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**Article**

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## QUALITY ASSURANCE IN THE JAPANESE UNIVERSITIES

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### Abstract

The higher education system represents a vital means for a country to nurture its economic development and social cohesion. All over the world there has been an increasing interest in quality assurance (QA) in higher education, reflecting both the growing importance of higher education services and their valuable contribution to societies. As higher education services moves beyond national borders, the need for international cooperation in QA have increased in the last decades. Moreover, there is an internationalization of QA in higher education and the Asia-Pacific region is a good example.

The paper examines the current academic literature surrounding QA in higher education in Asia-Pacific region, emphasizing the case of Japan. Based both on literature review and the experience of a Japanese visiting professor the paper deals with the emergence and development of QA systems in higher education in Asia-Pacific region and focuses on the case of the Japanese higher education system (JHES). The paper shows that the need for international arrangements and approaches to QA in higher education is clearly demonstrated by the case of Asia-Pacific region. It also shows that, facing the challenges of a highly competitive knowledge driven global economy, the region has begun to establish and implement an agreed set of QA principles in higher education. Commitment to quality by all higher education providers from the region has proved to be essential. The importance of quality provision in cross-border higher education made the JHES to implement a new approach in QA.

**Keywords:** quality assurance, higher education, Asia-Pacific region, Japanese higher education system, Japan

**JEL classification:** I 20

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### Introduction

In the age of globalization countries, organizations and people value education both as a mean towards higher economic growth/profit and income and a way of enriching their lives [8]. Countries have recognized the critical role played by higher education in economic development. This is why more and more countries compete not only in the economic field but also in the higher education domain. As developed countries have a higher quality of schooling than other countries they produce more and better human capital.

The rapid spread of economic globalization leads to a deeper internationalization in higher education. The increasing marketisation of higher education services has caused their

incorporation in trade agreements. Trade in higher education services “is a reality today and its future growth is expected to be very significant all over the world” [7, p 3]. In this respect the higher education systems have to re-orient their structure and functions to cope with the challenges of internationalization.

As the mobility of knowledge workers and seekers across the world has significantly increased this “will be dependant on the quality and the standards offered by the educational institutions” [2, p. 1]. Ensuring the recognition of qualifications across the national borders in the long turn has become a fundamental objective of QA systems. The establishment of a QA system has become “a necessity, not only for monitoring quality in higher education delivered within the country, but also for engaging in delivery of higher education internationally” [19, p. 9].

The issue of quality assurance (QA) in higher education has received growing interest from researchers over the past two decades. Given the unique position of higher education in the knowledge based society, QA has a major role to play in signaling excellence. Quality assurance can be defined as “a planned and systematic review process of an institution or program to determine that acceptable standards of education, scholarship, and infrastructure are being maintained and enhanced” [13]. More than ever countries understand that it is important to build a national commitment to QA in higher education. According to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) “a strong quality culture in tertiary education institutions-shared by the academic leadership, staff and students- helps to reinforce the QA system” [17, p. 9].

Since the end of the last century the Asia-Pacific region has become the new global engine of economic growth. Today’s global growth is heavily influenced by Asian countries that previously had little systemic influence. El-Erian argued that “the markets of yesterday collide with those of tomorrow” [1, p. 5]. This is also the case for the markets of higher education services where the Asian market has begun to collide with other markets.

The countries from Asia-Pacific region have recognized that education is the decisive element to prosperity, cooperation, security and peace in the region and beyond. The region has increasingly become a higher education services provider in the world.

Based on the literature review and the experience of a Japanese visiting professor, our paper tries to answer to the following questions:

- Why establish QA principles in the Asia-Pacific region ?
- How does the Japanese higher education system (JHES) deal with QA ?

The first chapter of the paper emphasizes the emergence and development of QA systems in higher education in Asia-Pacific region. The second chapter focuses on the implementation of QA in JHES.

### **1. Quality assurance in higher education: the case of Asia-Pacific region**

In a knowledge-based society all countries are facing big challenges in the tertiary education. The new trends in the global context of higher education services market (e.g., the strong competition, the lifelong learning, the skilled migration, the rapid dissemination of knowledge, the increase in cross-border education, the development of higher education as an export-oriented industry) underline the need to continuously improve the quality of higher education.

