Evolution of quality assurance in higher education from INQAAHE GGP to ISGs – Are quality assurance agencies in Asia ready to the emerging modules?

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Abstract

Purpose – In 2022, the International Network for Quality Assurance (QA) Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE) published the new guidelines by adding three QA modules in response to the changing higher education landscape. The paper aims to investigate the transformative focus of quality assurance in higher education globally as well as Asian response to three new QA modules according to the INQAAHE ISGs.

Design/methodology/approach – The research conducted a quantitative approach for data collection. An on-line survey was conducted to perceive QA practices, perceptions toward new emerging QA modules and challenges encountered. In total, there were 26 responses from 18 territories with 22 QA agencies. A total of 13 out of them have a national qualifications framework in place.

Findings – Three are three major findings in the study. First, national policy and criteria and standards in distance education have been developed in the majority of Asian nations. Second, non-signatories of the Tokyo Convention had a higher proportion of having related policies, regulations and criteria in CBHE and distance education. Third, national policies and regulations; and lack of professional staff are two common challenges implementing QA in new types of providers.

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Originality/value – The findings are of value for policymakers, QA agencies and universities to advocate the new QA model as a systematic approach in response to changing higher education landscape in the post pandemic era.

Keywords Quality assurance, INQAAHE, Higher education, Qualification recognition

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

Due to severe global competition for talent and resources in the era of higher education massification, higher education institutions are expected to respond to these "new" challenges. Nevertheless, the attention on how the quality is redefined and what standards and criteria should be developed, has been intensified, particularly during outbreak of the pandemic. Concurrently, *diversification, relevance and sustainability* have been regarded as three core elements of quality assurance (QA) measures and arrangements in higher education (INQAAHE, 2022; Harvey & Stensaker, 2022). Quality assurance agencies (EQAA) and accreditors, in most nations, cannot stop evolving in order to "meet both the changing expectations of universities, governments, and students" (Matear, 2018, p. 1). As a quality regulator as well as a future thinker for higher education development, EQAAs and accreditors are often expected to embrace diversity of higher education system, seek for institutional efficiency, empower universities in this transformative age (Hou, Hill, Guo, Tsai, & Justiniano Castillo, 2020).

In 2022, the International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE), the largest global QA network, published the new guidelines titled *International Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in Tertiary Education (ISGs)* with three new QA modules in cross border education, short learning program and distance education, in response to the changing higher education landscape in the post pandemic era (INQAAHE, 2022). Given that there is a growing number of students choosing to study abroad after the 2000s, another key aspect for quality assurance practices is its convergence with the recognition of qualifications and linkages with national qualifications framework (Knight, 2004; Hou, Lu, Grace, Chen, & Guo, 2023).

Higher education in Asia, and its quality assurance (QA) mechanisms have undergone several phases of reforms. It is imperative to explore the effective QA methods to renovate higher education and to engage varying stakeholders in the development of new quality standards in the post COVID-19 era. Thus, the paper aims to investigate the transformative focus of QA in higher education globally and in Asia. Through an international online survey targeting Tokyo Convention signatories and active full members of INQAAHE and Asia Pacific Quality Network (APQN), Asian accreditors' responses to three emerging QA modules and new initiatives addressed in the INQAAHE ISGs are discovered. Barriers and challenges are discussed at the end of the paper. Based on above, three research questions are addressed as follows,

RQ1. What are the common characteristics of QA in higher education globally and in Asia after 2000?

RQ2. How do EQAAs and accreditors in Asia respond to three QA modules of the INQAAHE ISGs and other emerging initiatives?

RQ3. How would three QA modules be integrated into qualifications recognition system from an Asian QA perspective? And what challenges are national QA systems in Asia confronting?

2. Literature review

2.1 An overview of QA development, qualification recognition and regional conventions

QA has existed for more than a century, since it first appeared in the USA. Global QA development can be generally categorized into the three main stages, prior to 2000. As an outset

of the first wave, beginning around the 1900s, EQAAs in the USA as self-directed organizations "emerged from efforts to standardize a diverse system" due to economic concern and consumer protection (Kinser, 2021, p. 2). The second wave came after Second World War and European countries, such as UK and Ireland started to establish national external quality assurance mechanism in order to "help guide the development of a rapidly growing and diversifying sector" during the 1960s. In this stage, two conflicting QA rationales aiming at both state control and quality enhancement often intertwined with each other (Harvey, 2018; Harvey & Stensaker, 2022). It was not until the 1990s that the third wave of external QA started with an explosion of the establishment of varying EQAAs, professional accreditors, and self-funded agencies. During the period, INQAAHE was formed in 1991 in Hong Kong by 18 EQAAs.

