will be the backbone of the Register. While the primary purpose of the Register is to acknowledge well developed quality assurance agencies, there is an opportunity to open the review process for the institutional members of APQN very selectively. The Board will decide on this matter in due course. This discussion paper is written on the assumption that the quality assurance agencies are the primary clientele of the Register. Institution-oriented procedures will be added on the following if institutions are to be included in future.

2. How is APQR different from Full membership of APQN?

APQN's membership criteria already have the reputation that higher levels of standards are built into the membership review process. While membership in some networks is open to any legitimate quality assurance agency, APQN has published eight criteria that form the basis to determine the type of membership an applicant can avail. They are:

i. Nature of the operations of the agency
ii. Mission statement and objectives
iii. Agency staff - numbers, profile and roles
iv. Profile of reviewers
v. Independence
vi. Resources
vii. External quality assurance criteria and processes
viii. Quality assurance

Agencies wishing to join APQN as Full Members must provide evidence that they fulfill the requirements for all eight criteria while Intermediate members are required to provide evidence that they fulfill the requirements for criteria 1 and 2.Thus, the Full membership already has higher levels of standards built into the membership review process. However, this process is based on a desk review of documentation provided by the applicant and lacks a rigorous external review. The review process for the Register will address this lacuna and provide for an external review of evidence along the lines of 'externality' agencies promote among institutions. In other words, the review process for the Register will help agencies to 'to take their own medicine'.

While elaborating and interpreting the criteria for the purposes of the Register, APQN will also rely on the Chiba Principles. Membership of the APQR would depend on a member also showing adherence to the Principles.

3. Purpose of the APQR

The Board of APQN considers the following as the primary purposes of establishing the Register.

- Provide an aspirational target
- Serve as a quality hallmark
- Basis for mutual recognition
- Service to members
- Basis for cross-border operation of quality agencies / institutions
- Evaluation of the evaluator
- Reference to global stakeholders on trustworthy EQAAs in Asia Pacific

4. Criteria for Recognition by the APQR

A slightly modified set of 11 criteria that takes into account the APQN membership criteria as well as Chiba Principles are:

1. The QAA is a full member of APQN or is a QA body which is valid entity recognised by the appropriate authority in the relevant country/territory/region, and is accountable to stakeholders.
2. The quality assurance agency undertakes quality assurance activities (at institutional and/or program level) on a cyclical basis.
3. The mission statement and objectives of the agency are understood consistently by its stakeholders
4. The profile of the agency staff and the profile of the reviewers the agency uses are consistent with the Mission Statement.
5. 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.
6. The agency has sufficient resources to run its operations in accordance with its mission statement and objectives.
7. 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.
8. An appeals mechanism is available for the institutions.
9. The agency has effective quality assurance measures in place to monitor itself and is subject to occasional review.
10. The agency undertakes research on internal and external quality assurance and provides information and advice to the higher education institutions.
11. The agency cooperates and collaborates with other agencies and key players across national borders.

Recognition by or inclusion in the APQR is based on a review of the agency against its adherence to (or substantial compliance with) above criteria. The 2015 APQN conference is expected to endorse the next version of the Chiba Principles and the Board has already initiated the review process of those principles. The list given above can be used as a trigger to initiate the discussions on the revision of

Chiba Principles. The list draws from two sections of the Chiba Principles: B. Quality Assessment and C. Quality Assurance Agencies.
Acceptance onto APQR is based on 'substantial compliance' with these criteria. Each criterion will be judged 'fully, substantially, partially or non-compliant'; and substantial compliance with the whole set needs full or substantial compliance with each criterion. It is also proposed to offer Intermediate or Candidacy status to those QAAs which are partially compliant being recently established entities . For example, criteria 8 and 10 are still evolving in the Asia-Pacific region and APQN might be able to play a developmental role in encouraging QA agencies to move towards substantial compliance from the base line of 'partial compliance'.

Inclusion to APQR will be valid for a period of five years. The governing body of the Register has the right to cancel the membership if there are circumstances that question the substantial adherence of the agency to the review criteria.

5. Process

An agency may

1. request APQR to implement the review; or
2. present the outcomes of another review and demonstrate that the review was rigorous and independent; or
3. request APQR and another QA network to implement a joint review.

Options one and two are similar to what INQAAHE allows for its review of its members. However, APQN may decide to limit option 2 to the reviews carried out by other QA networks that have an active memorandum of understanding with APQN. In other words, agencies cannot be accepted to the Register based on the outcome of any review but only the ones where the review had been administered by a QA network – APQN or its counterparts. Option 3 becomes useful to QA agencies that wish to undergo a joint review by APQN and another network, such as INQAAHE. For the former, namely review by APQN, the procedures given below have been adapted from the INQAAHE procedures.

