

## **INQAAHE 2013 paper**

**Theme 2:** Innovative approaches to external QA in tertiary education: not a single approach towards excellence

**Title:** **Coordination of external quality assurance, national policy and aid priorities: an example from PNG**

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Note: The views expressed in this paper are the authors' own and do not reflect the views of the Government of Papua New Guinea.

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### **Abstract**

We outline a novel approach to the coordination of quality assurance, national policy and donor country aid in Papua New Guinea, which aims to improve the quality and sustainability of university education. Background information on the current situation of PNG universities approach is provided, for context, leading to a description of the three-way partnership envisaged in implementation of an Independent Review of the PNG University System. This partnership is between the Government of PNG, the Australian Government through its international aid agency, AusAID, and the PNG universities. We discuss a range of enabling factors at national and institutional level that facilitate the introduction of external institutional-wide quality assurance reviews for the PNG universities. We also discuss challenges and lesson learnt, including some of the actions taken by universities. In particular, we address the challenges of developing robust self-assessment processes in severely under-resourced institutions not familiar with this practice. From this specific account, we explore past aid practices and the emerging opportunities for developing countries to link higher education quality assurance to other national policy instruments and education aid programs. There are probably further opportunities for donor countries and aid agencies to craft systematic programs of higher education aid that work in tandem with the country's higher education institutions as well as with the policy and funding instruments of developing countries. As well, we suggest there may be scope for making greater use of self-assessments as an integral component of sectoral aid programs.

## **Paper**

### **Introduction**

In this paper, we describe a promising approach to improving the capabilities and quality of universities in Papua New Guinea (PNG), through a three-way partnership between individual universities, the national Government and the Australian international aid agency, AusAID.

Like many developing nations, PNG struggles to meet the challenges of simultaneously improving the quality of higher education while increasing access, in an environment where there are many calls on public funds. Until recently, national policies had emphasised an increase in enrolments over quality standards but this situation is now changing. The need to improve quality in universities has been recognised and, as a first step, external quality assessments will be conducted for all universities. A key element of the approach is reflective self-assessment of the type used for external quality audits. Such an approach is not without its challenges, however, and the story is still evolving.

### **Background**

Papua New Guinea, with a population of over seven million people, is a developing country with substantial natural and mineral resources but, at present, a very low level of participation in the formal labour market and extremely low average incomes. It is ranked at 153 of 179 countries on the United Nations Development Program's Human Development Index (United Nations, 2011).

PNG has a comparatively small post-secondary education sector. There are six universities, four public and two church-based. Other public institutions include six teachers' colleges and six nursing colleges, providing qualifications to diploma level, and seven technical and business colleges. Non-State institutions include a number of church-based colleges and some private providers, including institutions that provide both technical and vocational education and training (TVET) and higher education. Some of these offer qualifications from overseas universities or articulation pathways to further study at an overseas institution. There are now new projected colleges at provincial government level, and some projected church-based universities.

The first university established in PNG was the University of Papua New Guinea (UPNG) in 1965, with a vision to be the premier university for the Pacific. Since then, UPNG has had its ups and downs (see for example MacWilliam, 2011). UPNG, in common with the other public and church universities, has been asked to take in more and more school leavers and has done so over the past several years, to a point where its already limited capacity is overstretched.

Despite this expansion in access, the six universities and other providers of higher education serve only a fraction of the qualified secondary school graduates, and the demand for higher education continues to increase. An increase in school graduates has not been matched by an

increase in access for school leavers to TVET or higher education institutions. Of approximately 15,000 Grade 12 school leavers in 2012, government scholarships for tertiary study – the main form of funding for State institutions – were only able to be offered to around 4,000 students and the amount of each scholarship is known to be inadequate. Notwithstanding recent injections of recapitalisation funding from the PNG Government, and some new aid funding, the two largest public universities, UPNG and the PNG University of Technology, cannot yet maintain adequate resources and infrastructure.

### **University quality assessments**

In 2009, the Governments of Papua New Guinea and Australia commissioned an Independent Review of the PNG University System (Namaliu-Garnaut 2010). The Review confirmed severe underfunding and overcrowding in the four public universities, the consequences of policies focused on the quantity rather than quality of graduates. There are similar problems in the public TVET sector (AusAID, 2011).

