Is employer engagement effective in external quality assurance of higher education? A paradigm shift or QA disruption from quality assurance perspectives in Asia

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Abstract

Due to global attention on student employability, employers are expected to be involved in institutional governance in higher education and quality assurance (QA). Due to the difficulties in recruiting motivated employers to participate in external QA governance and process, this has become a challenging issue in many Asian nations. The paper aims to explore employer legitimacy in Asian national higher education regulations and EQA system according to a four-dimensional diagram of institutional governance model. There are two major findings. First, Asian governments developed QA policies with a focus on employer engagement but the emerging practice is still ineffective. Second, approaches of employer engagement in QA governance vary context to context, such as HK and Malaysia in the excellence mode; Taiwan, Indonesia, Australia, New Zealand belong to advanced type; and China, Thailand, and Vietnam fall in the intermediate category.

Keywords Employer engagement · Higher education · Quality assurance

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Introduction

Due to massification in higher education, rigorous economic conditions and a shift in social expectation in recent years, university graduates faced "increasing challenges in their transition from education into the workforce" than ever (EUROSTAT, 2019, p.1). Given the fact that the linkage between education and work is diminishing, employers' involvement in HEIs has gained greater prominence. (Mok, & Wu, 2015; Teichler, 2015). To respond to an urgent call from society that HEIs should equip students with employability skills, they are pressured engage employers in institutional management and curriculum reform; collecting alumni feedback; as well as collaborating with industry for internships. (Leisyte et al., 2013; Leisyte & Westerheijden, 2014; Hou et al., 2021). This has led to discussions on how HEIs enable students to build core competencies to improve their contribution to society within a well-structured QA scheme.

Developing students' employability has drawn increasing attention, not only from HEIs but also Quality Assurance (QA) agencies through employer engagement (Mok & Neubauer, 2016, Hou et al., 2021). The INQAAHE GGP guidelines *1.3 governance and organisational structure* stated that "The EQAA has a governance structure consistent with its mission and objectives, and, adequate mechanisms to involve relevant stakeholders in the definition of its standards and criteria" (INQAAHE, 2016, p. 5), particularly employers. According to Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) *2.4 peer review experts*, external QA should include a variety of peer experts in order to "contribute to the work of the agency through input from various perspectives, including those of institutions, academics, students and employers/professional practitioners" (EURASHE, 2015, p. 19). Hence, HEIs should acknowledge employer expectations regarding qualifications and quality of graduates by involving them in institutional governance and curriculum reform. Moreover, engaging employers in external QA standards development and onsite visits would also contribute to the enhancement of student learning outcomes and employability (QAA UK, 2014a; Shah et al., 2015; Tyszko, 2017). However, due to the difficulties in recruiting motivated employers to participate in external QA governance and onsite visits, it has become a challenging issue, much discussed in the QA community (Leisyte et al., 2013; Hénard, 2016).

Employers have been invited to act as reviewers, board members or consultants in some countries at the program accreditation level, particularly in Asia, but rarely for institutional reviews. This paper first explored the legitimacy of employers in national HE regulations and QA systems. Secondly, approaches and practices of employer engagement in external QA and accreditation in major Asian countries were analyzed, based on document analysis and in-depth interviews. The challenges encountered by Asian QA agencies and their perception toward future development were discussed as a conclusion. The three research questions are:

(1). What are the national regulatory frameworks for employer engagement in higher education and quality assurance in the Asian context?
(2). What approaches and models did national QA agencies in Asia adopt to engage employers in external QA governance and review procedures?
(3). What are the challenges that national QA agencies in Asia encountered while engaging employers in QA governance and subsequent impact on higher education?

Literature review

Higher education, employability, and the role of employers

Literature debates whether higher education expansion would strengthen students' employability or result in so called "over education" (Autor, 2014; Lauder et al., 2018). Currently, employability creates confusion but it is popularly viewed as a significant indicator to assess quality of qualifications in most contexts. In reality, the concept of employability, in relation to the quality of education, varies from different HE stakeholder's perspectives. Universities recognise the need to provide sufficient educational activities and training to facilitate student employment. Students expect to be employable with practical knowledge and useful skills for future employment. Graduates hope to obtain employment opportunities and succeed in their chosen occupations. In the views of government and society, employable graduates not only benefit themselves but also the local community and economy (Niedermeier, 2018; Støren & Aamodt, 2010). In addition to a set of personal attributes and practical skills, employers expect graduates to be equipped with a sense of commercial awareness, as well international experiences (Stiwne and Alves, 2010).

