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Published online: 10 May 2021.

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Is quality assurance relevant to overseas qualification recognition in Asian higher education? Examining the regulatory framework and the roles of quality assurance agencies and professional accreditors

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ABSTRACT

The engagement of quality assurance in the recognition process of overseas qualifications became an emerging issue in Asian nations with the increased interest in student mobility in the region in the 21st Century. This study explores the links between quality assurance and qualification recognition, and approaches adopted within national regulatory frameworks in the Asia Pacific region from the perspective of quality assurance agencies. Three major findings are obtained. First, governments are primarily responsible for academic qualification recognition in Asia. Second, professional qualification recognition is heavily restricted by governments due to nationalism and protectionism within the job market. Third, a divergence model between quality assurance and qualification recognition exists in the Asian context.

1. Introduction

The expansion of higher education has hastened the development of quality assurance and has allowed governments to apply it as a policy tool to regulate local higher education providers (Shin 2018). To date, over 250 quality assurance agencies and professional accreditors can be found all over the world (INQAAHE 2019a). In general, governments establish national quality assurance agencies with the primary responsibility to ensure the quality of local higher education providers and programmes. In comparison, self-funded professional accreditors tend to pay more attention to cross-border higher education and student mobility. Yet, both national quality assurance agencies and professional accreditors play a role in ensuring academic qualifications are of an appropriate standard.

Driven by global competition and talent mobility, quality assurance agencies and professional accreditors play an increased role in qualification recognition, which leads to convergence issues between quality assurance, accreditation and qualification recognition. In 2002, the Lisbon Recognition Convention stressed that qualification recognition promotes the free movement of students, teachers, researchers and administrative staff among states. As Rauhvargers (2004) also pointed out, qualification recognition is 'a precondition to ensure free movement of persons,

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including the labour force' (p. 331) at home and abroad. The European Network of Information Centres (ENIC) and the National Academic Recognition Information Centres (NARIC) in the European Region explains that 'a foreign qualification cannot be properly evaluated without taking into account the official status of the institution awarding the qualification and/or the programme taken' (ENIC/NARIC 2019, 1).

Facilitating qualification recognition, particularly that of an overseas qualification, necessitates the development of its associated link with quality assurance. However, Hou, Morse, and Wang (2017) identified the limited interactions between recognition bodies and quality assurance agencies, and their unclear responsibilities, as challenges for qualification recognition of an overseas degree. Hence, numerous nations require institutional or programme accreditation for credential evaluation. Since 2000, collaborations between quality assurance organisations and recognition bodies have become part of the international agenda, particularly in Europe. The European Association for Quality Assurance Agency (ENQA) and ENIC/NARIC emphasised that 'the recognition of qualifications be made contingent on the provider of education having been subjected to transparent quality assessment' (Rauhvargers 2004, 339).

In Asia, due to economic growth and national development, the quality and relevance of higher education have become a key concern followed by higher education expansion and massification. The engagement of quality assurance in the recognition process of overseas qualifications became an emerging issue in Asian nations with the increased interest in student mobility in the region in the 21st Century. This study explores the links of quality assurance and qualification recognition and approaches adopted within national regulatory frameworks in the Asia Pacific region from the perspective of quality assurance agencies. The dilemma for overseas qualification recognition due to tension between globalisation and nationalism is discussed. The following three research questions are addressed,

(1) What is the regulatory framework of overseas qualification recognition in the Asian context?
(2) What are the perspectives of national quality assurance agencies and professional accreditors in Asia in terms of overseas qualification recognition?
(3) What kinds of approaches in overseas qualification recognition are applied in the Asian context?

2. Literature review

2.1 Overseas qualification recognition in cross-border higher education

Over the past two decades, globalisation has become a powerful force driving the internationalisation of higher education all over the world. Throughout multifaceted approaches and processes, cross-border student mobility is considered as one of the key elements in higher education internationalisation (Knight 2007; Daniel, Kanwar, and Uvali´c-trumbi´c 2009). According to the 'Education at a Glance' by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), the number of international students has increased to 5.3 million by 2017. Moreover, students from Asia form the largest group of international students enrolled in tertiary education programmes at all levels (OECD, 2019, 236). Japan and China are the most popular destinations for international students in Asia. Inevitably, growing talent mobility has 'resulted in a significant increase in the demand for academic and professional recognition of foreign qualification' (OECD, 2004, 35).