The Review of the PNG University System confirmed that many school-leaver students are poorly prepared for tertiary studies. It recommended only a gradual expansion of places in universities and a much stronger emphasis on quality.

Following the release of the report, the Governments of PNG and Australia in 2012 agreed on an Implementation Plan. Two main elements are:

- The provision of Australian government aid funding (up to a ceiling amount) that matches annual increases in the total PNG Government funding for the State universities, and
- A requirement that all the six universities undergo independent external quality assessments to qualify for additional Australian government aid support, that will help them implement the recommendations in these assessments.

All six universities agreed in May 2012 to undertake these quality assessments, the first such institutional quality assurance reviews they have undergone. The model chosen for the institutional quality assessments adapts the familiar model of quality audit based on self-assessment but will review against 13 standards. External panels will be a mix of international experts and PNG citizens, with support from the Office of Higher Education (OHE).

The Australian Government has offered some initial support to the four universities, to refurbish visitor accommodation and to give technical assistance to prepare for the quality assessments.

To support the process and position PNG for future external quality assurance activities, the Australian Government has also funded a position in the Office of Higher Education, to help to manage the first round of quality assessments and to develop the capacity of OHE staff to coordinate such reviews in future. The aim is to establish external quality assurance (EQA) of

universities as a sustainable part of future national practice. A previous view of universities as wholly ‘autonomous’, and other factors, had limited the amount of Government ‘steering’ for the universities as well as the accountability of universities to the national Government.

The novelty of this approach lies in the linking of donor country policy and incentives (Australian Government), moderate increases in national government funding (PNG Government), and the willing participation of the universities in thorough self-assessments prior to the external quality assessments. The three-way partnership approach provides an opportunity for:

- universities to identify their own priority improvements and receive additional funding, both as base funding and as targeted aid funding
- the Government of PNG to improve the accountability and internal management of the universities, and to gain some matching contributions for its own increases in funding to the universities
- the Australian Government to invest in systematic, rather than ad hoc, improvements to the PNG university sector.

That is, the Implementation Plan offers the prospect of ‘win-win’ to all three parties, if each party meets its part of the bargain.

#### Progress to date

The current situation is that the two church-based universities have completed external quality assessments, based on internal self-assessments, which allow them to seek additional funding from AusAID to implement the recommendations. One of the universities, Divine Word University, has begun to receive this support, as it took the step of commissioning its own independent external audit in 2011, before the 2012 Implementation Plan was agreed. The other, Pacific Adventist University, is subject to regular external institutional accreditation from its parent church, the Seventh Day Adventists, and underwent the process in late 2012.

The four State universities are currently preparing self-assessment reports, with the first due by 30 April 2013. Two others are due by 30 June while the fourth is not due until 31 December, to allow time for existing governance and leadership issues at that institution to be resolved. The Office of Higher Education is establishing panels for the external quality assessments.

The PNG Government did not commit additional funds for the State universities in 2013, although it had provided a modest increase in 2012. It will be interesting, as well, to see how the recent devolution of national public resources to provinces and local level governments will affect future funding streams to the universities, whose students come from all over PNG. However, it is commendable that the lack of an increase in financial support for 2013 has not lessened the commitment of the four State universities to the quality assessment process.

### **Challenges in implementation**

Implementing EQA led by self-assessment at the PNG universities is not without its issues. One major challenge is to persuade university staff, in a severely resource-depleted system, that the path to quality improvement does not rely solely on the provision of more funding from government, but that quality must be driven internally by people within the universities. Some staff feel the quality assessments are ‘just another review’, having experienced previous diagnostic reviews that produced little change.

Certainly, improved revenue streams for State universities (from a range of sources) and elimination of financial fraud must be part of the solution, but income alone will not enable an internal culture of quality improvement to take hold. However, the approach requires the universities to take it on faith that additional resources will be forthcoming in future.