It has often been argued whether the level of qualification graduates earn at university sufficiently meets employer's demands in the changing job market (Teichler, 2009, 2015). Diamond et al., (2008) highlighted employers' concerns and found that "most universities are doing some sort of awards or initiatives that students can become involved in, but there is a bit of a mismatch between what industry is looking for and the way they are making sure students get that information" (p. 19). As Wilson (2012) reviewed the collaboration between universities and industry and mainly found that "the needs of the business do not align with the mission and strategy of the university" (p. 28). Grasgreen (2014) also argued that while 96 percent of chief academic officers in colleges believed that their students were prepared to launch their careers, in contrast, only 11 percent of business leaders believed that college graduates were ready for the workplace. Accordingly, a mismatch between university' and employer's expectation over quality of graduates continues to exist.

As noted above, an individual's employment is of significant importance to society, due to economic growth. Employability therefore contributes to an individual's personal wellbeing and growth, as well as social progress (Pologeorgis, 2019; Sanders & Weel, 2000). Given that university remains a place providing students with knowledge acquisition in a specific field of study and skills training needed in the job market, the emerging role of employers becomes the highlight of higher education (Mok & Neubauer, 2016; Mok et al., 2013; Pologeorgis, 2019). Bolden and Petrov (2008) argue employers are supposed to "provide an understanding of work contexts and work roles to inform education without substantial buy-in from academic staff quality standards may suffer" (p.41). Employers' views would facilitate HEI program design, and student relevant skills and professional qualification acquisition (Cheung, 2015).

Conceptual framework for quality assurance governance and its relevance to employer engagement

QA, consisting of internal and external dimensions, can be regarded as one of the most powerful tools to ensure quality of HEIs, particularly in Asia (Shin, 2018; Hou et al., 2020). Literature highlights the impact of external QA on HEIs, particularly at the programmatic

level (Elken & Stensaker, 2018; Hou, 2015; Stensaker, et al., 2011). Nonetheless, HEIs were supposed to make good use of review reports and respond to comments made by QA agencies appropriately to self- improve internal QA mechanisms (Mok & Wu, 2015; Hou et al., 2021).

Given the fact that QA has been considered a policy instrument in many contexts, a number of institutional governance models were proposed to interpret the changing roles of QA and its relationship with universities (Olsen, 2007; Paintsil, 2016; Hou et al., 2020). Wedgwood (2008) developed a multitude of diagrams in the HE context to illustrate how teaching connected with research and to what extent academic education is exerting societal impact by way of employer engagement, which could be connected to external QA scheme. Westerheijden et al. (2014) also proposed four quality assurance typologies to illustrate old and new functions of quality assurance in response to a global fad. Hou et al. (2020) identified the corporatist-democratic model as one of the most appropriate approaches to engage varying internal constituencies in the internal and external quality assurance process, particularly employers and students.

In accordance with literature and theories discussed above, employer engagement in HE and QA can be delineated into four types (basic, intermediate, convergence, and excellence) in terms of the degree of integration of IQA and EQA, as well as its relevance to labor market and society. In the basic model, employer engagement is considered a commercial activity, simply relating teaching and learning to society, in which employer engagement is based on personal relationships between key individuals, particularly teaching staff in HEIs (Bolden & Petrov, 2008). The intermediate model demonstrates that the relationship between universities and industry becomes reconciled with a more formalized system. The approach starts to facilitate education and knowledge connecting employment and value added in society. Under this model, when universities revise regulations or reformed curriculum, they would include those representatives "who are familiar with the area of study and the labour market situation in the committees and review panels" (Kvilhaugsvik, 2021, p. 6). When it comes to the convergence model, wide participation of employers, that has become as part of university's agenda, would ensure quality of graduates, support economic growth and yield world class research in the internal QA mechanism (Bolden & Petrov, 2008; Paintsil, 2016). In some contexts, for example, the representation of employers in the governance of HEIs is defined clearly not only by "institutional ordinances but also at national regulatory frameworks" (Leisyte et al. 2013, p. 7). The integration between IQA and EQA by employers' engagement could be considered as an excellent model, in which IQA was facilitated by EQA system to enhance quality of institutional governance, study of programs and graduates. Under the excellence model, this integrated approach of engaging employers would lead to the enhancement quality of study programs and graduates' employability, and at the same time employers are often invited to either serve a review panel, board members of the agency or quality assurance consultants (Perellon, 2005; Hénard, 2016; Mok & Wu, 2015; Hou et al., 2021).