Moving into the 21st century, an evolution of QA has gone faster with a focus of "accountability" in response to several global manifestations in higher education, including massification, internationalization, and marketization, privatization as well as domination of global rankings (Harvey, 2018; King, 2018). When the pandemic outbroke, global QA systems started to experience such a disruption over their traditional external review modes and standards, "which led to the need to reimagine, re-invent and redesign the diverse aspects of higher education to enhance relevance, trust and credibility in performance" (INQAAHE, 2021, p. 1). Hence, in addition to student learning outcomes and educational efficiency, the pandemic crisis of 2020 has caused national QA systems to pay more attention to stakeholders' engagement, social impacts and innovation, as well as how to integrate third mission into the standards and indicators (Kaiser, Melo, & Hou, 2022; Hou *et al.*, 2021b, 2022).

In general, evidence-based, enhancement-led and an emphasis of institutional self -review are adopted principles in most quality assurance systems (Martin & Stella, 2007; Harvey & Stensaker, 2022). Audit, accreditation, assessment/inspection and external examination/ national examination are considered as four popular ways of quality assurance practices worldwide (Harvey, 2018; Harvey & Stensaker, 2022). There are some common characteristics for these quality assurance arrangements. First, given the fact that EQAAs with their legitimate status often adopt "the approach of fitness for purposes", standards and indicators developed by EQAAs are provided for institutional self-regulation according to their mission and vision (Martin & Stella, 2007). Second, self-assessment reports, peer review, and onsite visits are core components of quality assurance exercises (Harvey & Newton, 2007). Universities should undertake a self-assessment procedure in compliance with the standards and indicators developed by EQAAs prior to an onsite visit (INQAAHE, 2016). Third, university performance and accountability are measured by both quantitative and qualitative approaches (Martin & Stella, 2007). Concurrently, internal quality assurance has gained more and more attention, vice versa likely reflecting the issues of state controls and EQA domination over decades (Stensaker *et al.*, 2011; INQAAHE, 2016). As Harvey (2018) argued, "the greater effectiveness over external process is another perspective that endured for more than a decade" (p. 19), QA needs to be more diverse, relevant and transformative in order to empower higher education institutions (INQAAHE, 2022).

QA is commissioned to align with qualification recognition systems owing to global talent mobility in some regions in the early 2010s (Knight, 2004; OECD, 2005). Although QA and qualification recognition schemes are part of national regulatory frameworks in most contexts, a divergence of qualification recognition and external quality assurance exists due to being operated by different authorized bodies (Hou, Morse, & Wang, 2017). To facilitate overseas qualification recognition globally and regionally, cooperation between quality assurance and recognition bodies has been highlighted in the UNESCO organized six Regional Conventions and Global Convention (Hou, Hill, Chan, Chen, & Tang, 2021). There are two major aims at these regional and global conventions while quality assurance is considered as a prerequisite: one is to promote international cooperation in higher education; and the other is to reduce obstacles to the recognition of degrees and qualifications (UNESCO Bangkok, 2013; Hou *et al.*, 2021).

2.2 Development and transformation of QA in Asian context after 2000

To respond to the growing social demand, system expansion and privatization, the establishment of QA systems became a national agenda concern in Asian nations (Martin & Stella, 2007; Hou *et al.*, 2023). After 2000, the development of EQA systems in Asia can be categorized into three phases.

(1) As a policy instrument under neo-liberalism (2000 ~ 2013)

In the first phase of QA development in Asia, quality assurance was regarded as a policy instrument for reforming higher education systems, assessing higher education providers' accountability (Harvey & Newton, 2007; Hou *et al.*, 2020) as well as the pursuit of academic excellence under neo liberalism (Jarvis, 2014; Hou *et al.*, 2023). In this phase, EQAAs and higher education institutions in Asia also found themselves grappling with the challenge of aligning with international educational standards and started to borrow quality policy, accreditation modes, and standards from advanced systems. Notably, several international organizations provided quality guidelines, principles for accountability and recognition of quality assurance agencies and accreditors, including INQAAHE, APQN. In the phase, QA professionalism is optimized while "the fitness for purpose" approach is implicated in the region (Karakhanyan & Stensaker, 2020). Yet, there were several critical voices arguing that QA associated with national authority is "bureaucratic, formalistic, centralized, and time consuming" (Harvey & Stensaker, 2022, p. 85). Besides, it was challenged by lacking evidence on the improvement of teaching and learning (Bloch, Degn, Nygaard, & Haase, 2021). As Westerheijden, Stensaker, Rosa, and Corbett (2014) highlighted "the adoption of quality assurance schemes becomes a process of copying instruments and policies that exist elsewhere, or to legitimate political action regardless of its actual effect" (p. 3).

