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The DNA of a Converging Diversity:
Regional Approaches to Quality Assurance in Higher Education

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The Council for Higher Education Accreditation
Mission Statement

*The Council for Higher Education Accreditation will serve students and their families,
colleges and universities, sponsoring bodies, governments and employers by promoting
academic quality through formal recognition of higher education accrediting bodies and will coordinate and work to
advance self-regulation through accreditation.*

—1996

Introduction

The modernization agendas of higher education systems and institutions around the world are littered with debate over definitions of what is a "quality higher education" often paralyzed by the parallax of multiple stakeholder perspectives. The resulting received wisdom of recent times being that, much like "beauty", "quality" is 'in the eye of the beholder' and therefore every individual, institutional, national, regional and global viewpoint is valid and every defence of what defines quality is defendable. But is this still the case? Over the last decade or so there has been a hitherto unprecedented appetite for attempting to clearly define the DNA of quality in higher education. In the process, certain red-herrings have emerged, such as the so called "World-Class Universities" and "University Rankings", but more pragmatic and practical initiatives have also evolved to speak to criteria that are generally held to be important when qualifying an effective higher education system, not merely for the purposes of national trumpet-blowing but in recognition of the immeasurable contribution to economic, political, and cultural development that a strong national higher education system plays. In 2013, are these criteria really so different from nation to nation and from region to region? Are we witnessing a convergence towards common principles of evaluating higher education or not? This paper will examine the evolutions of quality assurance in higher education in four regions of the world (Africa, the Arab Sates, the Asia-Pacific and Europe) and attempt to determine whether or not the diversity of agencies, networks of agencies, their respective guidelines, handbooks and good practices criteria all belong to a common 21st century higher education quality assurance genome.

Contextual Regional Evolutions

The concept of quality assurance as it relates to higher education is a new one – in relative terms. Forms of formal quality assurance (QA) have been applied in various guises to the commercial sectors for half a century or more, and perhaps in base or rudimentary undefined terms for hundreds even thousands of years, where the basic yardstick of human preference for the best price, deal or convenience effectively determined 'good quality'. The public sector has however been more immune to such forms of 'consumer' scrutiny, managing its affairs and questions of good practice often behind closed doors. Hospitals, schools, law and order, transportation etc. were seen as inherently publicly "good" since they were public goods. Even ostensibly 'private' schools, colleges and universities were free to govern their own affairs largely unchecked by the outside world or if not, limited to a few carefully selected overseers by way of educational

boards or councils. Such trends have been witnessed quite heterogeneously across each of the regions of the world – political systems and/or the profusion of private educational enterprise notwithstanding.

It is true however that certainly by the mid-20th century most education systems around the world had employed robust minimum standards of quality in their primary and secondary education sectors – often involving mandatory inspections of physical resources and cognitive learning as well as strict rules governing teacher qualifications. This may be attributed to the fact that pre-tertiary education concerns children or minors both of whom are considered vulnerable and in need of protection by society. Hence the universal public support for such control mechanisms, even if the issue of 'quality' in such controls may often lack strict definition or be disputed by the different stakeholder constituents.

The same level of diligence and demand for quality checks in and of the higher education sector has however traditionally been of less concern or even of minimal interest. This may be attributed to the fact that, a) compared to primary education (at least) and secondary level learning (often) not everyone has been required to participate, b) tertiary level education concerns legal adults and it can reasonably be considered that they make their own 'consumer choices' at their own risk, and c) the teachers at the third level of learning are considered to be of the highest caliber signifying a de-facto high quality of provision. Today it is this defining quality of a "quality higher education" that has proved to be so polarizing. As the World Bank concluded when attempting to analyze eight different higher education systems,

> Quality in higher education is inherently difficult to measure. Unlike the manufacturing sector, the production function in education is much more complex and results are often not readily discernible in a timely, objective or useful manner. The field of quality assurance in higher education is still in a state of adolescence, with varying and shifting approaches and confusion in both objectives and terminology. Incentive structures for improving (or not improving) quality also generally differ between public and private institutions. (Weber, 2010)

Perhaps the first signs that some form of at least a broad attempt at a 'quality enquiry' of the standards and practices of the world's higher education institutions and their systems can be traced back to the mid-1970s and early 1980s when the United Nations Education, Science and Culture Organization (UNESCO) elaborated a series of regional conventions on the recognition

of higher education qualifications.[1] Whilst the express aim and purpose of these (eventual) five regional and one inter-regional Conventions was to facilitate the mobility of learning and labour through a fair and transparent means for officially recognizing foreign qualifications, a practical result of these efforts as an integral part of the assessment or evaluation process of the validity of foreign qualifications was the need for quality assurance mechanisms to be in place to essentially 'convince' receiving countries that the credentials of foreign mobile workers and students were at least comparable to their own. This may be seen as the first step or foundation stone to the building of quality assurance systems in each of the regions in this study as well as (though not discussed here) in Latin America and the Caribbean. It should be emphasized that these Conventions were at the time not seen as quality assurance tools per-se by the policy-makers and experts who helped construct them. The concept that a higher education system let alone its individual components may be subject to a quality 'inspection' of any kind was still very much a taboo, not least in that in many higher education spaces this would have been seen as tantamount to crossing the line of academic freedom – a conceptual distinction which would take many decades to overcome.

A new generation of the aforementioned Conventions was launched in 1997 with the UNESCO/Council of Europe "Lisbon Convention" that updated the previous European 1979 text (covering Europe, Canada, the USA and Israel), followed more recently in 2011 with the Asia-Pacific's "Tokyo Convention", and the expectation of a revised "Arusha Convention" covering the Africa region being formally adopted at an international conference of states in March 2014. Each of these updated versions have not only revitalized the Conventions to reflect 21st century mass education and globalization, but have also significantly raised the profile and critical nature of quality assurances systems as the key recognition tools to the mobility of labour and learners.