A qualification should be 'readable and transparent in order to increase their international validity and portability and to ease the work of recognition arrangements and credential evaluators' (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) 2004, 24). Recognition refers to 'the acknowledgment and/or acceptance of prior academic, professional or vocational training, work experiences or credentials and the granting of full or partial credit for it with respect to entry into an academic institution or profession' (Knight 2004, 52). Generally speaking, 'academic qualification'

recognition refers to the 'acceptance of degrees, transfer of credits, or individual certification and license' at the home country's authority (Eaton 2004). On the one hand, qualification recognition formally acknowledges the appropriateness of a certain qualification for a specific purpose, including enabling the qualification-holder to access further and/or higher education and/or employment activities. On the other hand, equivalence of qualifications formally establishes whether two or more qualifications are equal, or deemed to be equal or comparable in value (The Tertiary Education Commission, 2018).

However, the interpretation above does not mean the degree earned in the sending (destination) country should be exactly 'equivalent' to the one earned at home, 'unless a substantial difference can be demonstrated' (Admission officers and credentials evaluators, 2004, 8). In general, there are two categories of qualifications recognition, including 'national recognition of an individual qualification' and 'recognition of an individual qualification abroad' (Rauhvargers 2004). Considering diversity in educational systems and varying types of cross-border mobility, 'recognition of an individual qualification abroad' is even more complicated and challenging. In the 'Toolkit for the recognition of Foreign Qualification' published by UNESCO, recognition of a foreign degree as 'a formal acknowledgement' should be defined and given by national competency recognition authorities (UNESCO Bangkok 2013a). Ideally, the qualifications which students were awarded from recognised institutions and programmes are 'almost automatically recognized by the national states' (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) 2004, 35). Due to quality concerns, more and more countries stipulated the procedural rules for recognition and authorise national credential evaluators or recognition bodies to 'assess the foreign qualification with a view to finding the right path for further studies or employment in the sending (destination) country' (Rauhvargers 2004, 333). In this sense, a foreign qualification is only accepted if a review by a national evaluator or recognition body shows no substantial difference from a local degree.

To facilitate overseas qualification recognition globally, UNESCO organised six regional conventions on the recognition of higher education qualifications, including Latin America and the Caribbean, Arab States, Europe, Africa, Asia and the Pacific and the Arab and the Mediterranean. These conventions were expected to achieve two aims: one is to promote international cooperation in higher education and the other is to reduce obstacles to the recognition of degrees and qualifications (Lee 2012; UNESCO Bangkok 2013a). The Tokyo Convention, the one formed in Asia and Pacific in 1983, is intended to ensure that studies, diplomas, and degrees in higher education are recognised as widely as possible, considering the great diversity of education systems and social-economic status in the Asia-Pacific region. Revised in 2011, the Tokyo Convention, 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 Asia and Pacific. The Tokyo convention is expected to serve the following functions: to facilitate the establishment of mechanisms of academic mobility recognition for promoting mutual understanding and solidarity across Asia-Pacific; to reinforce regional cooperation in higher education; and to recognise the diversity of academic programmes offered by different countries and the complexity of establishing comparability of competencies and qualifications (UNESCO 2011; UNESCO Bangkok 2013a). As of 1 February 2018, the treaty was ratified in all member states, including Japan, South Korea, Australia, New Zealand and China (Civinini 2018).

Currently, the Tokyo Convention requires member states to establish National Information Centres (NIC) similar to ENIC/NARIC to facilitate overseas qualification recognition in the Asia-Pacific region, by learning from the European model. The function of NICs is to act as a single point of contact from within existing ministries and organisations or by any new entity. In 2014, the convention drafted guidelines as a reference for member states to develop NICs (Valenzuela and Davies 2014). In 2017, a coordinating website, Asian National Information Centres Coordinating Website (ANICCW), was set up to 'to share information and facilitate mobility, joint research and collaboration on qualification recognition in Asia' (Asian National Information Centres Coordinating Website (ANICCW) 2019, 1)

2.2 Quality assurance as policy instrument in Asian higher education under neoliberalism

In the late 1990s, neoliberalism with an emphasis on 'marketisation, privatisation, deregulation with competition as a key characteristic' in higher education has been implemented in national agendas of Asia. Influenced by the new public management theory, several governance reforms were initiated, such as cuts in public funding, incorporation of national universities, competitions for national funding, etc. (Davies and Bansel 2007; Saunders 2010; Shin 2018). Policy makers interpret neoliberalism as 'decreased regulations, increased accountability and more academic autonomy' (Shin 2018, 7). Under neoliberalism, quality assurance has become a widespread, multi-purpose policy tool for reforming higher education systems, assessing higher education providers' accountability, and pursuing academic excellence (Stensaker 2007; Westerheijden et al. 2014; Jarvis 2014). Yet, Westerheijden et al. (2014) point out that '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). Shin (2018) argues that 'states prefer to use quality assurance as a strong driver to reform higher education while universities prefer to maintain their prestige without strong state influences' (p.2).