A related challenge is to persuade academics, some of whom are deeply frustrated and negative, to focus on systems, not on individuals, and on future improvements rather than current problems. The culture in some academic departments and in most administrative units has not focused on ownership or improvement: the very idea of a reflective self-assessment – especially one that is authentic and provides a voice for all – is highly unusual to some.

One element of the process is to encourage staff of the PNG universities to see themselves as part of the global community of higher education. While most academics welcome the prospect of engaging with academics from other countries, there remains in some quarters strong support for a policy of ‘localisation’, or implicit (if not explicit) preference for the recruitment of academics who are PNG nationals. Although it is important to provide opportunities for nationals, to build the country’s academic capability, the application of this policy has in the past hindered the flow of international expertise and new ideas into some universities. A related issue is that some academics, notably at UPNG, are captive to the legacy of the past, the ‘glory days’ of UPNG, and may be unwilling to admit that the current reality, which is sadly different, requires an openness to new practices and a willingness to cooperate with academics from other universities in PNG.

A final challenge, not unknown in developing countries, is that of conducting external quality assessments at a time when there are current investigations into fraud or corruption occurring at some universities. These investigations, which are in-depth forensic reviews, cannot be ignored by the external reviews but, equally, the quality reviews must not cut across these investigations to implicate the external quality reviewers in the investigative process. The safety and security of reviewers needs also to be taken seriously into account, although most PNG campuses do provide a safe environment for students and staff.

National policy has yet to fully engage with the rapid evolution of new modes and models of university education. Although open and distance education has been a feature of provision for most PNG universities and a national open university is planned, the potential for

overseas online provision to offer more attractive opportunities for students than the public universities needs to be more strongly factored into planning.

### **Enabling factors and lessons learnt**

Notwithstanding these challenges, there are some enabling factors at national and institutional levels that are assisting the conduct of the external quality assessments, both directly and indirectly.

Nationally, PNG has existing capability in external quality assessment, through existing accreditation processes for private providers. There is an active and progressive national committee, the National Higher Education Quality Assurance and Accreditation Committee (NHEQAAC) of the Commission for Higher Education, whose membership includes senior academic leaders of the universities. This Committee is fully supportive of the external university quality assessments and has stressed their benefits even without the ‘carrot’ of further aid funding. The Committee is driving other changes, such as the introduction of a credit points system and better credit transfer arrangements, to complement the recently-approved PNG National Qualifications Framework. The external quality assessments thus can work in tandem and assist developments that the Committee has endorsed.

More indirectly, other developments at national level are facilitating a greater and more systematic emphasis on quality in higher education. A new National Higher Education Plan, the first for some time, is being finalised and measures are being devised to improve university governance.

At the policy level the challenge of access is also being addressed. There is greater recognition of the role of the non-State sector – including overseas providers – in increasing access at reasonable levels of quality, which in turn emphasises the need for a robust but straightforward national regulatory and quality assurance system. New legislation, for a better quality assurance and regulatory system, is in preparation and the first steps are being taken towards an integrated tertiary education (higher education and TVET) sector in PNG. These developments signal and reinforce the external quality assessments of universities.

Within the universities, the enabling factors – in addition to the presence of NHEQAAC members as senior academic managers committed to the process – include the strong desire of some academics to receive more external, collegial input for their activities. There are some highly-qualified and dedicated academics, many of whom have shown determination and courage to keep teaching in the face of extremely difficult circumstances. In professional disciplines, there are academics who are very enthusiastic about the potential for international professional accreditation for their programs, as there are few professional accreditation bodies in PNG. Perhaps the most pleasing comment we have heard from academics so far is that the process is ‘long overdue’.

At senior management level, there is recognition that the external quality assessment process can provide leverage for desired internal change, so the process has support from Vice-Chancellors as well as NHEQAAC members.

We have learnt some lessons along the way, working with the universities. The first, and most reassuring, is that there is substantial internal capability in the existing universities to self-review and to drive a quality improvement process, notwithstanding the inevitable barriers and obstacles to change. This capability, and the opportunity to unleash it, is a fact that, in our view, may have been overlooked in past aid policies and practices (NUFFIC, 2005), which have supported selective improvement programs but have not addressed the ongoing capacity of universities to improve.