Over the past years, the awareness of the importance of QA in higher education has emerged in an increased number of countries from different continents and various attempts to evaluate and assure this type of quality can be noted. The Bologna process has highly contributed to the promotion of European cooperation in QA within the European Higher Education Area. The focus on quality gave birth to the European standards and guidelines for QA adopted by Ministers in Bergen in 2005.

Looking out at what other regions have already initiated, the Asian countries have themselves made efforts towards the enhancement of QA in higher education. Being characterized by a diversity of socio-political, cultural, economic and education systems, the Asia-Pacific region represents the most dynamic part of today's world. Commitment to free trade, investments and economic development has encouraged several countries to become major providers of higher education services in the region (e.g., Australia, Japan, China, South Korea). These countries have allocated important resources to create their own world-class higher education systems and begun to attract more and more international students.

However, the disparity of QA development in the Asia-Pacific region has remained the most important impediment. Such disparity, evident in Vietnam and Cambodia, has contributed to "the inefficiency in developing a formal or common QA cooperation within the region" [10, p. 15]. In this respect the concept of higher education harmonization is rather a new one for many countries of the region, but they have perceived QA as the key mechanism to promote the process of regional harmonization.

In order to improve the quality and standards of the Asian higher education systems there has been increased regional and international cooperation in the field of QA. The need for the adoption and implementation of an agreed set of QA principles in higher education for the Asia-Pacific region has derived mainly from the growing internationalization of higher education. Also, as the higher education systems are very diverse in the region the setup of a shared set of QA principles could [15]:

- increase the international reputation of higher education institutions of the region;
- demonstrate a clear engagement towards assuring quality of higher education;
- facilitate regional mobility and exchange of students, researchers and academic staff;
- improve the economic and social development of the region;
- build trust and confidence among the countries in the region by preserving the national character of the higher education system of each country;
- increase awareness among the QA bodies of the region etc.

This is why the countries of the region decided on the establishment of the Asia-Pacific Quality Network (APQN) in 2005. Being committed to high quality education, the APQN has declared that its mission is to enhance the quality of higher education services in Asia-Pacific region through strengthening the work of quality assurance agencies and expanding the cooperation among them [12].

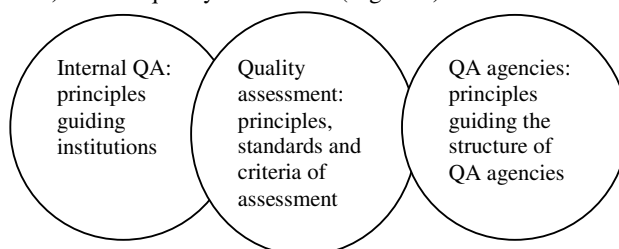
In April 2006, the Brisbane Communiqué initiative was launched by 27 Ministers and senior officials from across the Asia-Pacific region. The Ministers recognized not only the existence of significant differences in their education systems, but also the need to collaborate on important issues in schooling, vocational and technical education and higher education. Striving after both the increase of student and academic mobility and of

qualifications' transferability, the communiqué has promoted the development of a regional QA framework linked to international standards [18].

In February 2008, more than 35 participants from 17 countries of the region agreed on the so-called 'Chiba Principles'. Designed to provide guidance to both higher education institutions and QA agencies these principles aim at:

- continuously enhancing the quality of academic programs in the Asia-Pacific region;
- contributing to the establishment of a strong cooperation among QA agencies;
- complementing national quality frameworks relating to recognition of qualifications, institutions and programs;
- creating a regional alignment in quality assurance practices;
- giving the possibility of benchmarking in QA;
- facilitating student and academic mobility;
- promoting mutual trust and public confidence in the higher education institutions of the region;
- improving transparency and accountability of higher education institutions;
- harmonizing the national approaches regarding QA in higher education;
- encouraging a culture of quality improvement in higher education.

Starting from the basic premise that each country has created its own QA framework for higher education the Chiba Principles recognize that the prime responsibility for quality assurance rests with the individual higher education institutions. The Chiba Principles comprise a set of key principles regarding the institutional QA (e.g., QA culture, internal quality management systems), the QA agencies (e.g., policies and procedures, accreditation, audit) and the quality assessment (Figure 1).



**Figure 1 The structure of Chiba Principles**

In July 2008, the First ASEAN Quality Roundtable Meeting was organized in Kuala Lumpur. The 'Kuala Lumpur Declaration' has emphasized the key role played by QA in promoting harmonization in higher education and advocated the development of QA collaboration and sharing best practices of QA.