(2) Linking to qualification recognition and regional Convention due to a rapid growth of international student mobility (2011 ~ 2019)

In the second phase from 2011 to 2019, the inclusion of new quality assurance modules in national qualifications framework and overseas qualifications recognition system has gained greater attention regionally owing to a growing number of Asian students pursuing international education (ANICCW, 2019). According to the "Education at a Glance" students from Asia are the largest group of international students enrolled in tertiary education programmes at all levels, contributing to 58% of all mobile students (OECD, 2022, p. 218). Moreover, the UNESCO 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015 has triggered the integration of QA and qualifications framework and necessitated a compatible recognition system cross border (United Nations, 2023; Chakroun, 2017). Given that a national qualifications framework acts as a quick reference guide on the recognition of foreign qualifications and facilitates the mobility of students, workers, and professionals across the regions, Asian governments are pressured to build a flexible pathway for different types of learning outcome to be recognized, to connect the educational institution and the labor market, and finally to make the qualifications system sustainable (Hou *et al.*, 2023).

Revised in 2011, the Tokyo Convention launched first in 1983, has become a legal framework providing general guidelines to facilitate the implementation of regional co-operation regarding the recognition of higher education qualifications in the region. Emphasis of on students' learning outcomes and employability started to drive Asian EQAAs to be aligned with international standards and engage the development of national qualifications framework and recognition system. In 2019, 12 member states ratifying the Tokyo Convention established National Information Centers under the umbrella of *the Asia-Pacific Network of National Information Centers (APNNIC)* (APNNIC, 2023). Related quality and qualification information should be published on the APNNIC website, such as

educational system, quality assurance review outcomes, list of recognized higher education institutions as well as related quality policy and regulations (Noda & Hotta, 2023).

(3) A shift of multi-facet QA roles during the pandemic (2020 to present)

In the third phase, a call for "the build-up of new systems for external quality assurance" is getting stronger and stronger. INQAAHE and APQN have taken a proactive approach in support with those agencies interested in system changes, including developing a virtual mode for site visits; forming new standards for non-traditional providers (Salmi, 2020; Hou *et al.*, 2022; INQAAHE, 2022). As Lamie and Hill (2023) indicated that "governance methods of new providers need to be in place and these will need to be agreed at a sector level to provide quality assurance and mutual recognition" (p. 167). Therefore, it could be observed that QA in this period will likely adeptly integrate pressing global themes such as diversity, digitalization, relevance and sustainability into a new comprehensive QA scheme. To summarize, QA in Asian higher education is learning to transform itself from a focus of quality of traditional and local providers to diversification and relevance of educational system that would ensure student outcomes, respond social demand and address global concerns.

2.3 Transition of INQAAHE QA guidelines and emergence of three new modules

As the INQAAHE aims to be a platform for information-sharing on good practices and for quality improvement in higher education between EQAAs, it has developed good principles and practices, entitled the Guidelines of Good Practice in Quality Assurance in 2003 and revised in 2006. In 2016, INQAAHE amended the Guidelines, with focuses on QA of cross-border higher education, integrity of EQAAs and the links to the QA community (INQAAHE, 2016). By 2023, 16 national EQAAs have been recognized as the GGP aligned agencies in compliance with the INQAAHE GGP (INQAAHE, 2023).

As indicated above, "a 'one-size-fits-all' approach to QA in tertiary education no longer serves the needs of diverse stakeholders and societies" (INQAAHE, 2022, p. 2). The 2022 INQAAHE ISGs are expected to "embrace the ever-increasing diversity in tertiary education (formal and non-formal) and empower the enhancement capacity of QA providers in their quest for diversification, efficiency, relevance, and transformative power" (INQAAHE, 2023, p. 1). One of the manifestations is to recognize the high level of maturity of quality assurance agencies and facilitate them to moving from "efficiency (fitness for purpose) to relevance and transformative capacity" (INQAAHE, 2022, p. 12). In addition to the Baseline Standards module, which originated from the 2016 edition, three new sets of QA modules were built, including *cross-border QA/QA of cross-border education; QA of short learning programs, and QA of distance education*.

(1) Cross-border QA/QA of cross-border education

There are two sub-dimensions in these modules, including cross-border QA and QA of cross-border education. The former means that EQAAs provide QA services over the institutions outside the country; such as international accreditation; the latter refers to EQAAs that conduct QA/accreditation of domestic education units that operate across the borders of their legal incorporation, such as branch campuses (INQAAHE, 2022). In the cross -border module, EQAAs should demonstrate their mandates, have policy and review procedures in place, develop appropriate and relevant standards, and ensure a fair recognition system of review outcomes in cross-border education. In particular, EQAAs should be aware of the importance in alignment with international guidelines and regulations, understanding cultural and contextual differences, and ensuring review outcomes and status recognized in both domestic and international contexts.