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1   -Revised Asia-Pacific Regional Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications in Higher Education (2011) / "Tokyo Convention"
- Council of Europe/UNESCO Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region (1997) / "Lisbon Convention"
- Regional Convention on the Recognition of Studies, Certificates, Diplomas, Degrees and other Academic Qualifications in Higher Education in the African States (1981) / "Arusha Convention"
- Convention on the Recognition of Studies, Diplomas and Degrees concerning Higher Education in the Arab States (1978)
- International Convention on the Recognition of Studies, Diplomas and Degrees in Higher Education in the Arab and European States bordering on the Mediterranean (1976)
- Regional Convention on the Recognition of Studies, Diplomas and Degrees in Latin America and the Caribbean (1974)

In broadening the scope to seek out sources for the sudden increase in 'quality conscious' higher education stakeholders, two events are significant – one quite specific and the other a gradual phenomenon that suddenly lit a fire under the bonfire of academic vanities. The first was the publication in 1983 of 'America's Best Colleges' in the *US News* and *World Report*. This was the first real attempt at some kind of benchmarking or classification of public higher education institutions, albeit only of those in the USA. This was a landmark event not only in that for the first time parents and students could see which - in rather crass terms - were the 'good' colleges and which were not (according to the authors of the report), but also because it generated a subsequent snowball effect for similar forms of 'quality assessment' of entire higher education systems, culminating in an eventual global comparison index:

> The 1990s witnessed diverse lists, league tables and rankings around the world, numbering everything from specialist subject schools, to MBA programmes and private institutions […]. The tide of attention paid to university rankings, however, well and truly swept over the sector a decade later in 2003 with the release of the *Academic Ranking of World Universities* (ARWU) by Shanghai Jiao Tong University in China and the *Times Higher Education World University Rankings* a year later.
> (UNESCO, 2012)

Much as what happened with the UNESCO Conventions in the their early incarnations, the business of university rankings (both figuratively and literally) pushed almost involuntarily the issue of quality and quality assurance in higher education to the top of the social and economic development agendas. Here is not the time nor the place for a detailed discussion on the 'whys' and 'woes' of university rankings, lest to comment en-passant that whether arguing 'for' or 'against' the practice of ranking and their results, they have undeniably forced policy makers, educators, researchers and institutional leaders to define what they consider to be quality in higher education and how it should be measured.

The second 'event' or phenomenon to heat up the debate considering quality in higher education provision was the dawn of the knowledge revolution. Following in the footsteps of the industrial and technological revolutions, the realization that knowledge was the new power tool for countries and regions to compete and compete on a global scale spurned an intensive drive to build "knowledge societies" with "knowledge workers" who were trained, prepared and disposed to excel. Unsurprisingly, it was quickly established that the breeding ground for such people and ultimately successful national growth and prosperity lay in a country's knowledge institutions: its universities and higher learning communities.

With this now an important and acknowledged reality for national economic, social and even political stability, governments around the world began to take a serious interest (in many cases for the first time) in what their universities were teaching, researching, with whom, for whom, and how and why. National and regional overarching polices (such as the "Lisbon Agenda" in Europe), began to demand that the long-standing import of quality primary and secondary level learning, be complimented by reliable, relevant and robust tertiary systems that could address the advent of globalization superseding internationalization and inter-regionalism eclipsing regionalism

Quality Assurance Bodies, Networks and Initiatives

As a result of the UNESCO Conventions and their subsidiary texts, it has been widely regarded as essential for every country to establish a quality assurance body or agency at a national or sub-national level to oversee and observe that high standards and a quality provision of higher education in a system's institutions are observed. These agencies or bodies operate within broadly the same mission although their specific roles, mandates and authorities differ. At the regional level, different networks and associations have been established for QA bodies to share information, good practices and to advance quality capacities (see Table 1). Likewise policy-makers and supra-organizations are driving meta-level initiatives.

Table 1: Regional QA Agencies and Networks

	Africa	Arab States	Asia-Pacific	Europe
No. of National QA Agencies	21	14	31	40
No. of States in Region [2]	54	22	53	47
Regional Network of QA bodies	AfriQAN	ANQAHE	APQN	ENQA
Year of Establishment of Regional Network	2009	2007	2002	2000
Sub-regional Networks of QA Bodies	IUCEA CAMES	MERIC	/	CEENQA
Pan-regional Initiatives	AAU-EUA AU-AQRM	AQAAIW ARQAANE	APARNET AQAN	EHEA EQAR

Source: The author

2   Based on data (November 2013) from The African Union, The League of Arab States, The Asia-Pacific Quality Network and The Council of Europe.

Africa

At the national level, according to recent UNESCO figures there are currently 21 quality assurance agencies across Africa, with "a dozen other countries at relatively advanced stages" in establishing one. At the pan-regional level the Africa Quality Assurance Network (AfriQAN) is the leading Network for capacity building in regional quality assurance systems. Hosted by the Association of African Universities (AAU) "… its main mandate [being that] of promoting collaboration among quality assurance agencies through capacity building and the African Quality Assurance Peer Review Mechanism" (Varghese, 2013). Other initiatives initiated at a regional level to increase the implementation of quality assurance include:

- The Europe-Africa Quality Connect project initiated by the AAU in cooperation with the European Universities Association (EUA). The project has helped to enhance institutional evaluation capacities in five African universities.
- Several initiatives have been adopted by the African Union Commission:

  - The 2007 African Higher Education Harmonization Strategy to support the comparability of African qualifications though the establishment of an African Regional Qualifications Framework and the development of an African Credit Transfer and Accumulation System.

  - A project to examine and determine learning outcomes (in terms of knowledge skills and competences) in five key subject areas across approximately 60 African universities, "Tuning Africa" foresees the elaboration of a pan-regional qualifications framework.