5.1. APQR Review

The APQR Council **[APQRC]** is responsible for organising the review, ensuring good practice in the review process and selecting and briefing the members of the panel to be responsible for the review.

i. The agency should submit an expression of interest to the APQN Secretariat requesting for an external review against the APQR Criteria and demonstrating its eligibility for the review.
ii. The Secretariat informs the **APQRC** about the expression of interest. The **APQRC** decides on the eligibility of the applicant. If there are doubts about any aspect of the credibility or maturity of the applicant the **APQRC** will decide not to entertain the application without giving any reasons to the applicant.
iii. If the **APQRC** accepts the expression of interest, scope of the review is discussed with the applicant and a timeline and costing are agreed.

iv. The applicant agency submits a self-evaluation report at least two months prior to the proposed site visit.
v. The Secretariat forwards the submission to the APQR Standing Committee (SC). If the SC finds the documentation in order, it asks the Secretariat to compose a panel in consultation with the **APQRC** and plan the schedule for the review.
vi. The applicant agency is responsible for the practical arrangements with respect to the review, including booking of and paying for travel and accommodation and organisation of the site visit based on instructions from the panel chair.
vii. The Panel will read the review documents, carry out a site visit, and write the report of the review. The Chair of the panel is responsible for developing the program for the site visit and communicating with the agency about the panel membership and other practical details related to the review such as provision of additional information and replies to questions about the self-evaluation report.
viii. The report of the Panel is provided to the **APQRC** and the process as laid out in the next section is followed.

Cost-

Some parameters are required for the fee to be charged by **APQRC**. This must cover the services of the Secretariat and the honoraria of three panel members. There should also be a component of income to APQN till it mentors **APQRC**. 2000 US$ is taken as an indicative figure for the Secretariat's services. The nominal honorarium per day is UNESCO and World Bank rates would be 600 to 800 US$. We can expect that our reviewers will be willing to accept a 250 U$ per day. For a three-day visit, including one day for advance preparation, the honorarium per reviewer would be 1000 U$. The chair should be given an additional 2 day's honorarium.

For a three member panel, the costing would be:

Services of the Secretariat	2500 US$
Honorarium for three reviewers	3000 US$
Fee for the Chair	0500 US$
Total	6000 US$
15% of above towards APQN income	

Air fare + accommodation + all related expenses – to be borne by the applicant agency directly.

5.2. Other Review

Good practice in quality reviews requires independent administration of the review, including such aspects as identification of panel members, preparation of the site visit program and selection of interviewees. Thus, in the case of the review of an agency, these functions should be handled by an independent person or organisation, and not the agency itself. To ensure the credibility of such external reviews APQR will, in the initial years, accept only the reviews administered by a quality assurance network that has collaboration with APQN such as an active memorandum of agreement.

The **APQRC** will need to publish a set of criteria or requirements that the 'other reviews' need to adhere to in demonstrating the objectivity and rigor of the review. These requirements may be in terms of the externality and independence of the body that does the review, independence of the reviewers from the QA agency, size and composition of the review panel, and recency of the review.

If the EQA has been subject to such a review of its operations which includes an evaluation of the EQA against the Chiba Principles or its equivalent, the result of this review may be presented to the **APQRC**, accompanied by evidence that the review was independent of the EQA. An agency would be well-advised to inform **APQRC** in advance of its planned process for the review, to check that the review will indeed be acceptable for the purposes of APQR registration.

A committee of APQR will consider such applications and make recommendations to the **APQRC**.

i. The Committee members consider the evidence and give their assessment to the Secretariat within 2 weeks.
ii. Chair of the Committee summarizes the assessment into a proposed recommendation of the Committee. The proposed recommendation should give the arguments for the proposed **APQRC** decision.
iii. If the Committee agrees on the recommendation and the recommendation is positive, the Chair sends it to the Secretary of **APQRC** who will then send it to the **APQRC**.
iv. If the Committee agrees on the recommendation and the recommendation is negative then the Secretary sends it to the agency with the reasons (copy to APQRC members) and invites the agency to respond or provide further evidence within 2 weeks.
v. The Committee will consider the response and the Secretary sends the recommendation to the **APQRC** (together with the response of the agency in case of a negative recommendation).
vi. **APQRC** members are asked to respond to the President and Secretary 2 weeks whether they agree with the recommendation.
vii. The Secretary sends the decision to the agency.
viii. if the agency is *not* granted registration on the basis of another review it may still proceed to seek an APQR review.

Appeal against the APQRC decision will be considered by APQN Board for initial 3 years and later by APQR Advisory Board.

6. Structure of APQRC

The first APQRC will be appointed for a period of two to three years. Two members will be appointed for two years and two will be appointed for three years to provide continuity to the work of the Council. Proposed composition of a seven-member APQRC is as below:

i. President of the Board or a member of the Executive identified by the APQN Board as Chairperson .
ii. Two QA professionals with credibility to be identified by the Board from the Asia Pacific region, one within and one outside board.

iii. Three members from the stakeholder groups or partners of the initiative such as UNESCO, Association of Universities or Student bodies working at Asia –pacific level (Two of them will be appointed for two years)

iv. An international member from outside the Asia Pacific region, such as EQAR (for two years)

The first APQRC will be appointed by APQN Board with APQN president as Chairperson and APQN secretariat will be APQR Secretariat.