(2) Short learning program (Micro-credentials)

INQAAHE defined a short learning program as "a set of activities shorter than a full degree that culminates in learner assessment and the award of a credential, which should be designed in line with UNESCO ISCED levels 4–8" (INQAAHE, 2022, p. 44). Micro-credentials are one of the examples. Micro-credentials recognize a skill or competency that has been acquired through an organized learning process and validated through an assessment (OECD, 2021). With characteristics of flexibility, relevance to industry and shorter learning periods, micro-credentials became popular and spread rapidly during the pandemic (Hunt, 2020). The ISGs put an emphasis on scope of external review standards in flexibility, employability, assessment and recognition in the module. Most importantly, Standard 3.3. highlighted that "academic integrity should be at the core of related policies, activities and practice" (INQAAHE, 2022, p. 33).

(3) Distance Education

Distance education in the module is defined as "education imparted at a distance through the use of information/communication technology" (INQAAHE, 2022, p. 42) in both modes of online and blended. With its accessibility, affordability, flexibility, learning pedagogy, life-long learning policy, distance education becomes attractive for higher education institutions (Dhawan, 2020). Concurrently, the pedagogy, technology, infrastructure development, student support, and learning outcomes that accompany the teaching and learning process have become the focus of new attention in distance education (Hassan, 2021). The Module 4 of the ISGs presented a set of standards and measures for QA of online and blended modalities of distance education. More specifically, EQAAs should have clear policies to ensure that online or blended programs are authorized for their operations and the qualifications awarded are recognized.

All in all, the ambition of the INQAAHE ISGs is to act as one of significant references to reflect higher education diversification, to empower EQAAs, as well as to fulfill the need of varying stakeholders in the post pandemic era. By examining the content of the INQAAHE ISGs, QA is encouraged to transform itself gradually from *a limited focus on a local context to an international scenario*; *from one-fit-all to diversity mode*, and *from recognition to relevance and engagement as* shown in Figure 1.

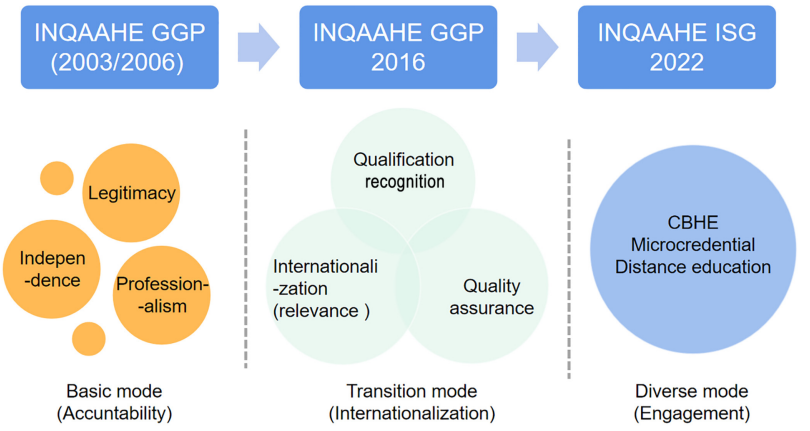


Figure 1.
Conceptual framework for QA evolution according to INQAAHE guidelines

Source(s): Figure developed by authors

3. Methodology

The research conducted a quantitative approach for data collection. Due to the lack of transnational data in the current situation of EQAAs in Asian context during and after the pandemic, an on-line survey was conducted to perceive current QA practices, perceptions toward new emerging QA modules and challenges encountered. *Purposive sampling* was applied to select participating EQAAs from that are judged to better capable to share useful information with the researchers (Neyman, 1992). According to the research questions and theoretical framework, the study targeted on 24 EQAAs at 22 territories, including 15 EQAA from 12 signatories of Tokyo Conventions and 11 active EQAAs at INQAAHE and APQN. Each EQAA was invited to recommend 1–2 senior administrator, staff or researcher to fill in the survey. In order to distribute the survey efficiently, the research team searched the liaison information of selected EQAAs from multiple sources, including the INQAAHE website, APQN website, and official websites of the selected agencies.

The online survey took place from July, 2023 to Sept, 2023 by three rounds of questionnaire distribution. The consent form was signed by all participants, who were invited to complete in the survey voluntarily. In total, there were 26 responses collected from 18 territories with 22 EQAAs. A total of 13 out of them have a national qualifications framework in place (Table 1).

The study took advantage of cross-national comparisons approach to analyze survey results. First, the collected responses were simply analyzed by mean and standard deviation. Second, four common indicators, including Pillai's Trace, Wilk's Lambda, Hotelling's Trace and Roy's Largest Root were applied to test differences between QA respondents with NQF and the ones without in terms of level of difficulties in the implementation of new QA modules by MANOVA (Hair, Black, Babin, & Anderson, 2019).