  - The *African Quality Rating Mechanism* promotes voluntary self-assessment and performance benchmarking as a quality enhancement strategy in the participating HEIs (Okebukola, 2012).

  - Moves are also under way for the establishment of an African higher education accreditation agency (Kigotho, 2013)

At the sub regional level there are two bodies responsible for this mandate:

- The Inter-University Council for East Africa (IUCEA) which oversees and ensures common standards in the five member states of the East African community: Burundi, Kenya, Rwanda, Tanzania and Uganda;

- The African and Malagasy Council for Higher Education (CAMES) established to harmonize university programmes in 17 countries (Benin, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Cameroon, the Central African Republic, Chad, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Côte d'Ivoire, Gabon, Guinea-Conakry, Guinea-Bissau, Madagascar, Mali, Niger, Rwanda, Senegal and Togo).

The Arab States

Latest figures presented to the OECD suggest that fourteen countries in the Arab region have established national accreditation committees or committees for accreditation and quality assurance (El Hassan, 2012), with the Arab Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ANQAHE) listing thirteen member countries with quality national assurance bodies including commissions, councils and authorities (www.anqahe.org). Other regional Networks include:

- The Association of Quality Assurance Agencies of the Islamic World (AQAAIW), the Arab Council for Quality Assurance established by the Association of Arab Universities (AArU), and the Arab Quality Assurance and Accreditation Network (ARQAANE). The AArU has launched several initiatives at pan-regional quality assurance and has produced substantial guidelines on the implementation of quality assurance measures at the institutional level.

- The Arab League Education Science and Culture Organization (ALESCO) has also called for the establishment of a common set of quality standards for academic excellence across the region (ALESCO, 2008).

- A United Nations Development Program (UNDP) aimed at building capacity in program quality assurance and evaluation in higher education has worked with institutions in fourteen Arab countries in key subject fields of education, engineering and computer science (Naqib, 2007).

The Asia-Pacific

The Asia-Pacific Quality Network (APQN) comprises 53 eligible countries[3] of which 31 are current members with one or more bodies responsible for quality assurance and standards of higher education, with fifteen pending memberships. Whilst the mandate of the Network is to serve the needs of "quality assurance agencies" many of the organizations members are individual institution's QA departments or committees as well as national commissions, providing they fall within the membership criteria which stipulates that, "the agency is responsible for reviews at institutional or programme level of post-secondary education institutions or post-secondary quality assurance" (www.apqn.org).

Other regional networks include: The Asia Pacific Academic Recognition Network (APARNET) based in South Korea and the ASEAN Quality Assurance Network (AQAN). Other significant initiatives at the regional level include the *Brisbane Communiqué*, adopted by the Asia-Pacific Education Ministers in 2006, wherein the countries of the region,

> [….] agreed to collaborate on a number of broad initiatives to encourage and facilitate regional student and academic mobility and exchange, and to address barriers to these activities. Ministers agreed to cooperate on four key themes:
>
> - quality assurance frameworks for the region linked to international standards, including courses delivered online
>
> - recognition of educational and professional qualifications
>
> - common competency based standards for teachers, particularly in science and mathematics, and
>
> - development of common recognition of technical skills across the region in order to better meet the overall skills needs of the economic base of the region.

3   The region includes: all Pacific island nations and territories, New Zealand, Australia, Papua New Guinea; all island and mainland nations and territories of Asia, including Russia, Afghanistan, the other central Asian states and Iran, but excluding the Gulf states (which are covered by another network).

Europe

The European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) lists 23 member countries having at least one national or sub-national body responsible for quality assurance and standards in higher education in Europe (40), including Russia, which is also a member of the Asia-Pacific Quality Network. Other regional networks are of a discipline specific nature[4] as well as sub-regional networks such as the Central and Eastern European Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (CEENQA), which is based in Hungary.

- Key among the pan-European initiatives that have helped to promote quality assurance in national systems and institutions was the Bologna Process (1999-2010) and its subsequent manifestation, the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) (www.ehea.info). Through its timetable of workshops, seminars and conferences and regular publications on quality related trends in higher education in the region, published in cooperation with the European Universities Association (see Sursock & Smidt, 2010) the 47-member Area has been able to establish an extensive network of experts and advisers on good practices across the region.

- The European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR) is registry of external quality assurance agencies that "substantially comply with a common set of principles for quality assurance in Europe". With a total membership of 30 quality assurance bodies from 16 countries (www.eqar.org), EQAR promotes trust in QA capacities in the region and builds trust in national quality assurance systems and decisions.

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4   See for example:
EAEVE - European Association of Establishments for Veterinary Education
EMTRAIN - European Medicines Research Training Network
AEC - European Association of Conservatoires
ECBE - European Council for Business Education
EFMD - European Foundation for Management Development
IFLA Europe - International Federation of Landscape Architects
EAALS- European Accreditation Agency for the Life Sciences
EEAA - European Evangelical Accrediting Association
ECA - European Consortium for Accreditation

International Initiatives

Other regional or pan regional initiatives continue to impact and influence the quality assurance process and procedures in each of the regions, including the UNESCO-World Bank Global Initiative on Quality Assurance Capacity (GIQAC) which aims to "Improve the efforts of regional networks to build QA capacity of accreditation agencies, tertiary education institutions, and government staff with QA functions" (UNESCO, 2012).

Guidelines, Principles and Procedures

In the course of fulfilling their missions and in concert with other pan-regional or sub-regional initiatives, many of the quality assurance networks themselves have produced or contributed to different sets of detailed quality assurance guidelines for internal and external evaluations, recommendations for policies and procedures, regional training courses, and broadly-defined quality assurance principles, as well as being involved in the revisions to the UNESCO Conventions which cover their respective geographic areas. Many of these texts are drawn from good practice examples at the national level both from within the Networks' regions and from other systems and structures around the world. Likewise, the development or review of national QA systems can often been seen to reflect key regional guidelines or initiatives. A non-exhaustive sweep of the different regional and sub-regional current publications, manuals etc., are detailed in Figure 1 and does not include the multitude of different discipline specific QA guides that proliferate in all regions (see earlier European examples).

