TOWARDS A SHARED UNDERSTANDING OF QUALITY ASSURANCE

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPLEMENTING A REGIONAL QA FRAMEWORK IN ASEAN

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This is the third Policy Brief issued by the EU Support to Higher Education in the ASEAN Region (SHARE) programme, a four-year initiative by EU and ASEAN to support harmonisation and raise the quality of higher education (HE) systems in Southeast Asia.

The Policy Brief was introduced at SHARE's fourth Policy Dialogue which aimed at paving the way towards a shared understanding of Quality Assurance (QA) in ASEAN and addressed all relevant stakeholder groups, i.e. representatives from regional bodies, HE ministries, commissions and QA agencies, university leadership, labour market and students.

Based on the key findings of the SHARE Study on regional QA the aim is to take stock of the current state of affairs, to identify key challenges and most important needs in the field of QA and to support national and regional actors in ASEAN at all levels of QA policy making. Recommendations will be provided to enable evidence-based decisions and actions that lead to a shared QA policy and contribute to achieving the overall objective of increased harmonisation of HE in the ASEAN region.

In order to unfold the potential of a regional framework, it will be important that agreed QA principles will be turned into practice and do not remain at the level of policy statements. In this regard effective communication plays a pivotal role. The benefits that HE stakeholders can gain from a regional framework need to be communicated at all levels of the system: from governmental bodies in charge to the individual teaching staff at a university.

MAIN FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS OF THE SHARE STUDY

The findings of the SHARE study on QA in the ASEAN region (Niedermeier and Pohlenz 2016) indicated that across the ASEAN Member States (AMS) national HE systems and approaches to QA are organised differently and follow a wide range of standards and procedures, including:

- Different ministries, sometimes multiple ministries, have authority over HE institutions (HEIs).
- Almost all AMS have at least one body that is in charge of external quality assurance (EQA) of study programmes or of HEIs. These bodies are organised differently and have different levels of independence from the state/ministry.
- Quality standards and their use in EQA processes vary across the ASEAN region. The level and scope of external assessments differs among the countries as well.
- In countries where multiple ministries and/or agencies are responsible for QA, regulations and standards are sometimes not well defined and distinctive.

There is a range of regional activities in QA, driven by both regional and international organisations. In contrast to national laws and policies, in general all QA processes and initiatives at ASEAN level are voluntary and, as such, rely on the commitment and engagement of countries and institutions. The three main players in QA at regional level are:

1. The **ASEAN Quality Assurance Network (AQAN)** represents the national External QA Agencies (EQAAs) and HE ministries/commissions in the various ASEAN countries that take charge of QA. AQAN is focussed on setting, developing, and implementing EQA frameworks at a national and regional level. It is affiliated with ASEAN.

2. The **ASEAN University Network (AUN)** has 30 member universities with ten thematic networks that universities in ASEAN can participate in. One of its thematic networks is AUN-QA, which promotes QA at the programme and recently also on the institutional level by utilising agreed criteria and guidelines. AUN-QA is offered to both AUN members and associate members.

3. The **Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization Regional Centre for Higher Education and Development (SEAMEO RIHED)** focuses on harmonising HE in Southeast Asia. It is an intergovernmental organisation established to promote cooperation in education, science, and culture in the region and has been also involved in the establishment of AQAN.

A recent initiative is the ASEAN Quality Assurance Framework (AQAF), which aims at driving harmonisation of QA processes within ASEAN. The AQAF has been developed by AQAN and is expected to serve as a common reference point for EQAAs and HEIs. The framework's principles and statements are generic so as to be adaptive to various political, legal, and cultural settings without compromising the AMS's basic values and traditions. It consists of four interrelated quadrants, each of them based on 10 QA statements.

1. External Quality Assurance Agencies (EQAAs)
2. External Quality Assurance (EQA) standards and processes
3. Internal Quality Assurance (IQA)
4. National Qualifications Frameworks (NQFs)

Based on selected national cases studies, the SHARE study on QA provides the following main conclusions:

- **Commitment**: Within ASEAN there is a strong will by different actors to harmonise HE systems and outcomes for the benefit of the region at all levels.
- **Consolidation**: Some QA systems in AMS are not fully established and consolidated and not all the main elements (e.g. purpose, standards, guidelines for evaluation, procedures, cycles, consequences) are clearly defined.
- **Clarification**: At the ASEAN level, complex structures of meetings and decision making (SEAMEO and ASED) processes exist. Furthermore, the tasks and responsibilities of different organisations dealing with QA are not always clear to HE stakeholders.
- **Communication**: Many stakeholders, particularly those working at QA agencies and universities, are not aware of regional initiatives and their implications at institutional level.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO POLICY MAKERS AT REGIONAL AND NATIONAL LEVELS