	Territory	Number of respondents	Number of agencies
Signatories to the Tokyo Convention	Armenia (v)* 8	1	1
	China (x)	1	1
	Japan (x)	3	2
	Mongolia (x)	2	1
	New Zealand (v)	2	2
	10		
	Russia (x)	2	2
	South Korea (v) 8	1	1
	Turkey (v) 8	1	1
Subtotal	8	13	11
Non-signatories to the Tokyo Convention	Croatia (v)8	1	1
	Hong Kong (v) 7	1	1
	Indonesia (v) 9	1	1
	Kazakhstan (v) 8	1	1
	Malaysia (v) 8	1	1
	Romania (v) 8	1	1
	Spain (v) 8	1	1
	Taiwan (x)	4	2
	Thailand (v) 6	1	1
	Vietnam (v) 8	1	1
Subtotal	10	13	11
Total	18	26	22

Note(s): "v" means having national qualification framework and level
Source(s): Table developed by authors

Table 1. Distribution of respondents by signatory status of the Tokyo Convention

4. Major findings

4.1 National regulatory framework and QA policy for new QA modules by the INQAAHE ISGs

4.1.1 High level of awareness of INQAAHE guidelines. First of all, the study found that more than 90% of the QA respondents were aware of the INQAAHE's two guidelines, including GGP and ISGs. Moreover, 23 out of 26 respondents knew the content of the two guidelines, approximately 88%. Half of the respondents indicated that their agencies were the INQAAHE GGP aligned members (See Table 2).

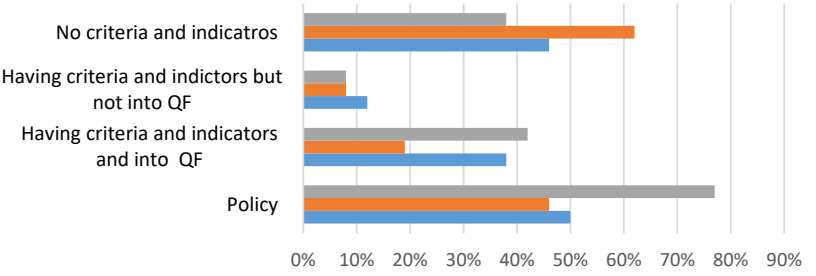
4.1.2 National policy and criteria and standards in distance education had been developed in the majority of Asian nations. When it came to national regulatory and QA criteria and indicators development in three modules, it was found that more than 77% of the respondents replied that they had the national policy for distance education in place and 50% developed the quality criteria and indicators for distance education. 42% of the respondents integrated distance education into national qualifications system, followed by CBHE with 38% and micro-credentials 19%. Subsequently, more than 62% of QA respondents said that there were no criteria and indicators for micro-credentials, and 46% for CBHE. (Figure 2).

The respondents were requested to share whether there were national policy, framework or guidelines for inclusion of "university social impact" into QA system. 52% indicated that they have had national policy in place, but did not develop criteria and indicators yet. In other

Items	Positive (yes)	Negative (no)
Heard of GGP	96% (25)	4% (1)
Know GGP content	88% (23)	12% (3)
GGP alignment	54% (14)	46% (12)
Heard of ISGs	92% (24)	8% (2)
Know ISG content	88% (23)	12% (3)

Source(s): Table developed by authors

Table 2. The percentage of respondents' perception toward the INQAAHE guidelines



	Policy	Having criteria and indicators and into QF	Having criteria and indictors but not into QF	No criteria and indicatros
Distance education	77%	42%	8%	38%
Microcredential	46%	19%	8%	62%
CBHE	50%	38%	12%	46%

Source(s): Figure developed by authors

Figure 2. Percentage of responses by three QA dimensions

words, *university social impact* has gained recognition by national higher education policy, but not by EQAAs.

When it came to level of importance, there is a consistency that the respondents agreed highly on inclusion of distance education integrated into qualification framework with a ratio of 4.23, following by CBHE and micro-credentials and social impacts, like their positive responses in national policy and regulatory framework above (Table 3). To our surprise, the level of difficulty was not as higher as the level of importance. Examining the correlation of two items, it was found that there is no significance between level of importance and level of difficulty (Table 4).

4.2 Comparison between QA agencies of Tokyo Convention member and non-Tokyo Convention members

Comparing QA respondents of signatories of the Tokyo Convention and of non-signatories, it was found that non-signatories had a higher proportion of having related policies, regulations and criteria in CBHE and distance education. One of the possible causes could be that 9 out of 10 are active INQAAHE and APQN members with national qualifications framework and their QA systems are more mature, such as Malaysia, Thailand, Hong Kong (Table 5).