As may be expected, and indeed hoped for, there is a fair degree of common ground and overlap between the various texts both inter-regionally and intra-regionally. There have been some attempts to codify or at least analyze the convergence of QA systems operating within each region. A study of the Asia-Pacific (Stella, 2008) concluded there were substantial similarities in approaches yet with significant differences due to national historical circumstances. Similarly, David Billing (2004) seriously questions a previous study on the convergence of European higher education systems (van Vught and Westerhijden, 1993). It would clearly therefore be unwise and indeed untrue to say there is a QA 'system' currently in place and operational in any of the four regions in question. Each of the guidelines, principles, tools etc. are principally recommendations of good-practice, and are broad enough to encapsulate what are currently considered essential elements to a par-standard QA structure in any of the region's countries and institutions. They are neither legally binding nor policed for breaches in any sense. Even within officially designated spaces such as the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), member

states pledge only to commit themselves to the Area's process of higher education reform – including the quality assurance component. It should perhaps be noted that goodwill and intention does not always translate into good practice, and many of the Bologna Process/EHEA commitments have yet to be properly implicated or have been done so half-heartedly (see Wells and Gilder, 2009). Since quality assurance of higher education remains a national responsibility and a sovereign engine, there is still often a gulf of actual practices within each region. However flawed the implementation may be, as was noted earlier, there is however consistency in the broader aspects of what constitutes essential QA practices both at the national and regional levels. As with all comparisons, 'the devil is in the detail' and the second part of this study will attempt to analyze the degree of convergence in the specifics of regional QA practices.

Figure 1: Regional QA Principles, Guidelines and Reports

Africa

- The Inter-University Council of East Africa (IUCEA) 2010 *Handbook for Quality Assurance in Higher Education* (Volumes 1-4) developed out of documents previously produced by the national higher education regulatory agencies in the three founder members of the East African Community, namely the *Handbook on Processes, Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance* prepared by CHE in Kenya, the *Quality Assurance Framework for Uganda Universities* used by NCHE in Uganda, and the *Quality Assurance and Accreditation System for Institutions and Programmes of Higher Education* used by TCU in Tanzania. According to IUCEA, "despite each of the three documents having a specific national outlook, all of them have a lot in common with respect to universal quality aspects." The development of the handbook was a consultative process involving DAAD, IUCEA, European partners and East African Experts, Regulatory Agencies, participating universities, academics and stakeholders. The Handbook consists of five chapters:

- **Volume 1:** *Guidelines for Self- assessment at program level* aims at the faculty/department offering an instrument to learn more about the quality of the programs on offer by means of an effective self-assessment at program level

- **Volume 2:** *Guidelines for external program assessment explains* the procedures and processes for an external assessment at program level. The specific target group is the external expert team, but also the faculty/department to be assessed.

- **Volume 3:** *Guidelines for Self-assessment at institutional level* aims especially at the central management of an institution and offers an Instrument to discover more about the quality of the institution

- **Volume 4:** *The implementation of a Quality Assurance system* aims at all levels of an institution, but is especially useful for the Quality Assurance coordinators for the development and installation of an Internal Quality Assurance system

- **Volume 5:** *External Quality Assurance in East Africa* provides the reader with background information about the state-of-the-art in external quality assurance in East Africa and discusses the role of the regulatory bodies in the light of international developments.

- The African Union's *African Quality Rating Mechanism* (AQRM)

Still in the implementation phase under development, the AQRM is designed "to establish an African system that will ensure the performance of higher education institutions can be compared against a set of common criteria and to help the institutions carry out self-evaluation exercises to support the development of institutional cultures of quality." (AU, 2013)

- The Association of African Universities *External Quality Assurance in Higher Education Training Course and Manual* developed jointly with the Association of African Universities and UNESCO's IIEP. Compiled of five modules: Module 1: *Making basic choices for external quality assurance systems,* Module 2: *Conducting the process of external quality assurance,* Module 3: *Setting up and developing the quality assurance agency,* Module 4: *Understanding and assessing quality,* Module 5: *Regulating and assuring the quality of cross- border providers of higher education.*

Arab-States

- ANQAHE – DAAD Report, Improving the Management of Quality Assurance in the ARAB REGION – Quality Assurance Agencies (2009)

- The ANQAHE GIQAC Report 2010

- Association of Arab Universities (AARU). The Guide for Quality Assurance in Arab Universities

- Quality Assessment of Programmes in the field of Education in Arab Universities, UNDP Regional Bureau for Arab States (2006). Part of UNDP-RBAS project, Enhancement of Quality Assurance and Institutional Planning in 23 Arab Universities in Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Oman, Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Syria, Yemen.

Asia-Pacific

- Asia-Pacific Quality Network Membership Criteria

- Higher Education Quality Assurance Principles for the Asia Pacific Region, ("The Chiba Principles") (2008)

Europe

- Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (2009, 3rd Edition)

International/Inter-regional

- INQAAHE Guidelines of Good Practice in Quality Assurance (2007)

- The Bonn Declaration on Regional Cooperation in Quality Assurance in Higher Education (2007)

- ASEM Bridging Declaration (draft stage) (expected 2014)

Quality Assurance Criteria

Rationale

To guide the detailed comparison we will look at both the summative and formative approaches to quality assurance in higher education, with summative taken to mean the criteria used in each of the regions to assess whether their respective institutions are functioning against expected standards, and the extent that formative processes are in place to actively develop a quality

culture within the respective systems of self-reflection, self-analysis and quality enhancement plans developed as a result.