The International Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (INQAAHE)(2019b) defined quality assurance (QA) as 'a process of establishing stakeholder confidence that provision (input, process and outcomes) fulfils expectations or measures up to threshold minimum requirements' (p.1). Normally, quality assurance consists of two dimensions- internal quality assurance and external quality assurance. Internal quality assurance is considered as the part of the external process that an institution undertakes in preparation for an external quality assurance (Hou et al. 2018); external quality assurance agencies (EQA), with a 'self-critical, objective, and open-minded' character, undertake third-party review activities of higher education institutions, in order to determine whether the quality of universities 'meets the agreed or predetermined standards' (Martin and Stella 2007, 34). Under the new public managerialism, external quality assurance is often associated with a government educational policy in Asia (Van Vught and Westerheijden 1994; Martin and Stella 2007). On one hand, Asian governments started to deregulate and corporatize universities, on the other hand, they were determined to develop a national quality assurance system in higher education, in order to assess universities' performance and ensure accountability, including setting up a national accreditor or professional accreditors. With either direct or indirect political control, Asian agencies are considered as extended arms of governments. Although most agencies claim to be autonomous over review procedures and decisions, they admit that enhancing such 'autonomy' remains difficult because of their close affiliation with the government (Davies and Bansel 2007; Jarvis 2014; Hou et al. 2015).

Systems of Quality assurance in Asian higher education were not developed until the early 2000's. In addition to a national mandate, national quality assurance agencies in Asia, due to aiming at regional integration and harmonisation, are expected to develop a national qualification framework in order to facilitate domestic and foreign qualifications recognition (Hou, Morse, and Wang 2017; MQA, 2020). The estimated number of quality assurance agencies and professional accreditors in Asia today has reached 81, including 44 public and 37 private organisations (Table 1). Of these, approximately 39.5% are located in South-East Asia, 24.7% are in East Asia and only 13.6% are in the

Table 1. Summary of the number of QA agencies in the Asia-Pacific region.

Asia-Pacific QA Agencies	Number of QA Agencies	Number of Public QA Agencies	Number of Private QA Agencies
South East Asia	32	12	20
South Asia	11	11	0
East Asia	20	9	11
Central Asia	7	2	5
Pacific	11	10	1
Total	81	44	37

Source: Authors

Table 2. Varying approaches for oversea qualifications recognition in terms of EQA.

Approach	Process	Initiator	Convergence with EQA	Examples
Bilateral/ multilateral agreement	To recognise overseas credentials based on agreements signed at national authorities	Government driven	Low	France and India (Campus France)
University assessment	To recognise overseas credentials according to university's standards	University-driven	Low	Italy, South Korea
Mutual recognition at programmes level	To recognise academic qualification of professional programs	Professional accreditor driven	High	Washington Accord (Engineering fields)
Mutual recognition at agency's level	To recognise academic qualifications based on the review decisions of quality assurance agencies	National quality assurance driven	High	HEEACT, MQA and NZQA
Mutual recognition for professional qualification	To recognise professional qualification according to the standards of professional councils	Professional Council driven	Intermediate	ASEAN' 'the Mutual Recognition Arrangement Framework on Accountancy Services

Source: by authors

Pacific. Coupled with the national QA system, the number of professional accreditors varies from country to country in Asia. For example, Malaysia has more than 13 professional accreditors compared with only 3 in Taiwan and none in most South-East Asian nations Table 1.

2.3 Approaches for overseas qualification recognition and role of quality assurance- a tension between globalisation and nationalism

Educational system controlled by nation states is central to the prevalence of nationalism (Haddad 1985). Based on concept of nationalism, the nation states have a monopoly over legitimate education and convey justified values to all citizens (Gellner 1983; Haddad 1985; Friedman 2018). Yet, globalisation and student mobility presents a challenge to national sovereignty when institutions keep transcending 'the national boundaries as natural, logical, and universal' (Friedman 2018, 251). This tension between globalisation and nationalism would definitely contribute to skyrocketing obstacles to an overseas qualification recognition controlled by nation states. For example, a transnational programme may be approved for operations in the receiving (destination) country, but its graduates may not be recognised as such if they seek either public appointments or employment at home (UNESCO/APQN 2006). Professional qualifications might even be more complicated due to the involvement of 'a number of different actors, such as professional associations, regulatory bodies and employers' organisation' (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) 2004, 37). In other words, professional restrictions are often enacted in local contexts, and this would impact the monopoly practices by states and exclude national quality assurance agencies and professional accreditors.