Notably, the success of employer engagement requires alignment between institutional strategies, student motivation and employers' aspirations at the institutional level (Bolden & Petrov, 2008). Based on the varying models above, there is an urgent need for universities to work with employers in teaching and research. It is encouraged to engage employers in the process of institutional management. At the same time, employer engagement in the external review process is encouraged by international QA networks in HE, such as INQAAHE, ENQA. Yet, it is argued that if an excessive engagement of employers would result in violation of institutional autonomy, decision bias, or even creating inequality in the review process (Leisyte et al., 2013). Ideally, a well-balanced internal QA and external

QA system is expected to be in place to safeguard the value of employer engagement in HE and QA scheme. Therefore, a four-dimensional diagram can be illustrated, as follows, to assess the level of employer engagement due to depth and diversity of engagement in HE and QA (See Fig. 1).

Employer engagement in external quality assurance and peer review in Asian context

Despite the strong emphasis on employability, which changes the fields of study and occupational areas (Teichler, 2015), the underlying concept of employer engagement in HE as one of the manifestations for "stimulating students' motivation, self-reflection and engagement in the learning process" (EURASHE, 2015, p. 6) is highly desired by QA agencies as well. The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA UK) (2014b) characterizes employer engagement "as mutual benefits between universities and industry, including graduate employability enhancement through embedding practical and vocationally relevant skills within the curriculum; supporting the skills development of the local workforce; providing employer with access to research, consultancy and innovation services and Training" (p. 3). Most importantly, employer engagement would drive universities to "become more flexible in the types of learners they recruit, the range of learning opportunities they make available and the modes of study they offer" (QAA UK, 2014b, p. 3) under this globally changing higher education context. The CIQG International Quality Principles identifies employers as "another group of stakeholders that can contribute to quality assurance in higher education. Their involvement focuses on improving students' employability by making sure that they learn the relevant skills" (Hénard, 2016, p. 26). Notably, in a view of QA agencies, study of programs needs to embed employers' perspective in course design and delivery in order to equip students to be employable workers in the job market (ASPA, 2017).

Literature indicates that employer engagement is not limited to internal quality review within HEIs, but gains legitimacy as a part of external QA. As Stensaker (2018) argues that "legitimacy of quality assurance essentially emerges out of mutual interactions between a focal organization or practice and the larger environment, however, future legitimacy

Basic model (I)	Intermediate model (II)
Fragmentation:	Reconciliation:
Business is core value but not included in IQA	*Value to Society*
1. Connecting with teaching vs research 2. Emphasis of academic outreach on societal impact 3. Reliance on faculty's relationships with the industry	1. Education relevant to employment 2. Embedded in curriculum and disciplines via IQA mechanism 3. Transition of knowledge into skills
Advanced model (III)	**Excellence model (IV)**
Convergence:	Integration:
Employer's engagement in the institutional governance	*Employer engagement situated in both IQA and EQA*
1. Embedded in national regulatory frameworks 2. Part of HEIs initiatives and connecting to IQA policy 3. Contributing to quality of graduates	1. Employers legitimacy in review panel and governing board of EQAA 2. Enhancing quality of the programs and graduates' employability

Fig. 1 A four-dimensional diagram of employer engagement in IQA and EQA. Source: authors

which is highly dependent on the relationships may likely emerge between the different stakeholders involved in external quality assurance" (p. 59). This argument presents cognitive legitimacy for employer' roles and responsibilities, not only constrained within HEIs but also extended to external QA, particularly the chances to serve in the governing body or to be the members of the review panel. The Association of Specialized and Professional Accreditors (ASPS) stated that, "employers specifically provide input regarding competencies they need, so that graduates are being successful employed" when they participate in the onsite visits (ASPA, 2017, p. 6). Hou et al., (2021) argued that employer reviewers in the external QA review process have pressured Taiwanese universities to engage employers in institutional governance and brought positive impacts on inclusion of student employability initiatives into the institutional strategic plan. The QAA UK self –assessment report identifies that agencies should develop strategies to engage employers in order to eliminate the mismatch between universities and general society (QAA UK, 2014a). Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA) emphasizes that quality assurance agencies work directly or indirectly with varying stakeholders, especially industry and professional bodies throughout the external review system to provide the agency "with a greater understanding of the key issues in the higher education sector and helps to build stakeholder capacity to meet regulatory requirement" (2019, p.3). All in all, QA agencies and professional accreditors recognize the value of employer engagement in HEIs and their roles in external QA systems.