For the purposes of preparing a meaningful and inclusive regional comparison, the analysis is formed from eight of the regional documents mentioned earlier (three from Africa, two from the Arab States, two from the Asia-Pacific and one from Europe). The ideal for such a work would be to have four clearly defined higher education 'Quality Assurance Policies/Guidelines' emanating from each region. Unfortunately we are not at that point yet, but neither are we so far from it either.

In terms of what might be described as a comprehensive and generally accepted set of guidelines, the Europe region is perhaps further ahead than most with the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area*, which are taken here as the reference point for the region, while acknowledging that there are a myriad of other QA guides and policies at discipline, institution, national, sub-national and sub-regional levels in the Europe region. It is also acknowledged that "European" guidelines may not be a reflection of all the 'Europes' since the definition of Europe's boundaries can be bothersome, depending as it does on whether we speak of the a geographical, political (UNESCO, EU) or higher education areas (EHEA).

The Asia-Pacific region has elaborated the "Chiba Principles" which are similar in design to the European Standards and Guidelines and are therefore a natural text for our comparison exercise. The Asia-Pacific Quality Network's (APQN) Membership Criteria have also been included as a reference text due to their complementarity to external QA processes and their explicit foundations to the third higher education QA pillar of the establishment and role of a QA agency or body.

For the Arab states, two texts have been selected as reference points: the ANQAHE -DAAD report of QA in the region and United Nations Development Programme's (UNDP) approach to quality assessment in Arab universities. The latter may at first glance seem an unusual choice – being as it is a discipline level QA exercise and perhaps far from a "regional" position. The rationale for its inclusion is simply based on the number of participating countries and institutions in the region (14 and 23 respectively) and the level of exacting detail and rigor of the evaluation exercise of three very fundamental higher education disciplines the programme evaluated: education, engineering, and ICT. The level of involvement and commitment to such a stringent process by the competent authorities in each of the countries involved suggests

implicitly a united and transparent approach to internal QA in higher education in the region. The DAAD-ANQAHE Report has been selected in the absence of a formal regional consensus document or text, as it too demonstrates a general consensus at a policy level of the region's intent to channel good practices particularly in the domains of external QA and QA agencies, thus completing the circle of QA with the UNDP-RBAS internal quality brief.

The African references are threefold: the African Association of Universities-International Institute for Education Planning (IIEP) External Quality Assurance course, the IUCEA Handbook and the African Union's African Quality Rating Mechanism (AQRM). Whilst, the AAU-IIEP is a course and therefore not strictly a reference document it has been used as such here for one important reason: it is supported by the AAU and therefore reflects the view points and perspective of all its constituent member states in the Africa region. Clearly however it is essential to acknowledge the sub-regional nature of the greater Africa region. For this reason the East African IUCEA Handbook has been cited as a reference document with particular pertinence to internal and external higher education QA. Perspectives on "Sub-Saharan Africa" (World Bank, Materu, 2007) and West African (CAMES) higher education QA do exist but do not appear to have broad official support hence their omission from the comparative analysis here. The African Union's AQRM is however included in the African context not least since it is an AU initiative and thus holds the support of the AU membership. It is however acknowledged that this initiative is still in its infancy and does not yet constitute an AU Directive.

The INQAAHE Guidelines have been included for an international perspective only. The guidelines are very broad in nature and focus largely on the establishment of QA agencies or bodies.

Taking the above texts as our reference points, below and in Annexes 1-3 we examine in detail the extent of common specific criteria in each of the regional documents as they relate to 1) Internal Quality Assurance, 2) External Quality Assurance, and 3) the Establishment of a QA Agency or body.

Internal Quality Assurance (IQA)

Overall there is widespread commonality across each region in terms of the criteria needed for an effective IQA process (see Figure 2). A detailed mapping of the use and incidence of specific criteria can be found in Annex 1 and which fall under five principle requirements:

I. Institutions should have a policy or commitment to developing a quality culture across the whole institution and that this has buy-in at all levels for the future growth and development of activities.

II. Transparency and clear information about the institution's awards, programs, research and facilities is made publicly available.

III. The processes, policies and procedures of institutional QA are clearly defined in terms of scope and timeframes, are made publicly available and are adequately resourced.

IV. A cross-section of stakeholders is involved at various levels of the IQA process.

V. Appropriate and adequate resources are maintained for maintaining an effective level of teaching, learning and research, including competent faculty, learning and physical resources.