We have learnt also that, with the stimulus of an external review, the four State universities have set themselves up to support the process and initiate improvements. All four have established quality enhancement or internal audit or self-assessment committees: although not all committees have been very active, two seem likely to continue into the future. One university has established and staffed a Quality Enhancement Hub as an ongoing initiative, while others have conducted various feedback surveys or codified policies or data. While these latter actions are familiar ‘tidying up’ before an external review, they are improvements nonetheless, and support organisational learning.

Another lesson is that awareness-raising and briefing sessions with staff of individual academic and administrative departments, using external and internal facilitators, is a good way to build support for the process. Direct engagement with staff helps to address possible misconceptions about the process, e.g. to explain that the process is focused on improvements and not about blaming individuals. It also enables a dialogue, to cut through the ‘churn’ of current frustrations and tackle the fixation of some on the need for more Government funding. We have stressed in our briefings the need for both the ‘twin pillars’ of better resourcing and stronger internal quality assurance.

The success and impact of the external quality assessments of the State universities will not be known until after the processes have been completed. However, the commitment to the process and energy shown by many in the State universities suggest that our emphasis on self-assessment represents a useful addition to existing approaches. Our hope is that this internal process, and modelling of external reviews at international standard, will kick-start the emergence of a quality culture within key areas of the universities.

Many of the challenges and lessons outlined above will be familiar to those in other developing countries, whose journeys are likely to have been similar (e.g. CHET, 2002; Hayward, 2006; Materu, 2007). This account from PNG is offered as a contribution to building a community of practice for higher education quality assurance in countries that have severe development challenges (cf Bunoti, 2011).

In the final section of the paper we explore the wider context of international aid policy and how the PNG experience contributes to our knowledge of how to improve higher education outcomes in such countries.

**Opportunities to link EQA, institutional ownership, government funding and aid policy**

As noted earlier, many developing countries are faced with the triple challenge of simultaneously expanding their higher education systems, improving quality, and limiting the public resources directed to these ends (World Bank, 2011).

However, the policies of aid donor countries have not always assisted developing countries to adequately address this triple challenge. Writing about the situation in Papua New Guinea, MacWilliam (2011) states: ‘The decline in UPNG since at least the early 1980s has been caused, in part, by the neglect of aid donors at the same time as there has been a substantial reduction in the national government’s commitment’.

A focus on basic education, driven by the Millennium Development Goals, has meant that the priorities of many donor countries have not included higher education significantly over recent decades (Hayman, 2005). This situation is changing (UNESCO, 2007; Dickson 2009), with greater recognition by aid agencies of the role of a healthy higher education sector in: driving economic and social development; educating the teachers that will staff the schools; and in assisting to build elite national capability and leadership (Yizengaw, 2005; Brannelly et al., 2011). Nonetheless, much higher education aid funding takes the form of student scholarships to institutions in the developed world (UNESCO, 2011), even if in-country improvement activities are also supported.

Given the role of higher education in national development, we suggest there may be further opportunities for donor countries and aid agencies to craft programs of higher education aid that work in tandem with the policy and funding instruments of developing countries, while at the same time committing the institutions in these countries to play a role in improving their own quality.

All countries have a range of policy instruments available to them in managing and planning their higher education sectors. These range from legislation and ‘hard’ regulation through contractual conditions, financial incentives and sanctions, to negotiations, agreed frameworks and persuasion. The role of the public opinion also should not be overlooked. The way is open to donor countries and agencies to discuss with national governments in developing countries the best ways to use some of these policy levers to pursue systematic quality objectives in higher education, but with the active involvement of the institutions themselves (Wamboga-Mugirya, 2009). We stress that both the institutions of higher education, as well as the government quality assurance agency, if there is one, should be involved in such cooperative partnerships.

There are several reasons why external quality assurance, if it includes a robust self-assessment component, should be part of such partnerships. There is some evidence that EQA

can have positive effects on the quality of higher education systems in developing countries (Hayward, 2006). Involvement of an EQA agency can assist in monitoring system-level as well as institutional impacts. And, of course, EQA can assist governments and aid agencies to better understand how academic standards in the institutions compare to international norms.