External QA mechanisms mainly consists of three key elements: self-assessment, peer review and onsite visits. In particular, "peer review", representing "a well-established approach to assuring standards" (Bloxham et al., 2015, p. 1069) is a further manifestation of QA professionalism. INQAAHE specifically defined "peer review" as a "process of evaluating the provision, work process, or output of an individual or collective operating in the same milieu as the reviewer(s)" (INQAAHE, 2020, p.1). Normally, QA agencies and accrediting bodies employ a group of specialists in the field and knowledgeable about HE in general, to review university self-assessment reports and undertake on-site visits to assure, assess, audit or check quality of study programs and HEIs (CHEA, 2019).

Given that peer review is the backbone of external QA, professionalism in field specialty, acquisition of HE and QA knowledge, as well as appropriate communication skills to perform review tasks are identified as key manifestations for qualification and quality of the review panel in most contexts (Stensaker et al., 2011). Most importantly, academic qualifications and review panel composition must be acceptable, adequate as well as avoiding conflicts of interest (EUROSTAT, 2019; Hou et al., 2021). The ESG in 2.4 clearly indicated that external experts should "be carefully selected; have appropriate skills, and be competent to perform their task" (EUROSTAT, 2019, p. 19). In addition, they need to be "consistent with the characteristics of the institution/programme being reviewed" (INQAAHE, 2016, p. 8) as well as "supported by appropriate training and/or briefing" (EUROSTAT, 2019, p. 20) by the external quality assurance agencies. Moreover, composition of review panel is supposed to be diverse, in order to avoid homogeneity (Leisyte & Westerheijden, 2014).

Traditionally, only academics would be invited to engage in the peer review process and serve on site review panels, due to their field expertise and general knowledge in HE (INQAAHE, 2016). Yet, Derrick (2018) argued that "ideally, this group approach reduces bias, but in practice it also risks certain biases being confounded through support of more than one deliberating voice (p. 25). In recent years, it is imperative to engage employers to sit on the review panel for the collection of the inputs from various stakeholders (INQAAHE, 2016). Moreover, it is advocated that employer engagement in the review

panel could likely avoid bias and subjective judgement from one single group of reviewers (Lucander & Christersson, 2020). Thus, by engaging employers as reviewers, "quality expectations from varying stakeholders on the specific study programs related to their missions and visions will be fulfilled through peer review and the accreditation process" (ASPS, 2017, p. 10).

"Policy borrowing" and "drawing lesson aboard" are often implicated into the development of quality assurance schemes in varying contexts, such as Europe and Asia. Perellon (2005) finds that policy convergence in the quality assurance procedures occurred in Spain, Netherlands, and Switzerland. Shin (2018) also argues that most Asian countries "adopted a form of quality assurance along with the introduction of neoliberal reforms" within a global convergence scenario after 2000. However, a cross-national study of QA systems in Asian higher education by Neubauer and Gomes (2017) acknowledge that quality assurance function and mechanism supported by national policy discourses clearly exhibit the manifestation of cultural difference and heritage. For example, the Australian government makes considerable efforts to safeguard the quality of transnational education; QA systems in East Asian states, such as China, Japan and Taiwan as a Confucius society were being challenged by in-built systematic bureaucracy and strong resistance from higher education institutions. To conclude, QA legitimacy in Asia is often established by national authorities, even though diversity of QA systems exists from context to context (Hou et al., 2018). In recent years, given the fact that QA agencies and accreditors tended to focus on how universities ensure students learning outcomes, shorten skills gaps as well as enhance graduates' employability, employer engagement in external QA exercises started to be included in the accreditation system reform (Deephouse & Suchman, 2008; Romenti et al., 2012; Cheung, 2015; Mok & Wu, 2015; Stensaker, 2018; Hou et al., 2021).

Influenced by a global convergence, employer engagement in external QA has significantly drawn the EQAA's attention in Asia, but challenges, such as effectiveness remain. Hou et al., (2020) found it was difficult having employers in the review panel due to reward system and culture. It was also found that employer involvement would not actually promote diversity in HE and ensure student learning outcomes. Moreover, Tyszko (2017) argues that employer feedback in the accreditation report is not exactly what universities, accreditors or even regulators expected. To summarize, one of the functions of peer review is to be relevant to the need of industry and society in a balance between local policy discourse and global convergence. Employers who serve either in the review panel or engage in the governing board as one of the HE stakeholders, to some extent, can achieve the intended consequence abovementioned under the EQA governance model executed by national and professional accreditors. Based on the discussion above, a conceptual framework for employer engagement from an EQA perspective is created in Fig. 2.