Figure 2: Comparison of Regional Internal Quality Assurance Criteria
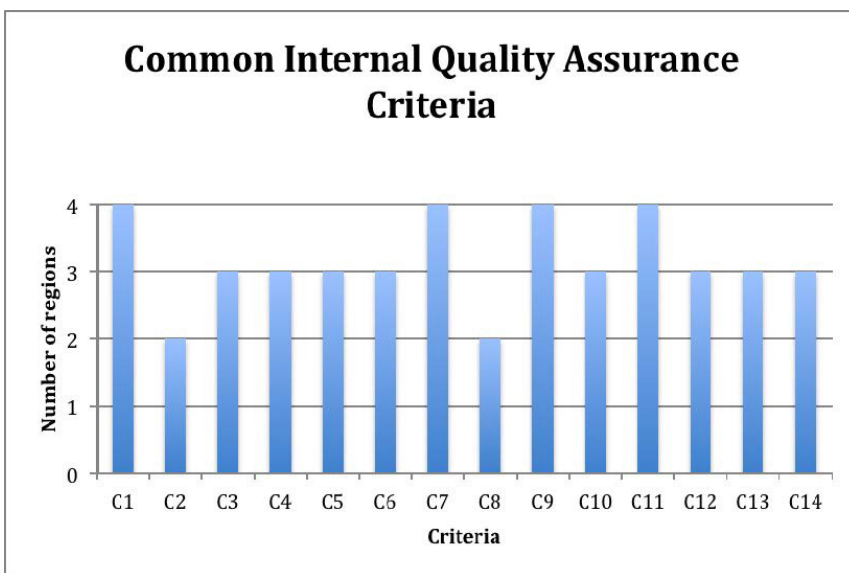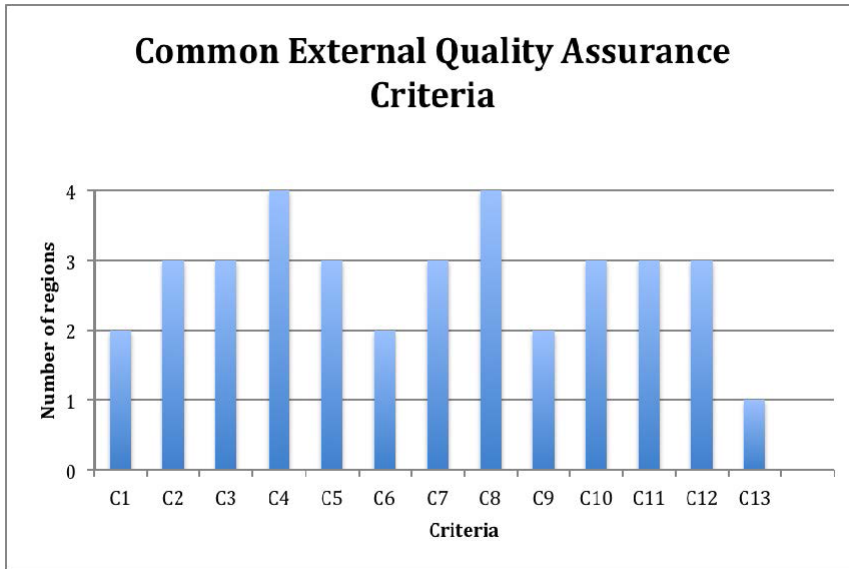

Source: The author

Within these five basic parameters there are differing levels of detail depending on the nature and purpose of individual texts. As might be expected, the UNDP-RBAS program evaluations are very detailed in the roles and scopes of student learning and assessment as well as teaching pedagogy and continual professional development. Likewise the IUCEA Handbooks have very detailed documentation of IQA processes and good practices. There is strong support across all regions for open and clearly documented QA processes based on well-documented evidence. Whilst all regions advocate the involvement of stakeholders in the process, (see Figure 2/ Criterion 9) the explicit involvement of students is slightly less prevalent. What is the most encouraging and perhaps surprising message is the desire in each of the regions for a commitment to quality assurance to be infused at the institutional level (Criterion 1).

External Quality Assurance (EQA)

The key reference points for EQA are the European ENQA Guidelines, the African Association of Universities External QA Program and the "Chiba Principles" (see Annex 2 for a detailed breakdown). The Arab States DAAD report has mention of only a couple of explicit elements, which can be explained by a certain crossover with the third group of Quality Assurance Agency criteria. The five key overarching domains for EQA for each of the regions focus on:

I. Establishing a clear aims, objectives and methodologies and time-cycles for the EQA developed with all relevant stakeholders.

II. Ensuring that external evaluators are identified and appointed in an impartial manner and that they execute their roles independently.

III. Providing provision for reports, decisions and recommendations of the EQA evaluation to be made publicly available.

IV. Establishing timeframes and procedures for the effective follow-up of the recommendations of the EQA, as well as assuring an effective appeals system to them.

V. Involving the use of acknowledged experts and students in the EQA process.

Figure 3: Comparison of Regional External Quality Assurance Criteria

Common External Quality Assurance Criteria

Source: The author

There is in each of the regions a strong emphasis on ensuring the consistency and transparency of the EQA process and procedures in order to illuminate any accusations of partisan or vested interest behaviours (see Figure 3/ Criteria 4 and 8). In the documents surveyed, only Africa currently includes a reference to cross-border QA (Criterion 13). This is surprising given the proliferation of institutions delivering programs across-borders and may well warrant future attention in revised versions of Guidelines and/or the inclusion of a fourth category of HE QA good-practices at the regional levels.

Quality Assurance Agencies/Bodies (QAA)

All four regions are equally emphatic about the key principles behind their respective QA Agencies (see Figure 4 below and Annex 3). Unanimously, they should:

I.   be independent and autonomous

II. have clear mandates and missions and goals

III. have the required human and financial resources to accomplish their mission and goals effectively and to the standards expected of stakeholders]

IV. be fully accountable for their work and themselves be subject to cyclical review and evaluation of their work and functions.

V. provide information and advice based on empirical research and reporting.

Figure 4: Comparison of Regional Quality Assurance Agency Criteria
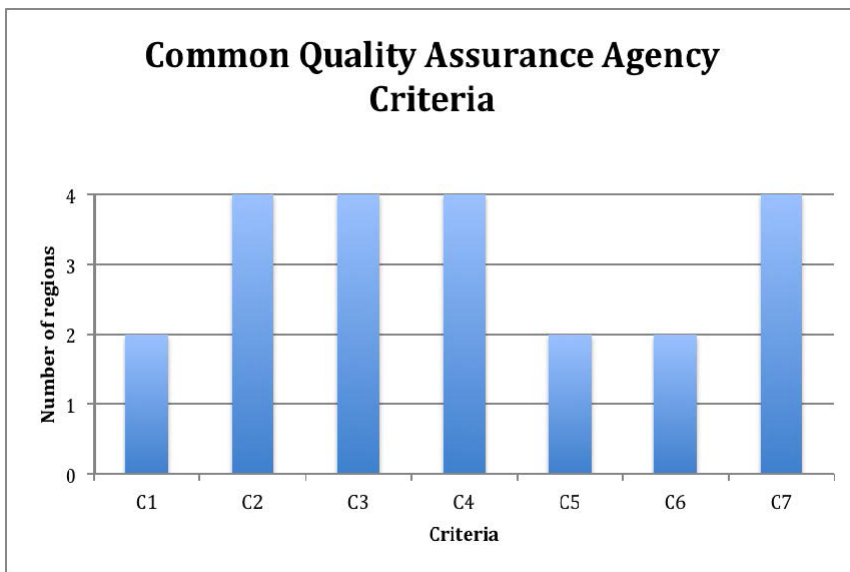
Source: The author

As well as the regional reports and guidelines, the INQAAHE Guidelines also reflect closely the regional ideals and good practice recommendations. Again there is a certain amount of over-lap with other QA criteria, such as the role of the QA in producing research and summary reports which in some regions falls under the External QA category.