Regarding a convergence between QA and QF, QA respondents of Tokyo Convention signatories tended to consider both CBHE and distance education more important with a highest score of 4.08, in contrast, non-signatories preferred *distance education* with a score 4.38 (Table 6). When it comes to the level of difficulty, both considered micro-credentials quite challenging.

4.2.1 All QA respondents considered that CBHE should be integrated into standards framework, vice versa, those non-signatories started to pay more attention to sustainability. Regarding the first priority for EQAAs which should respond first and integrate into current standards framework, it was found that CBHE was the first selection by most QA

All samples ($N = 26$)

	Mean	Standard deviation	Confident interval Lower	Upper
CBHE importance	4.04	1.00	3.63	4.44
CBHE difficulty	3.35	0.89	2.99	3.71
MC importance	4.00	0.89	3.64	4.36
MC difficulty	3.69	0.84	3.35	4.03
DE importance	4.23	1.61	3.58	4.88
DE difficult	3.50	0.91	3.13	3.87
SI importance	3.92	0.70	3.63	4.21
SI difficulty	3.60	1.00	3.19	4.01

Source(s): Table developed by authors

Table 3. Average score of importance and difficulties for integrating QA into QF

All samples ($N = 26$)

	CBHE importance	MC importance	DE importance	SI importance
CBHE difficulty	0.07	0.20	−0.37	0.11
MC difficulty	−0.03	0.11	−0.18	0.24
DE difficult	0.02	0.15	−0.28	0.26
SI difficulty	−0.17	0.22	−0.31	0.19

Source(s): Table developed by authors

Table 4. Significance between level of importance and difficulty

respondents. In comparison, QA respondents of the Tokyo Convention signatories considered distance education as the top; vice versa, non-signatories considered measuring "sustainability" as significant and urgent (Figure 3).

Comparing the difficulty of a convergence between QA and QF in CBHE, micro-credentials, and distance education modules, the study found there was no significant difference between the Tokyo Convention signatories or non-signatories; or those having qualification framework or without it by applying MANOVA test (Hair *et al.*, 2019) (Table 7). Yet, with the urgent need of recognition of cross-border qualifications and other types of providers, developing national qualifications framework can be regarded a stepping stone to diversity and relevance of QA, but it will take time to achieve the ultimate goal in Asia.

4.3 National policies and regulations, and lacking professional staff are two common challenges implementing QA in new types of providers

The study found that different factors would affect the external review process and outcomes of CBHE, micro-credentials and distance education immensely (Figure 4). In general, national policies and regulations, and lacking professional staff are two common challenges

Table 5.
Comparison between quality assurance at signatories of Tokyo Convention and non-signatories

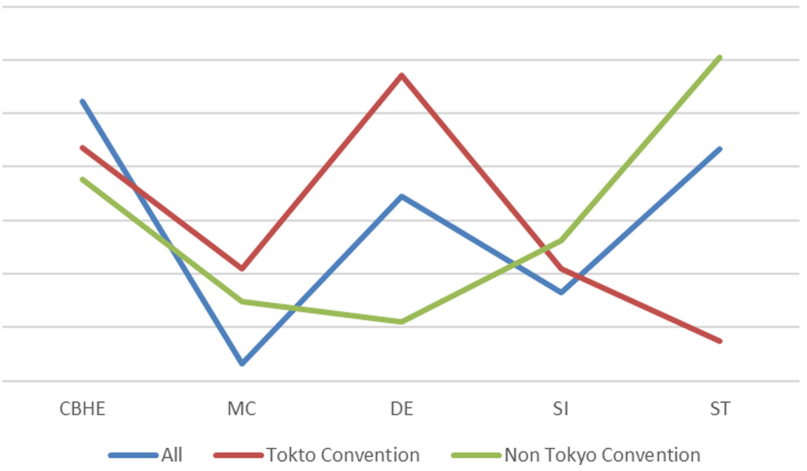
	Cross-border higher education (CBHE)		Micro-credentials (MC)		Distance education (DE)	
	National policy	Review criteria	National policy	Review criteria	National policy	Review criteria
Signatories to the Tokyo Convention	42%	34%	54%	16%	75%	25%
Non-signatories to the Tokyo Convention	62%	62%	50%	39%	85%	77%

Source(s): Table developed by authors

Table 6.
Average score of importance and difficulties for integrating QA into QF by signatories and non-signatories