To resolve the issues, several routes have been applied to facilitate recognition of foreign credentials at the home country or third work/study destination. The fastest way is that when nations sign bilateral and multilateral agreements on mutual recognition of academic qualification, foreign qualifications would be recognised automatically. For example, China has signed mutual agreements with over 60 countries (ANICCW, 2019). The agreements should identify clearly what types of qualifications would be recognised by signing countries but professional qualifications are often excluded, such as Law, Medicine or other professions (CAMPUS France 2018). In addition, reliance on universities is one of the alternatives in some countries, such as Italy and South Korea. In this sense, universities and education institutes are obligated to verify and recognise foreign degrees on their own (Hou, Morse, and Wang 2017).

The other emerging scheme, is to engage quality assurance as a prerequisite for oversea qualifications recognition (Hou, 2014). It is called 'mutual recognition' over review decisions among quality assurance agencies and professional accreditors ". The concept of 'mutual recognition on QA decisions' is built on 'the recognition by two or more external quality agencies is an affirmation by each that it accepts the entire or partial decisions and judgments of the other' (Woodhouse 2008, 28). Based on the agencies 'having comparable aims and procedures' in the quality of scope and activity, 'they would likely reach the same conclusion in reviewing and passing a judgment on an institution, study program or qualification' (Woodhouse 2008, 28). In this sense, if the review decisions by both receiving and home agencies are accepted, qualifications awarded by the institution and study programme at the receiving country are also recognised at home. However, the implication of mutual recognition scheme over qualifications should rely on a well-developed quality assurance system at the national level.

In theory, mutual recognition is implemented at the programme level. To date, the Washington Accord is a successful case. In 1989, the Washington Accord, an international engineering agreement, 'governed mutual recognition of engineering qualifications and professional competence' (International Engineering Alliance 2019). The Accord outlines not only 'the mutual recognition, between the participating bodies, of accredited engineering degree programmes but also establishes and benchmarks the standard for professional engineering education across those bodies' (International Engineering Alliance 2019, 1).

The other type of mutual recognition occurs among national quality assurance agencies that undertake programme accreditation. In Asia, two successful cases of mutual recognition include the Higher Education Evaluation & Accreditation Council of Taiwan (HEEACT) with Malaysia Qualification Agency (MQA) and New Zealand Qualification Agency (NZQA) with MQA. Supported by the Taiwan and Malaysian governments, HEEACT and MQA carry out mutual recognition over the general bachelor's programme and qualification assessment and/or accreditation. In 2012, two agencies agreed to accept the accreditation decisions of the other. The number of Malaysian students has increased from 5793 in 2011 to 12,689 in 2017, with a 2.2 times growth rate (Hou and Fahmi 2014; MOE, 2010, 2016). NZQA and MQA have also completed two mutual recognition projects, one comparing bachelor's degrees and another for master's and doctoral degrees from 2011–2015 under the New Zealand-Malaysia Free Trade Agreement. These projects have helped to support the portability and recognition of qualifications between New Zealand and Malaysia (NZQA & MQA, 2016).

Another mutual recognition approach with joint commitments by member states in a region is the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN). In 2012, ASEAN countries signed 'the Mutual Recognition Arrangement Framework on Accountancy Services' to 'facilitate free movement of professional/skilled labour/talents in ASEAN' (ASEAN 2017, 1). The Mutual Recognition Arrangement Framework on Accountancy Services promote 'the flow of relevant information and exchanging expertise, experiences and best practices suited to specific needs of each ASEAN Member State' (ASEAN 2017, 1). This approach was attempting to facilitate professionals' mobility, which was used to be controlled by the governments and professional councils (Table 2).

Varying approaches for overseas qualification recognition discussed above are inevitably affected by national regulatory frameworks. In line with nationalism, states remain arbitrary and determined in oversea qualifications recognition, which has also led to a divergence of qualification recognition and external quality assurance in most contexts (Hou, Morse, and Wang 2017). Yet, to some extent, globalisation and increased student mobility in Asia would likely weaken or even threaten national sovereignty over education.

3. Research method

To collect relevant data, this study adopted a qualitative approach that includes an on-line survey and two separate focus groups. First, an on-line survey was undertaken to discover QA practices and

Table 3. Qualification recognition system and role of quality assurance in Asian nations.