However subsequently after 3 years APQRC will elect it's own president amongst nominees received from above categories as below.

Nominees for 6 i and 6 ii above would come from APQN as founding body of APQR.

Nominations for category 6 iii and 6 iv above will be made by APQR Advisory board, which will comprise all APQR registered EQAAs.

The Committee will have at least one face to face meeting per year in the margins of the APQN annual conference and will rely on electronic discussions to conduct its business.

7. APQR Advisory Board-

APQR Advisory board will comprise all APQR registered EQAAs and it will elect own President and secretary. Role of advisory board is to advise on instruments and functions of APQRC . After first 3 years it will also have major role of nominating members to APQRC as mentioned in article 6 above and to appoint appeals committee to consider appeals against APQRC decision.

Initial APQR Advisory Board would be comprised of APQN's full/intermediate members who have expressed interest in joining APQR.

8. Other Possible Structures

If it is thought preferable, instead of implementing the APQR itself, APQN can facilitate the establishment of a separate entity joining hands with other stakeholders. If this approach is taken, the structure, legal form and establishment of the new entity would need to be decided. Note that INQAAHE was established in New Zealand and EQAR in Belgium as those two countries offer forms with few requirements or constraints. In registering APQN we faced substantial challenges and these challenges will arise if APQR is to be established as a separate independent legal entity.

If a separate entity is the preferred option, there could be a small governing body with nominees from various bodies. These would obviously include APQN, but other additional possibilities are UNESCO, a HEI network, student bodies, etc. In this structure, APQN can influence the developments with the Register only at an arms' length and through its nominee to the independent governing body of the Register. As the governing body of the Register would only have a single function (namely to oversee APQR) it should be quite small and of low cost.

Yet another option is to call this small body the Register's Committee and this will avoid confusions between the reference to the APQN Board and the Register's governing body.

The operation of the process by such a separate entity could be very much as outlined above for the APQN implementation.

9. Finance

If the APQR is established as an arm of APQN, the costs can be kept to a minimum. Charges would be made for an APQN review (Section 5.1 above), and the evaluation of any other review (Section 5.2) can probably be done by an honorary committee, or honorary evaluators appointed for specific reviews.

If a separate body is established, funding sources will need to be identified to support the secretariat and administrative costs. EQAR is largely funded by governments as it was established at the request of governments within the context of the Bologna process. It would be necessary to identify some parties in the Asia-Pacific region (perhaps APEC) who are willing to commit to supporting APQR.

10. Further discussion and directions

1. It is proposed that APQN should set up and mentor APQR for initial 3 years as outlined above. As the number of registered bodies grow and stakeholders develop interest it is expected that APQR can become independent entity like EQAR. Even in that case APQN will have it's role as founder of APQR.
2. After considering inputs and feedback to this discussion paper , a final shape to APQR's founding bodies will be given by APQN Board in next 2 months ie before end of October 2014 APQR will be a reality.
3. Should the register be opened to institutions as well? If yes, we can use Section A of the Chiba principles that addresses IQA. APQN board feels it should not be done at this stage.
4. Should we elaborate the criteria for recognition for the rigorous external review and build the APQR on that or should we build it on the Chiba principles?
5. Where will the funding come from? APQN has committed to provide seed money for the first few years and keep the Register moving hoping that there will be some steady income stream in two –three years and then APQR can think of being on it's own.
6. Who are the other sponsors? Eg. APEC, Asian Development Bank, UNESCO Bangkok, World Bank etc? Similar to the efforts made in the past for funding the network establishment, is there an opportunity to convince the sponsors on the need to promote external review of QA agencies through the Register? At present it is hoped that with lean structure APQR can be self sustaining if there is steady flow of review applications to be on APQR.

11.

Specific comments sought from APQN Members and stakeholders.

While the discussion paper is expected to receive feedback on all aspects proposed, specific views on following issues are most welcome .

a. APQR should include review HEIS at initial stage or not?
b. Outcome of review should include only full recognition / inclusion on APQR or there can be provision for intermediate or candidate status ?

c. Should register be open for QAAs from outside Asia Pacific region as well?
d. Should APQR explore and accept external funding from bodies like APEC, Asian Development Bank, UNESCO Bangkok, World Bank , other government bodies or not ?
e. Can APQN Board act as Appeals authority for first 3 years or let there be separate appeal committee since inception?

Kindly return the page by email after indicting your preferred options to APQN President Dr Jagannath Patil jp.naacindia@gmail.com on or before 30th October 2014.