	Mean	Standard deviation	Confident interval Lower	Confident interval Upper
Signatories to the Tokyo Convention (N = 13)				
CBHE importance	4.08	0.95	3.50	4.65
CBHE difficulty	3.31	0.95	2.74	3.88
MC importance	3.92	1.04	3.30	4.55
MC difficulty	3.46	0.88	2.93	3.99
DE importance	4.08	1.75	3.02	5.14
DE difficult	3.31	0.85	2.79	3.82
SI importance	3.92	0.67	3.49	4.34
SI difficulty	3.33	1.07	2.65	4.02
Non-signatories to the Tokyo Convention (N = 13)				
CBHE importance	4.00	1.08	3.35	4.65
CBHE difficulty	3.38	0.87	2.86	3.91
MC importance	4.08	0.76	3.62	4.54
MC difficulty	3.92	0.76	3.46	4.38
DE importance	4.38	1.50	3.48	5.29
DE difficult	3.69	0.95	3.12	4.26
SI importance	3.92	0.76	3.46	4.38
SI difficulty	3.85	0.90	3.30	4.39

Source(s): Table developed by authors



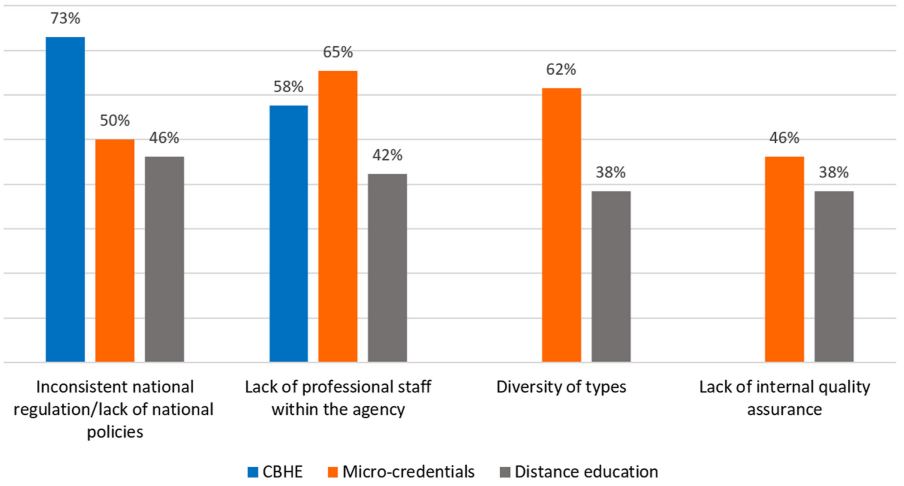
Source(s): Figure developed by authors

Figure 3. Priority of QA development and integration with QF

		Value	*F*	Hypothesis df	Error df	Sig	Partial eta squared
NQF	Pillai's trace	0.17	0.42	8	16	0.89	0.17
	Wilk's lambda	0.83	0.42	8	16	0.89	0.17
	Hotelling's trace	0.21	0.42	8	16	0.89	0.17
	Roy's largest root	0.21	0.42	8	16	0.89	0.17

Source(s): Table developed by authors

Table 7. MANOVA test of NQF QA respondents



Source(s): Figure developed by authors

Figure 4. Factors affect the external review process and outcomes (CBHE, micro-credentials, distance education)

implementing QA in the respective modules. Top three challenges in CBHE are "*Differences in regulations and laws across countries*", "*Differences in qualification system across countries*", and "*Lack of professional staff who are familiar with CBHE among QA agencies*". In addition to two common items *lacking professional staff and national regulations and policies*, diversity was considered as a contributing factor affecting QA of micro-credentials most. Besides, *limited value for micro-credentials* was another concern of most QA respondents. What concerned participants most in QA development of distance education were "*no transparent and reliable information*", "*national policy and regulation*" *and* "*professional staff*". Nevertheless, *diversity and internal quality assurance in the module* also impacted whether the value of distance education will be recognized by the employer or not (Figure 4).

Given that social impact and sustainability have gained greater attention in recent years, the respondents were invited to share their perception toward the challenges if EQAAs would like to measure university performances in this manner. It was found that "lack of transparency and reliability of information" and "limited value and recognized by the employers" were identified as top concerns from their perspectives.

5. Discussion- moving forward

5.1 Is quality assurance ready to respond to new emerging issues?

The study shows that most Asian quality assurance agencies are evolving to the third diverse stage of "policy formulation" in order to address the quality issues, such as stakeholder engagement, relevant to social impact, responses to SDGs. Obviously, the pandemic is one of potential triggers for this transformative power (Hou *et al.*, 2022). Although the transformative power and capacity building of QA differed from context to context, distance education and CBHE have drawn the greater attention among all QA participants. This aligns with the viewpoint of Hou *et al.* (2022), "under the disruptive era, digitalization not only provides an alternative for higher education and QA practices but overwhelmingly drives innovation" (p. 587). More specifically, whether Asian nations would like to respond to INQAAHE ISGs, they still need to characterize new QA schemes for micro-credentials, social impact or SDGS in order to underline the relevance of external review (INQAAHE, 2022). As it would be an important issue to pursue, more evidence is needed in the future studies.