The QA agencies in the Asia-Pacific region have been established in different ways as: a governmental agency, a body fully independent of the government (e.g. a group of higher

education institutions creating a QA agency), a buffer body/under a local buffer organization where the government may have a role in its initiation or a body without any role of the government in its foundation (e.g. professional accreditation).

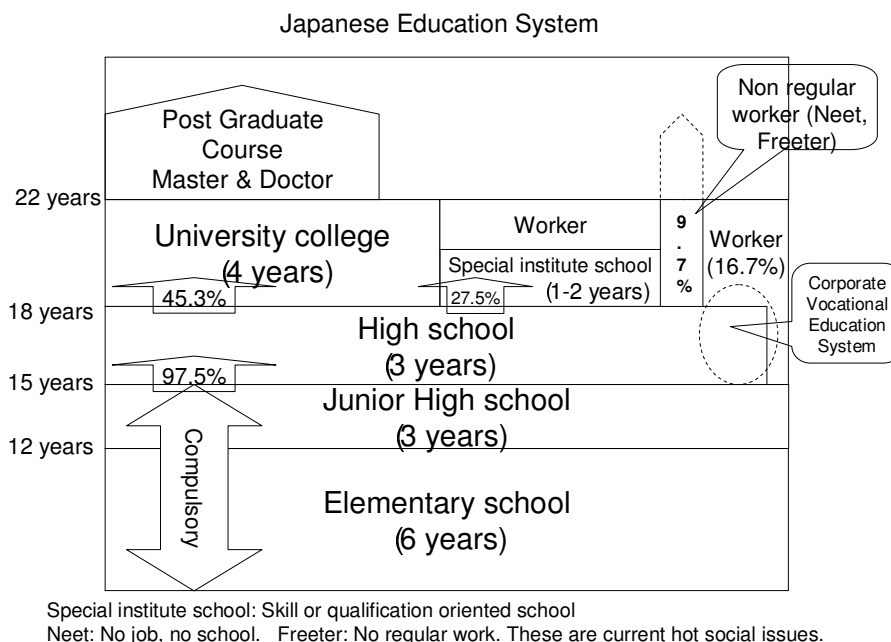
In most of the countries of the region external QA is of relatively recent origin and the QA agencies have varying policies in dealing with the issue of quality in higher education [19]. Major national QA bodies include: the Australian Quality Agency (AUQA), the China Academic Degrees & Graduate Education Development Center (CDGDC) and the Higher Education Evaluation Centre (HEEC) of Ministry of Education in China, the National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC) in India, the National Institute for Academic Degrees and University Evaluation (NIAD-UE) and the Japan University Accreditation Association (JUAA) in Japan, the Korean Council for University Education, the National Accreditation Board (LAN) in Malaysia etc. All of them are currently using three primary modes of QA: assessment, accreditation and audit [6]. With a long tradition in the accreditation of universities, Japan enjoys a worldwide recognition of the quality of its higher education system.

## **2. Quality assurance in the Japanese higher education system**

Japan imported the framework of modern education system from Europe and USA in the Meiji period. A predecessor to the creation of the JHES was founded in 1869 and became the University of Tokyo in 1877. The Japanese universities were heavily influenced by the nineteenth-century concept of the Humboldt University. In the beginning the JHES was dominated by foreign professors and most classes were taught in foreign languages. Due to the high cost of hiring foreigners the government gradually sent Japanese students to overseas universities. After the completion of their studies abroad they returned home and became professors in the Japanese universities. Therefore, the JHES became nationalized, moving in the opposite direction to internationalization [3].

The long Japanization policy of higher education institutions in Japan discouraged the enrolment of foreign students. In the 1980s the government started to reconsider the lack of internationalization of JHES. Hence, in 1983, the Ministry of Education launched 'the Plan to Accept 100,000 Foreign Students' and developed the higher education infrastructure to increase the number of foreign students. In 2003 the number of foreign students in the JHES reached 109,509, thereby achieving the Japanese government's goal. Actually, it was an 'asianization' of the JHES instead of internationalization because the percentage of East Asian students goes beyond 85 % out of the total number of foreign students. Also, the percentage of foreign faculty members increased from .97 % in 1982 to 3.41 % in 2002 [4].

The Japanese education system (Fig. 2) is under the supervision of the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT).