A crude snapshot of the sets of criteria identified and their presence in each of the regions (Table 2) reveals that more than half are documented good practices in three of the regions and over a third are recommended in all four of the regions. What this rather clumsy quantitative analysis of a qualitative narrative fails to fully demonstrate however is the real extent of the synergy

between the regions, especially when we take into account other reports and practices especially at institutional levels, which show that QA processes, procedures and policies almost entirely reflect those of this comparative exercise. An analysis that were to also take these into account would undoubtedly reveal still further commonalities, but an undertaking on such a scale would be very resource intensive and may prove an impractical one.

Table 2: Comparison of Common QA Criteria by Regions

	2 Regions	*3 Regions*	*4 Regions*
IQA criteria	100%	85%	30%
EQA criteria	100%	69%	15%
QAA criteria	100%	0%	57%
IQA + EQA + QAA criteria	100%	51%	34%

Source: The author

Conclusions

It is hardly surprising that there is, at least at a certain level, clear evidence of a convergence on what elements must be addressed for a robust, effective and worthwhile process of higher education QA in the four regions – Africa, the Arab States, the Asia-Pacific and Europe. There are at the same time differences in some of the specifics and levels of prescribed detail reflecting the diversity of each of the regions and also within the regions themselves. Reflecting on the situation in the Asia-Pacific alone, Stella highlighted how the reality of diversity and harmonization are not mutually exclusive:

> Alongside varied characteristics, the quality assurance systems of the region also have certain common critical core elements such as self-assessment based on a set of transparent criteria, validation by an external team, and the quality assurance outcome that is valid for a certain period of time. This commonality amidst variation signals possibilities for convergence and alignment with a regional approach in the region. A regional QA framework that would serve as the common point of reference for the national systems of the region and at the same time not in contradiction with the international developments could be pursued. It involves endorsement of codes and guidelines already agreed by the international QA community as features of a good QA system. Endorsement of commonly agreed principles, values and codes of practice provides a platform for future enhancement of QA approaches. (Stella, 2008)

At one point that may have been as recent as twenty years ago, a comparison of regional QA practices across higher education systems or indeed even a comparative understanding of QA in higher education would have been an elusive undertaking. In 2013 such a construct is far more within reach. It is now possible to compare systems that have developed, adapted to their environments and in some cases matured. They still vary in size, shape, design and structures, but they nonetheless share the same basic quality assurance DNA. Refinement and discussion on standards and criteria for measuring and enhancing quality will continue, as they should; and it may well be that there is no finite answer to the intricacies and detail bound up in the notion of ultimate quality in education, but that makes it all the more important to ensure that quality is a continuous process and not a static goal. It is as much the process itself as the outcomes that will ensure higher education institutions and systems focus on developing and adapting to improve their provision and service to all their stakeholders.

What is clear is that both independently and yet simultaneously, internal and external reflections on the genetic makeup of a quality higher education system of individual institutions have been taking place in each of the regions. It may not be possible to capture exactly the individual nuances or subtleties of each system's processes, but they are nonetheless evident. One country's "program quality review" is another's "internal quality assessment"; one institution's "library and laboratory resources" are another region's "teaching and learning resources"; and one QA agency's "mission and objectives" are another QA body's "mandate and scope". Nevertheless, all committed QA practitioners are in fact advocating and communicating the same messages of good practices. There is no hiding the fact however that the well-intended guidelines and the good-intensions of networks and associations do not always translate or transmute into actual good practice.

Perhaps therefore, there is now a genuine opportunity for, and a practical value in the elaboration of a detailed common international genetic code of QA in higher education which not only reflects the convergence of regional systems and the diversity of their respective institutions, but also provides the impetus to cement criteria with conduct.

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ANNEXES

Annex 1.
Internal Quality Assurance Criteria

No.	Criteria	Africa			Arab States		Asia-Pacific		Europe	International
		African Union AQRM[1]	IUCEA Handbook[2]	AAU-IIEP Course[3]	UNDP-RBAS Report	DAAD-ANQAHE Report[4]	APQN Membership Criteria[5]	"Chiba Principles"[6]	S&Gs for QA in the EHEA[7]	INQAAHE
1	A quality assurance culture is created, defined, supported, and promulgated.		V4.2.2.1	M1.II.1		P9		A.1	1.1	
2	Quality assurance aligns with and is embedded within the institution's unique goals and objectives.			M3.II.5				A.2		
3	Appropriate and current information about the institution, its programs, awards and achievements is made publicly available.	I.G.7	V4. 1.3.2	M1.II.1				A.7	1.7	
4	Institutions should have a policy and associated procedures for the assurance of the quality and standards of their programmes and awards.		V4. 1.3.1					A.4	1.1	
5	Internal quality management systems, policies and procedures are in place.	I.G.5	V4.1.3.1					A.3		

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1 Institutional Level
2 V=Volume
3 M=Module
4 P=Paragraph of Report Summary
5 C= Criteria
6 A, B, C = Sections of Principles
7 1, 2, 3 = Sections of Guidelines