Diversification, relevance and transformative capacity are three aspects that the INQAAHE ISGs would like to elicit responses from EQAAs in the post pandemic period. With a focus shift from "one-fit-all" module to a variety of QA dimensions, the INQAAHE ISGs has revealed that EQAAs should be more proactive to reflect upon diversification of higher education. When institutional differentiation and diversity continues to challenge QA, one of possible solutions is to "induce regulatory competitions to match such developments" (King, 2018, p. 39). Nevertheless, EQAAs are encouraged to adopt a new compliance theory to reflect varying stakeholders' need by developing "better regulations programs", such as a risk-based approach.

5.2 Would the INQAAHE ISGs decrease the barriers of convergence of QA and qualification recognitions?

Prior to the pandemic, Hou *et al.* has found that (2017) several factors continued to obstruct a convergence between QA and qualification recognition in Asia, such as limited engagement of higher education stakeholders, lack of confidence in the system, lack of integration into the local context, limited transparency, etc. In the study, it was acknowledged that there were more complexities surrounding integrating QA of CBHE, micro-credentials, and distance education into "on-fit all module" either within contexts or cross contexts due to their diverse

characteristics. Thus, it remains challenging for recognizing qualifications awarded by distance education, micro credentials and CBHE while QA in Asia is evolving into the new phase with a focus of relevance and engagement. On one hand, there is a widespread concern that the lack of comparability in QA and qualifications system in the region hindered the convergence of QA and qualification recognition. On the other hand, this has sparked a vigorous debate about whether a built-up regional regulatory framework would lead to an isomorphism phenomenon in global higher education system (Liu & Liu, 2017; Hou *et al.*, 2023). This issue has long been a "persistent bottleneck" for EQAAs in Asia (Hou *et al.*, 2020).

Notably, the convergence of QA and qualification recognition depends on engagement of various HE stakeholders, which will result in quality, efficiency, relevance, greater impact and sustainable development of higher education (UNESCO Bangkok, 2020). Under Tokyo Convention, APNNIC, a collaboratively regional information portal, began to provide transparent reliable information in higher education, QA, and national qualifications framework within region. It is believed that "appropriate, reliable, accessible and up-to-date information on higher-education systems, institutions, programmes and quality assurance mechanisms" (UNESCO, 2020, p. 8) should be provided by national competent authorities. While most QA respondents in the study have high expectations toward a convergence between QA and qualifications framework, the INQAAHE ISGs can suggest that "the procedures, standards and activities carried out by EQAAs are relevant to higher education system within which it operates and equip the TEIs, and overall, the system, with the necessary capacity to yield relevant outcomes" (INQAAHE, 2022, p. 39).

6. Conclusion

It has been more than two decades since national quality assurance systems have been established in the early 2000 in Asia. Under neoliberalism, QA was initially doomed to be an extended arm of government to regulate higher education institutions in the massified era. Although it was regarded as a policy instrument in Asian nations, the changing needs of varying higher education stakeholders has facilitated an evolution of QA in purposes, methods, and governance models (Matear, 2018; Hou *et al.*, 2020). The study found that EQAAs in Asia have begun to consider new emerging QA modules as a part of their existing system to fulfill their new obligations as well as to prove their accountability in a flexible manner. Cross-border education and distance education have drawn more attention comparing to micro-credentials. Moreover, most of QA respondents agreed that it was imperative to integrate new QA modules into national qualifications framework and recognition systems, in spite of several existing barriers, such as national policies and regulations, and lacking professional staff.

Over past two decades, a "one-fit-all" QA mode might have created some harm in quality, relevance and efficiency of the higher education system, as a result of an isomorphism in Asian context. However, outbreak of the pandemic 2020 which has brought a lot of negative impacts over higher education quality pressured EQAAs to build their capacity and to address emerging issues after the global crisis. To reflect upon diversity, relevance and efficiency in a changing higher education landscape, the 2022 INQAAHE ISGs, as a global benchmark for QA self-enhancement, is determined to provide a new methodology to future challenges in academic quality. Using the new guidelines, INQAAHE would like to engage regional QA networks as well as to bridge all quality assurance agencies and accreditors together in response to new challenges in the post pandemic era. Thus, the Asian QA practices in the study are paving the way into a new policy formation, which can be implicated into other regions. Although it will take time to measure the actual impact of the new guidelines, evolution of QA cannot be stopped. As King (2018) indicated,

Regulators are increasingly being called upon to demonstrate that they can regulate for innovation rather than acing as conservative breaks on progress, quality assurance agencies shall have transformative power to retain the confidence of a myriad of stakeholders (p, 39).

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Further reading

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