**Figure 2 The Japanese education system**

The Japanese tertiary education includes universities, junior colleges, colleges of technology and specially courses at specialized training colleges (professional training colleges). The Japanese universities are at the heart of the tertiary education. In 2007 there were 765 Japanese universities out of which 86 national universities, 90 local universities and 589 private universities. The School Education Law (Law no. 26 of 31 March 1947) clearly specifies the goals of each of these types of institutions (Table 1).

**The goals of the institutions of the Japanese tertiary education**

Table 1

| No. | Type           | Main objective  |
|-----|----------------|---|
| 1.  | University     | To conduct teaching and research in depth in specialized academic subjects as well to provide broad knowledge as a centre of learning and to develop intellectual, moral and practical abilities. |
| 2.  | Junior college | To conduct teaching and research in depth in specialized academic subjects and to cultivate such abilities as are required in vocation or practical life.   |

| No. | Type                         | Main objective  |
|-----|------------------------------|---|
| 3.  | Technical college            | To teach specialized academic subjects in depth and to cultivate the abilities required for certain vocations.  |
| 4.  | Special technical school     | To develop the abilities necessary for certain vocation or practical life or to enhance cultural standards.   |
| 5.  | Graduate school              | To provide teaching and conduct research in the theory and application of a science. To explore and pursue the field deeply and to contribute to the progress of culture. |
| 6.  | Professional graduate school | To teach and research scientific theory and applications, and cultivate the scholarship and superior skill needed for jobs requiring high levels of expertise.            |

In the 1990s the JHES faced different challenges as: the bubble economy, the decline of the 18 year old population, the technological evolution, the globalization of higher education. Due to those challenges and in order to improve the quality of the JHES and achieve a higher performance the Japanese government has introduced important changes in the tertiary education in the last two decades. The first major change occurred in 1991 when the University Council, which was an advisory organization to the Ministry of Education, recommended that the self-evaluation system of the activities of universities should be introduced for the improvement of education and scientific research functions. The majority of academic staff was reluctant to the idea of an evaluation by an external party (e.g. government, external peers).

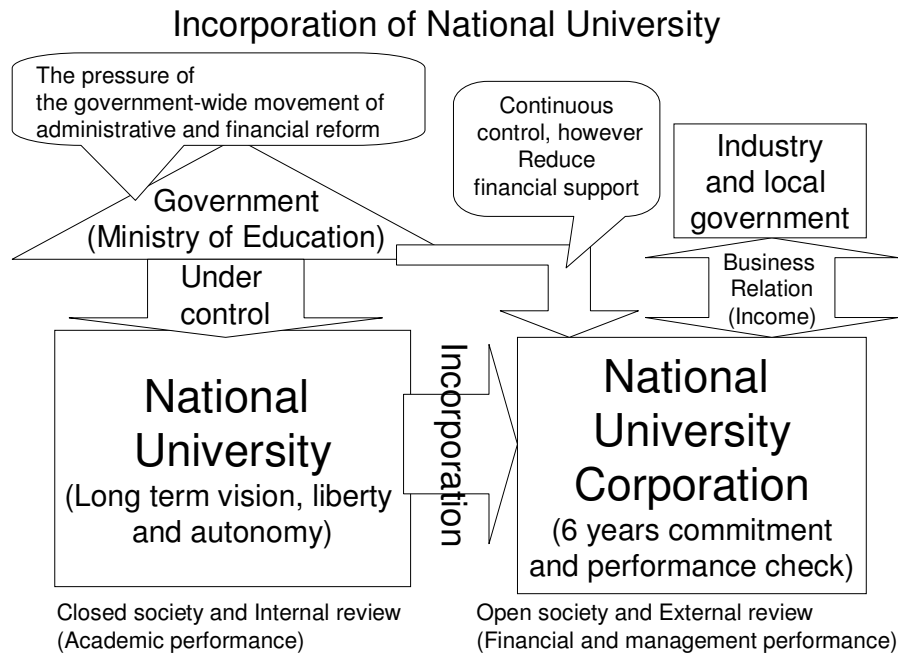
The second change was in 2001 when the Council for Regulatory Reform, which was established in the Cabinet office of the government, published the report on the regulatory reform of the government. The council proposed both the introduction of a continuous accreditation run by third-party organizations. The MEXT accepted the council's recommendation, introduced the new accreditation system and decided that all universities have to be external evaluated every 7 years or less by a QA agency authorized by the Ministry [5]. By 2005 and 2006, the following four QA agencies were authorized by the MEXT: the NIAD-UE, the JUAA, the Japan Institution for Higher Education Evaluation (JIHEE) and the Japan Association for College Accreditation. From 2004 to 2007, 269 higher education institutions were evaluated and accredited by these Japanese QA agencies.