	Malaysia	Indonesia	Thailand	Philippines	Vietnam	Cambodia	Taiwan	Japan
Recognition body	MQA/Jabatan Perkhidmatan Awan (JPA)	Indonesian Qualification Board (IQB) or Badan Kualifikasi Indonesia		Bureau of Standards and Evaluation	Commission on Higher Education (CHED)	Ministry of Education and Training/ Quality Management Department	Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport/authority	Ministry of Education
Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT)								
Regulation	Service Circular Letter No.8	Ministry of Research, Technology and Higher Education Regulation No 59, 2017	OHEC committee	CHED Memorandum Order	Decision 77/2007/ BGDDT	Degree and Certificates Evaluation Committee (DEC)	Regulations Regarding the Assessment and Recognition of Foreign Academic Credentials for Institutions of Higher Education	Treatment of degrees and credits acquired overseas
QA agency involvement	Establishment of MQF	None	None	None	None	None	None	None
Ministry of Education control	Strong	Strong	Strong	Strong	Strong	Strong	Strong	Strong
Relationship between QA agencies and professional bodies	Strong	Medium	Medium	Weak	Weak	Weak	Medium	Medium
Challenges	In compliance with MQF	1. Limited information about the institutions and programmes 2. QA lack of capacity for recognition	1. Limited information about the institutions and programmes 2. QA lack of capacity for recognition	1. Limited information about the institutions and programmes 2. QA lack of capacity for recognition	1. Limited information about the institutions and programmes 2. QA lack of capacity for recognition	Limited information about the institutions and programmes 2. QA lack of capacity for recognition	QA lack of capacity for recognition	QA lack of capacity for recognition

attitudes towards qualification recognition in 11 national QA agencies in Asia, including Japan, South Korea, Malaysia, Thailand, Vietnam, Cambodia, Indonesia, Taiwan, India, Philippines and Myanmar. All selected agencies are members of the INQAAHE and the Asia Pacific Quality Network (APQN). The questionnaires were developed in four sections, including (1) QA practice, (2) academic and professional qualification recognition, (3) relationship between QA agencies and professional accreditors, and (4) challenges for QA and qualification recognition. The survey was distributed to 11 Asian QA agencies via mail, and eight replies were received by the end of 2018. Each response was coded from D1 to D8.

For the focus groups, a total of 16 heads, or representatives, from quality assurance agencies and professional bodies in Nursing, Medicine, Veterinary, Finance were invited to participate. Each focus group meeting took two and a half hours. All discussions were transcribed verbatim and the transcripts were used as one of the major sources of data analysis. To facilitate data analysis and avoid preconceived ideas or bias, all participants in the two focus groups were also given a shortened code in terms of their backgrounds; representatives from quality assurance agencies were coded from Q1 to Q8 and those from professional accreditors and bodies were P1 to P6 (Bazeley and Jackson 2013). Data from focus groups were analysed using the Miles and Huberman (1994) method for generating meaning from transcribed and interview data. The method allows for reduction of typically large amounts of qualitative data by noting patterns and themes; clustering items into categories; building logical chains of evidence through causality and inferences; and making conceptual coherence (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison 2007). In addition, triangulation that uses multiple data sources in an investigation to produce understanding, was adopted to verification of major findings (Patton 2001).

4. Major findings

4.1 The results of documents analysis and the survey

1. Governments remain the primary agencies responsible for oversea qualifications recognition in most Asian countries as expected

One of the objectives of developing qualifications recognition arrangements is to facilitate the mobility of learners and workers, both within and between jurisdictions. The document analysis and on-line survey found that rather than QA agencies, governmental bodies mainly undertake recognition of overseas qualifications in Asia, except Malaysia.

As expected, in numerous countries, the Ministry of Education is the leading competent recognition body responsible for the assessment and recognition of foreign qualifications, including Thailand, Indonesia, Vietnam, Philippines, Cambodia, Taiwan and Japan. The recognition body in Thailand is the Bureau of Standards and Evaluation, under the Commission on Higher Education that 'formulates policies and standards on higher education, sets up systems for academic accreditation and certification of higher education standards including suggested guidelines for equivalence of degrees and learning performance' (UNESCO Bangkok 2013b; Interviewee D4). As respondent D4 stated,

> OHEC (Office of Higher Education Commission) has appointed a national committee to be in charge of the equivalency and recognition of foreign degrees and qualifications. The committee usually has a meeting once a month.

Similarly, the power of qualification recognition in Taiwan belongs to the Ministry of Education. According to the Regulations Governing the Assessment and Recognition of Foreign Academic Records by Institutions of Higher Education (FAR), the university attended by the individual applicant should be either 'already be listed in the reference list' or 'has been accredited by the government authority responsible for such educational institutions or by the professional accreditation agency for education in the country where it is located'. The programmes and courses undertaken should be

comparable to the equivalent academic level of Taiwan's institutions. In Japan, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) regulates the recognition of foreign degree in the 'treatment of degrees and credits acquired overseas', which emphasises 'the number of years of the curriculum of the pertinent school education and the number of years in the curriculum of school education in Japan should be the same if it is recognized' (UNESCO Bangkok 2013c).