Recommendations addressing **policy makers at ASEAN level** suggest a consolidated approach, including:

- **Formulation of QA policies and establishing a monitoring system**: Political statements and goals for harmonisation in HE and QA should be formulated and published, complemented by clear monitoring and follow-up processes.
- **Balancing diversity and harmonisation**: Although diversity of systems must be respected, agreed principles should be followed by all AMS in order to strengthen closer alignment of HE systems.
- **Improving coherence of policy making**: Overlapping governance structures at regional level should be reduced in order to increase efficiency of policy making and implementation. The mandates, roles and tasks of different actors should be clarified.
- **Enabling a participatory process**: A wider group of stakeholder organisations should be engaged in the implementation, follow up, and further development of the regional QA framework in order to increase its legitimacy.

At **national level**, key recommendations focus on:

- **Acceptance**: Regulations and practices must develop from a formalistic and sometimes bureaucratic exercise to a more content-related approach that takes the needs and interests of different stakeholders into account. Particularly, EQA systems and procedures should focus on the development needs of study programmes and institutions within a context of goals and strategies defined by the universities themselves.
- **Consistency**: Multiple standards and duplication of national regulations set by different ministries/ agencies should be avoided in order to reduce the burden on universities.
- **Autonomy**: Supporting EQAAs in their transition to more independence is another mechanism to increased acceptance of EQA processes and outcomes. Since primary responsibility for QA lies with the HEIs, consideration should be also given to granting more institutional and financial autonomy to the broad range of universities in AMS.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE AQAF

The AQAF is meant to be a neutral device, which does not prescribe detailed QA processes and criteria to be met. It serves as an instrument, which on the one hand, provides a reference point for benchmarking of systems; on the other hand, it responds to different national contexts in a flexible manner. Especially in a region with diverse systems, different stages of development, needs, and capacities like ASEAN, this flexibility is important – not only in order to comply with the dynamic nature of QA but also to gain acceptance and political buy-in from all AMS. Nevertheless, a joint vision and understanding of key principles will be necessary, in order to increase the alignment of QA systems and to create a "zone of trust" to enhance regional cooperation and mobility in HE. In this respect strategic communication is of utmost importance. The overall objectives, the purpose and potential of a regional QA framework need to be spelled out clearly and communicated in an understandable manner. Ultimately, the successful implementation of the AQAF relies on the commitment of national governments and requires that they realise the benefits of shared QA policies and principles. Furthermore, both political and university leadership need to create incentives to engage the institutions in turning QA policies into practice.

Therefore, it is recommended to provide clarity and practical tools to stakeholders, especially HEIs, with regards to:

- **Alignment**: National frameworks should clearly state the internal and external QA standards and align these to the AQAF.
- **Independence**: The different dimensions of independence in the field of QA should be defined and minimum criteria of operating EQA processes independently from external influence set.
- **Applicability**: The AQAF should be accompanied by supporting documents that illustrate the generic standards by providing examples of best practice. Guidelines for its application and specific tools for the implementation of QA policies should be developed.

REFERENCES

ASEAN Quality Assurance Network (AQAN). The ASEAN Quality Assurance Framework (AQAF). [http://share-asean.eu/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/AQAF.pdf]

Niedermeier, F. and Pohlenz, P. (2016). State of Play and Development Needs: Higher Education Quality Assurance in the ASEAN Region. Report of the EU Support to Higher Education in the ASEAN Region (SHARE). DAAD: Jakarta. [http://share-asean.eu/published-materials/reports/]

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40 YEARS OF ASEAN-EU RELATIONS IN 2017

SHARE, the European Union Support to Higher Education in the ASEAN Region, is a four-year initiative by the EU and ASEAN. Launched in Jakarta in May 2015, SHARE aims to support ASEAN in harmonising regional higher education by sharing European expertise. It does this through strengthening regional cooperation, enhancing the quality, competitiveness and internationalisation of ASEAN higher education for institutions and students, and thereby contributing to a closer ASEAN community. SHARE is implemented by a consortium of Europe's major international education agencies, led by the British Council and comprised of Campus France, DAAD, EP-Nuffic, ENQA, and EUA. More information on SHARE at www.share-asean.eu