Founded by the Japanese government in 2000, the NIAD-UE accredits and evaluates public universities. Its accreditation criteria are as follows: mission of the university, organization for education and research, faculty staff and educational assistants, student admission, curriculum and method for education (undergraduate degree programs, postgraduate degree programs, professional degree programs), achievement of education, student services, facilities and equipment, system for improving quality of education, finance and management [9]. The JUUA is an independent organization of universities established to improve the quality of universities in 1947.

The third change occurred in 2004, when all national universities, which used to be state universities, were incorporated. The purpose of the incorporation was to promote and



continue university reform by providing a more autonomous status to university. The Japanese government allowed them to manage their institutions by their will and responsibility (Fig. 3). The National University Corporation Evaluation Committee of the MEXT evaluates national universities corporations every 6 years.



**Figure 3 Incorporation of National University**

All the changes that have been recently carried on in Japan as the incorporation of national universities, the introduction of a certified evaluation system, the increase of flexibility of establishment approvals and the creation and implementation of capable QA mechanisms are parts of the whole reform in higher education.

In essence, a higher quality of the JHES has been required by various interrelated factors as:

- the massification of the Japanese higher education;
- the internationalization of higher education;
- the increasing marketisation of higher education services;
- the high societal expectations towards Japanese universities in a knowledge-based society;
- the progress of the information and communication technologies;
- the high expectations of the Japanese society regarding the research and teaching functions of the universities in the knowledge-based society- the societal expectations toward universities;
- the decline of the company in-house training function due to economic stagnation;

- the need to obtain international assessments on tertiary education;
- the aging society with few children and the decline of the 18 year old bracket population;
- the need to increase labour productivity;
- the need to expand the research and scientific capabilities;
- the full exploitation of the human resources development function of tertiary education in order to continue to produce a better personnel;
- the increasing development of the service industry;
- the diversification of the values from a focus on physical wealth to one on spiritual wealth;
- the changing and diversifying forms of employment;
- the extended economic downturn after the collapse of the bubble economy etc.

As the JHES is a highly complex system QA in higher education must reflect a recognition of this fact [11]. QA in the JHES was basically entrusted to the autonomous efforts of the universities themselves by self-evaluation in the late 1990s. Since 2004 the third-party evaluation and accreditation of universities has begun in Japan. In sum, making continuous efforts to enhance the quality of the JHES represents a key task not only for the Japanese government or universities. Guaranteeing the quality of higher education is the Japanese nation's responsibility.

### **Conclusions**

The need for QA in higher education has become more pressing in the context of the massification of tertiary education, the emergence of a growing diversity of educational offerings and the increasing internationalization of higher education. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century internationalization constitutes both a necessary and a critical element for all higher education systems within the Asia-Pacific region. The cross-border mobility of students, academic staff and programs which has increased over the last decades requires actions from governments to ensure that frameworks of QA and mutual recognition facilitate this mobility on a global scale. In order to establish a new international regulatory framework to deal with these challenges QA represents an essential element in a more and more trade oriented international higher education market.

An increasing interest in Asian countries regarding the Bologna process has emerged in the beginning of this century. The paper shows that the need of an international approach to QA in higher education is clearly demonstrated by the Asia-Pacific region.

The diversity of Asia-Pacific region reflects the variations in QA frameworks of its countries. The QA agencies of the Asia-Pacific region countries have varying policies in dealing with the issue of quality in higher education and in many countries the external QA evaluation assessment is of relatively recent origin. The existing QA systems in higher education often not adequately address internationalization. In spite of the heterogeneity of the higher education systems and of an uneven development of their QA systems the countries of the region have established regional networks to ensure quality of higher education at internationally comparable standards.

The share of Japan in the international higher education market has continuously increased in the last decades. As the Japanese universities have become increasingly diversified their QA systems have become more important. The paper shows that QA in the JHES is

strongly related to various interrelated factors. Further studies should address a benchmarking between the Japan and other major higher education providers from the Asia-Pacific region regarding their QA systems in higher education.

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