> *Each foreign degree will be examined individually and judged whether it is equivalent to a Japanese degree or not. Only Japanese nationals without foreign nationality are eligible to apply (Interviewee D5).*

Similarly, the Ministry of Education and Training/Quality Management Department in Vietnam is in charge of an oversee qualification recognition according to the Act on *Decision 77/2007/BGDDT (Interview D7)*. In Cambodia, the overseas degrees/study records need certification from the National Committee for Recognition. The Cambodian government also regulates that foreign universities and programmes accredited at their home countries still require recognition by the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport/authority prior to the recognition process with the support of the national quality assurance agency (Interviewee D6).

Similarly, the Commission on Higher Education (CHED) in the Philippines is mandated as the responsible body for the recognition of foreign qualifications, working closely with other government agencies such as the Bureau of Immigration, Professional Regulation Commission, and the Department of Foreign Affairs. However, the universities are given autonomy for the recognition of foreign qualification for the purpose of further studies in the Philippines (UNESCO Bangkok 2013d, Interviewee D7).

2. Emerging roles of quality assurance agencies and global rankings in overseas qualification recognition

Unlike other countries, Malaysia calls on Malaysia Qualification Agency (MQA), a national quality assurance agency, to carry out qualification recognition. MQA evaluates the academic qualifications, even secondary school, for entry to higher education programmes in Malaysia.

> *Beginning January 2017, taking over from the Ministry of Higher Education, MQA has been responsible for the recognition of foreign higher education qualifications for employment and further studies (Interviewee D4).*

> *MQA will develop a proper system of this function. All qualifications listed in eSisraf will remain as it is until 31 December 2016. This will the main reference before a proper system develop to serve this new function. Accordingly, the relevance between quality assurance and recognition is clearly developed in national regulatory framework, in Malaysia (Interviewee D4).*

In addition, global ranking is considered one of the references in determining the quality status of foreign universities even though some respondents admitted that it was very not reliable, including Indonesia, Vietnam, Philippines, Thailand and Taiwan. The Ministry of Research, Technology and Higher Education (MoRTHE) in Indonesia recognises and endorses Diploma obtained from overseas on the basis of their regularly updated list. The list contains all reputable/recognised HEIs from overseas, mostly taken from global rankings. As the Indonesian interviewee indicated,

> *We do not look at the accreditation only except based on recommendation from the respective government. Put simply, to work in the public sector (government agencies), the Diploma obtained from overseas should be endorsed/ recognised by the MoRTHE first (Interviewee D1).*

In certain contexts, the use of global rankings widely by international students and employers contributed to the emerging roles in oversea qualifications recognition

> *The only requirement in Vietnam is that the receiving institutions should be internationally recognised such as listed in the world university ranking Shanghai Jiao Tong or QS rankings (Interviewee D7)*

> *We use rankings because of the needs of the foreign students, Vietnamese students, or alumni. When they shared upon their learning experience and looking for universities, they always had been advised to seek the ranking of the university and institution. They think it is easy to judge how the university is doing, though they may know it is not a reliable instrument to check it (Interviewee D7).*

When you look at the job market, it will be found that if you are from a high ranking university, it means that you are equipped with appropriate skills or knowledge. On the contrary, if you do not graduate from those high ranking universities, you are not competitive in job market (Interviewee D1)

4.2 Results of focus groups

1. The government severely restricts professional qualification recognition due to nationalism and political pressure except Cambodia

Given that Asian governments strictly control professional qualification due to nationalism and protectionism at local job market, a foreign professional qualification cannot be recognised in most Asian contexts (Interviewee Q5). Most countries use professional associations and bodies as the major regulators for qualification and licencing such as in medicine, nursing, law and accounting, rather than national quality assurance agencies and professional accreditors. Moreover, many governments protect certain professions by setting a high standard for overseas qualification recognition (Interviewees Q2, Q3, Q7).

The recognition of professional qualification in Indonesia depends on the profession. Professional certification is issued by an agency endorsed by the National Body for Certification of Profession or *Badan Nasional Sertifikasi Profesi* (BNSP) (Interviewee Q1). As mandated by Law 13/2003 and elaborated by Regulation 23/2004, the BNSP is established as an independent agency with the responsibility of carrying out certification of competencies. BNSP provides licences to professional certification bodies or *Lembaga Sertifikasi Profesi* (LSP), which are legal entities established by industry and/or professional associations (Interviewee Q1). Moreover, taking national licencing examination such as the recent competency test is considered as a requirement for recognition.