Annex 1. (continued)
Internal Quality Assurance Criteria

No.	Criteria	Africa			Arab States		Asia-Pacific		Europe	International
		African Union AQRM[1]	IUCEA Handbook[2]	AAU-IIEP Course[3]	UNDP-RBAS Report	DAAD-ANQAHE Report[4]	APQN Membership Criteria[5]	"Chiba Principles"[6]	S&Gs for QA in the EHEA[7]	INQAAHE
6	Institutions should develop and implement a strategy for the continuous enhancement of quality.		V4.2.2.1					A.5	1.1	
7	Institutions should have formal mechanisms for the approval, periodic review and monitoring of their programmes and awards.		V4.1.3.8		II.3	P10		A.4	1.2	
8	Students should be involved in developing standards and criteria.		V4. 2.1						1.1	
9	Stakeholders should be involved in developing standards and criteria.	I.G.4	V4.2.2.1.		II.3.			B.2	1.1	
10	The strategy, policy and procedures should have a formal status and be publicly available. They should also include a role for students and other stakeholders.		V4. 1.3.11					B.3	1.1	
11	Institutions should have ways of satisfying themselves that staff involved with the teaching of students is qualified and competent to do so.	I.G.6	V4. 1.3.5	M2.II.3	II.2.1			A.6	1.4	

Annex 1. (continued)
Internal Quality Assurance Criteria

No.	Criteria	Africa			Arab States		Asia-Pacific		Europe	International
		African Union AQRM[1]	IUCEA Handbook[2]	AAU-IIEP Course[3]	UNDP-RBAS Report	DAAD- ANQAHE Report[4]	APQN Membership Criteria[5]	"Chiba Principles"[6]	S&Gs for QA in the EHEA[7]	INQAAHE
12	**Institutions should ensure that the resources available for the support of student learning are adequate and appropriate for each programme offered.**	*I.1.4-7*	*V4. 1.3.6*	*M2.II.3*	*II.2.3*				*1.5*	
13	**Institutions should ensure that they collect, analyze and use relevant information for the effective management of their programmes of study and other activities.**		*V4. 1.3.10*	*M3.III.2*	*II.3*	*P9*			*1.6*	
14	**Students should be assessed using published criteria, regulations and procedures, which are applied consistently.**		*V4.1.3.4*		*II.1.3*				*1.3*	

Annex 2.
External Quality Assurance Criteria

No.	Criteria	Africa			Arab States		Asia-Pacific		Europe	International
		African Unio AQRM	IUCEA Handbook	AAU-IIEP Course	UNDP-RBAS Report	DAAD-ANQAHE Report	APQN Membership Criteria	"Chiba Principles"	S&Gs for QA in the EHEA	INQAAHE
1	Stakeholders participate in developing the standards and criteria for assessment.			M3.11.2				B.2		
2	Reports should be made public and include all recommendations, commendations and decisions.			M3.II.4				B.5.3	2.5	6
3	External quality assurance activities (at institutional and/or program level) are undertaken on a cyclical/determined timeline basis.			M3.IV.2				B.1	2.7	
4	QA processes should have a predetermined follow-up procedure for recommendations and decisions are implemented consistently.			M2.II.7		P11		B.5.4	2.6 3.7.4	
5	Quality assurance agencies should produce from time to time summary reports.			M3.II.29				C.4 C.8	2.8	
6	An appeals mechanism is available.					P5		B.6		8
7	Formal decisions made as a result of an external quality assurance are publicly available and are applied consistently.			M2.II.5				B.3	2.3 3.7	

ANNEXES

Annex 2.
External Quality Assurance Criteria

No.	Criteria	Africa			Arab States		Asia-Pacific		Europe	International
		African Unio AQRM	IUCEA Handbook	AAU-IIEP Course	UNDP-RBAS Report	DAAD-ANQAHE Report	APQN Membership Criteria	"Chiba Principles"	S&Gs for QA in the EHEA	INQAAHE
8	Procedures are in place to ensure that external reviewers have no conflict of interest.		V2.2.1.1.	M2.II.4			C4	B.4		
9	Fit for purpose: All external quality assurance processes should be designed specifically to ensure their fitness to achieve the aims and objectives set for them.			M1.II.2					2.4	
10	The aims and objectives of quality assurance processes are developed ahead of the evaluation by all those responsible (including higher education institutions). The criteria and description of the procedures to be used are made publicly available.		V2.2.2.1	M2.II.1			C7	B.3	2.2	
11	The external Assessment will include experts and students where appropriate.		V2.2.1.1	M2.II.4				B.5.2	3.72	
12	The external Assessment will follow from a self–assessment.		V2.2.1.1	M2.II.3				B.5.1	3.7.1	
13	Procedures for Cross-border QA			M5						

Annex 3.
Quality Assurance Agency Criteria

No.	Criteria	Africa			Arab States		Asia-Pacific		Europe	International
		African Union AQRM	IUCEA Handbook	AAU-IIEP Course	UNDP-RBAS Report	DAAD-ANQAHE Report	APQN Membership Criteria	"Chiba Principles"	S&Gs for QA in the EHEA	INQAAHE
1	Competent public authorities should formally recognize agencies.			M3.IV.1					3.2	
2	Agencies should be independent to the extent both that they have autonomous responsibility for their operations.			M3.I.7		P5	C5	C.1	3.6	3
3	Human and financial resources are adequate and accessible.			M3.III.2		P5	C6	C.3	3.4	7
4	Agencies should have a clear mission, goals and objectives for their work, contained in a publicly available statement.			M3.II.15		P5	C2	C.2	3.5	1
5	QA agencies should cooperate with other agencies and key players across national borders.					P6		C.7		10
6	Undertake research and provide information and advice.			M3.1/2 9				C.8		
7	Agencies should be accountable for their work and be subject to periodic reviews of their activities.			M3.1/41		P5	C1	C.6	3.8	9

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