Moreover, when conducted with a strong emphasis on self-assessment, EQA helps higher education institutions to ‘own’ the issues and to identify the specific improvements they need, and quite probably with greater accuracy and understanding than external consultants can provide. This sense of ‘ownership’ in turn may help to ensure that funds are used transparently and systematically within institutions. Finally, the more experience universities gain in conducting and contributing to EQA, the more there are nationals who can review other providers, including overseas and private institutions, and affiliated colleges.

The linking of aid funding to university quality improvements has been a feature of some donor agency interventions (World Bank, 2011) and aid funding has been directed specifically to strengthening national and regional quality assurance systems (e.g. GIQAC funding to APQN and other INQAAHE regional networks).

However, these initiatives have not been closely linked to other measures to improve the situation of institutions, especially universities, in developing countries. The coupling of institution-led quality assurance, national government funding and donor country aid may offer a more systematic approach to capacity development for higher education in developing countries than could be offered by any of these activities when provided alone.

The model being used in PNG, which we suggest could be more widely adopted, echoes the recommendations from a 2005 NUFFIC conference entitled ‘A Changing Landscape: Making support to higher education and research in developing countries more effective’. Participants made the following recommendations (NUFFIC, 2005, p16):

**Any cooperation or funding relationship must include quality assurance mechanisms as fully integrated components** (*emphasis added*). At institutional level, these mechanisms are mainly intended to enhance the quality of teaching and research of the individual institutes, at national level mainly to regulate national priorities, and at international level, mainly to enable the recognition of degrees and cooperation.

The Proceedings go on to state:

The new participants thus added a very compelling additional component to the discussion, i.e. **that any quality assurance mechanism should be anchored within an institute** (*emphasis added*). With regard to the international level, all aspects of cooperation or funding mechanisms must include quality assurance mechanisms.

### **The value of self-assessment**

In our view, self-assessment is a key element. It is a truism of EQA that only institutions themselves can improve their quality, but many capacity diagnostic exercises in developing countries are done ‘to’ institutions – or notionally ‘with’ them – rather than done ‘by’ them. Too many reviews have been commissioned and conducted by aid agencies without enough recognition of the ability of institutions to self-diagnose many of the necessary changes that would be beneficial. The concept of self-evaluation is a feature of some writing on capacity development, especially in regard to the development of national capabilities in monitoring and evaluation, but this element seems under-developed and is not based on the notion of ‘ownership’ of the issues as a starting point for change (European Commission, 2005).

While the route through self-assessment takes longer, it may produce longer-lasting outcomes if embedded into university processes, as a systematic contribution to institutional change (CHET, 2002). External quality agencies and universities in many countries now have substantial expertise in supporting and/or conducting authentic self-assessment processes, and there are good reference works and articles available on the subject (e.g. Kells, 1995; Schmitz and Whitworth, 2002; Watson and Maddison, 2005; Adams et al., 2008). Thus, there are low barriers to promoting this practice within institutions, if sufficient trust and goodwill is available in the country.

### **Conclusions**

We suggest that there are almost certainly further opportunities for donor countries and aid agencies to craft systematic programs of higher education aid that work in tandem with higher education institutions as well as with the policy and funding agencies and instruments of developing countries. There are certainly opportunities for donor agencies to take a more coordinated approach, in education as in other sectors (NUFFIC, 2005).

Further, EQA agencies in developing countries may be able to work more systematically with donor agencies, or to coordinate approaches from a range of institutions to donor agencies. Our experience in PNG suggests that many significant improvements to higher education require infrastructure and practice improvements that are common to all institutions of higher education, e.g. common national data systems for institutions and government agencies, ICT and learning resources that are able to be shared across institutions, national purchasing cooperatives.

Rather than supporting stand-alone improvements at one institution, donors might give more attention to these over-arching needs, which could be supported by innovative financing that is pooled and contingent on contributions by the national government.

Finally, we suggest there may be scope for making greater use of self-assessments as an integral component of sectoral aid programs, certainly in higher education but also in other sectors including school education, health, and governance systems.

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