Licensing examination is an effective method by some professional associations, such as medical doctors and accountants. Similar principles of exit test or examination are also used in tests leading to certification (Interviewee Q1).

The Thai government also regulates professionals, who graduated with foreign degrees and qualifications and seeking licences to practice in Thailand, to comply with the legal rules and regulations set up by these professional agencies (Interviewee Q6). At present, 13 professional bodies in Thailand control licences for professional practices, including medical science, veterinary science, nursing and midwifery, dentistry, pharmacy, physical therapy, medical technology, accountancy, engineering, law, architecture, teacher, public health and science and technology professionals (Interviewees Q1). In Malaysia, professional qualifications from foreign countries are reviewed and evaluated by the local professional bodies for recognition qualification (Interviewee Q3).

Recognition of professional qualifications which are not directly accredited by Malaysia professional bodies must comply with requirements of the respective professional bodies to be recognised for practice in Malaysia. Much will depend on the terms of an MRA and the involvement of the professional bodies in the MRA (Interview D3).

In Taiwan, two laws relate to academic and professional qualification recognitions; one is 'Regulations Regarding the Assessment and Recognition of Foreign Academic Credentials for Institutions of Higher Education' (Issued on 2 October 2006), and the other is for medical degree, 'Principles regarding the Assessment and Recognition of Foreign Academic Credentials for Medical Studies in Institutions of Higher Education' (Issued on 1 January 2017). The government stipulates that foreign medical qualifications are only recognised in nine regions. Students obtaining medical degree outside these regions are required to take an equivalent proficiency exam to ensure quality of the professional degree (Interviewees P4 and P5). For nursing qualification recognition, the 1016 credit hours for internship programme is the minimum standard. If the graduate does not meet this standard, his/her qualification is not recognised (Interviewee P1).

Graduates from some Thai universities will not have to sit for examination for professional license if the professional curriculum and programs of that university have been accredited and approved by professional association of these 14 disciplines. The government does not care where you obtain the degree (Interviewee Q6).

In India, the recognition is a kind of a political issue. Our medical council of India is very autonomous, kind of, so anybody acquires a foreign qualification in medicine, they have to give an exam in India, examination, and if they are qualified in that examination, then only they're allowed to practice (Interviewee Q5).

However, several nations such as Japan started to lift the obstacles originating from national regulation.

With the view of globalisation, we cannot stick to this restricted system forever, and our government is moving in the direction of easing the restrictions. For example, in the case of legal profession, the Japanese ministry has eased the restriction against becoming lawyer, and they are now allowed to engage in some transactions, but only some limited transactions, not so wide-range (Interview Q7).

2. Most Asian nations have no specific mode of collaboration between national quality assurance agencies and professional accreditors for oversea qualification recognition

This study found that MQA, NIAD-QE, and HEEACT collaborate with professional accreditors and professional bodies but in slightly different manners. Three types of partnership exist in the region, including supervisor, information sharing and recognition body. In Malaysia, though 13 professional accreditors and bodies developed their own rules for professional licencing, they are still strongly linked with MQA under Malaysia qualification framework (MQF). When the Malaysia qualification framework (MQF) was formed in 2011, MQA was authorised to develop the Malaysia Qualification Register (MQR) to list all accredited institutions and programmes. Currently, all qualifications, including domestic, foreign and professional, are required to comply with the MQF to be registered in MQR (Interviewee P5). The final report for professional programmes is approved and endorsed in the Joint Technical Committee meeting between MQA and professional bodies before submission to the Accreditation Committee meeting (Interviewee Q3).

MQA conduct joint assessment with professional bodies as prescribed under the MQA Act. Professional bodies must establish a Joint Technical Committee for the purpose of accrediting a programme (Interviewee Q3).

As a sub-supervisor, MQA has developed a strong partnership with professional accreditors and bodies. This well-rounded 'combination of inward and outward' recognition system is one of the most successful cases in Asia. By contrast, Japan and Taiwan developed a slightly loose partnership with professional accreditors and bodies. The Japan Network of Certified Evaluation and Accreditation Agencies (JNCEAA) launched in January 2011 to foster awareness among accreditors involved in enhancing quality assurance in Japanese higher education. In addition, the JNCEAA members share the accreditation information and results on the same webpage (Interviewee Q7). Similarly, Taiwan's HEEACT collaborates with four domestic accreditors in the joint publication of review results on the webpage of Taiwan Quality Institutions Directory (Interviewees Q8). Commissioned by the government, HEEACT is authorised to recognise the status of domestic and international accreditors. In addition, HEEACT and other accreditors jointly developed several core courses for reviewers' training.

In Thailand, the Office for National Education Standards and Quality Assessment (ONESQA) has no particular relationship with professional accreditors. However, ONESQA invites representatives of professional bodies to consult on QA and professional accreditation practices when necessary (Interviewee Q6). There is no specific collaboration between national quality assurance agencies and professional bodies in Indonesia, either. In 2016, the Indonesian National Quality Assurance Agency (BAN-PT) was commissioned to develop professional accreditors and supervise their operations (Interviewee Q1).

5. Discussions

5.1 A convergence model between quality assurance and qualification recognition is not developed yet but mutual recognition is expected to implement in the region

This study finds that Asian governments still play a strong role in oversea qualifications recognition and control professional credentials and qualifications. A lack of links among quality assurance agencies, professional accreditors and recognition bodies commonly does exist in most countries. Due to political concerns and protectionism within the job market, nationalism has even led to the escalating barriers of talent mobility across the region. Indeed, it will likely take considerable time to implement the convergence model in Asia (Hou, e. al., 2017; Sharma 2018).

Yet, under the Tokyo Convention, Asian governments are aware that engagement of quality assurance in the review process of oversea qualification is imperative. Owing to a gradual acceptance of quality assurance as a necessary precondition for recognition, mutual recognition of review decisions of quality assurance agencies and professional accreditors has been considered as an appropriate approach to facilitate international mobility among students, academic staff, and labour force, such as the ASEAN Mutual Recognition Arrangement Framework on Accountancy Services, Mutual agreement between MQA and HEEACT, MQA and NZQA. It is believed that this process could limit the current expansion of non-recognised and bogus qualifications from foreign countries when oversea qualifications are awarded by the accredited institutions and study programmes at the receiving quality assurance agency.

5.2 Is globalisation and mobility leading to the weakening of state control of credentials and professional qualifications?

The increasing pressure for talent mobility and global linkage has made the international qualification recognition an inevitable trend (Hou, 2018; Hou, et.al., 2018) . However, we must admit that state control remains the mainstream of qualification recognition as discussed above. Previous evidence has shown that Asian countries still hold the legal power of recognising credential or degrees mainly in form of ministry of education. Though some countries devolved authority to the quality assurance agency (such as MQA), the majority of governmental departments set up the standards and regulations in regulating such recognition. As far as the professional qualifications are concerned, designated professional bodies play a major role in guarding the standards and checking the entry to the local market. Compared to general credentials and degrees, those professional qualification holders face even tougher regulations and control from the state. As a whole, globalisation, on the one hand, seems to loosen the border of credentials. On the other hand, it also makes state to consider how to balance the needs of domestic interests and greater transnational mobility. The Nation-state remains powerful in accepting professional qualification. On the contrary, we saw limited prevalence of neo-liberalism in opening national borders to non-local credentials and particularly professional qualifications (Table 3).

6. Conclusion

The study demonstrates that a divergence approach between quality assurance and qualification recognition is applied in most Asian contexts. Given the fact that state control remains strong in oversea qualification recognition, most quality assurance agencies and professional accreditors in Asia would only act as a secondary role in the issue. Currently, a call for a convergence between qualifications recognition and quality assurance schemes is getting stronger and stronger (ENIC/NARIC 2020). As the new dynamics in cross-border higher education has been prevalent over all the world, a convergence model between qualification recognition and quality assurance of higher education is highly expected in Asian context under the joint efforts of international higher education organisations, such as UNESCO, INQAAHE, and APQN.

The current and increasing mobility of students, academic programmes and labour force across national borders, mandates the development of a national regulatory system to assess foreign qualifications. Due to the diversity of programme qualifications, delivery modes and the proliferation of non-formal providers worldwide, assessing the value of a foreign degree is becoming increasingly challenging. As Rauhvargers (2004) stated, 'given the national and cultural embedding of education, national control over qualifications will remain necessary and strong, making systems of recognition of foreign qualifications indispensable' (p.24). On one hand, Asian governments need a thorough knowledge of higher education and quality assurance systems, where the qualification is conferred to correctly position a foreign credential. On the other hand, quality assurance agencies and recognition bodies are encouraged to consolidate their partnership in quality of cross-border higher education. Nevertheless, a well-structured recognition system is expected to be more inclusive, transparent, and able to engage varying higher education stakeholders. As former UNESCO Bangkok, Dr. Molly Lee (2012) stated,

> Assessing the value of a qualification has become more complicated and yet at the same time, evaluators, employers, professional bodies and other stakeholders have become very interested in determining the quality of an institution, programme or qualification. Therefore, recognition and credential evaluation agencies increasingly appeal to quality assurance agencies to inform them of the quality status of an institution or programme. Thus, there is a need for international cooperation and information sharing (p.8).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

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