Research method

This study adopted a qualitative approach via document analysis and semi-structured interviews. According to Bowen (2009), document analysis is "a systematic procedure for reviewing or evaluating documents, including both printed and electronic (computer-based and Internet-transmitted) material" (p. 27). By examining the data and documents selected, the researcher needs to "elicit meaning, gain understanding, and develop empirical knowledge" (Bowen, 2009, p. 27). Hodder (2000) defined the liabilities of the researcher in the process of documents analysis approach, including interpreting
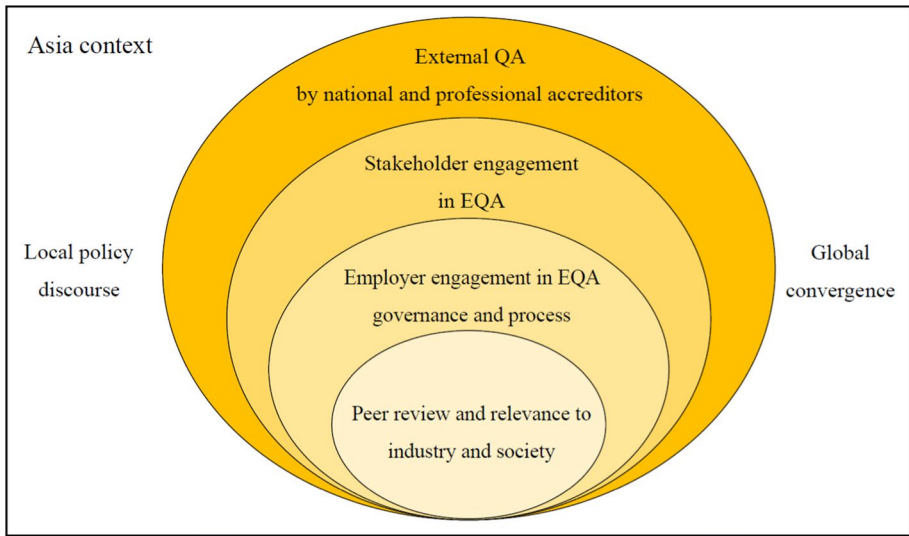
Fig. 2 Conceptual framework for employer engagement from an EQA perspective in Asia Context. Source: authors

the differences, similarities and patterns of the varying documents under the social, economic and cultural contexts. Published quality regulations, policy documents and accreditation handbooks from the websites of international networks, governments and 11 QA agencies were collected and analysed according to the conceptual framework developed above (Table 1).

In order to perceive the status of employer engagement in EQA governance, the study targets the QA agencies in Asia with APQN full membership as well as actively participating in the international activities of the APQN from 2017 to 2019. Between March 2019 and Dec. 2019, 11 heads and senior administrators from national and professional accreditors in Asia were accepted the invitation of the researchers and provided their opinions through either face-to-face semi-structured interviews or an electronic email. Interviewees all have at least 5 years' experience in QA as practitioners. Based on the three QA experts' consultations, the interview questions were categorised into four major parts: approaches national accreditors used to engaged employers; benefits brought to HE and QA; challenges encountered by national accreditors; and their perception toward the employer engagement in EQA governance and process.

All interviews were transcribed verbatim and transcripts used as one of the major sources of data analysis. To facilitate data analysis, and avoid preconceived ideas or bias, all respondents were given a code that summarised nationality and agency (Bazeley & Jackson, 2013). The representatives from QA agencies were coded from Q1 to Q11 (Table 2).

The study used MAXQDA, a software system for qualitative research and text analysis, to identify main themes. Second, based on preliminary analysis, the Miles and Huberman (1994) method was applied for meaning generation and verification. The method of noting patterns and themes; clustering items into categories; building logical chains of evidence through noting causality and making inferences; and making conceptual coherence allows typically large amounts of qualitative data to be reduced (Cohen, et al., 2007).

Table 1 List of documents collected

International Networks	Asian government and quality assurance agencies
1. INQAAHE GGP guidelines	1. Malaysian Qualifications Agency Act 2007
2. ENQA ESG guidelines	2. NIAD-QE Act
3. Asia Pacific Quality Network (APQN) Chiba Principles	3. Taiwan Ministry or Education 2005 Revised University Act
4. Council for Higher Education Council (CHEA) seven principles	4. BAN-PT Regulation No. 2 of 2017 concerning SAN-Dikti
	5. Quality Assurance in Vietnamese Higher Education: Policy and Practice in the 21st Century
	6. A Glimpse at Office for National Education Standards and Quality Assessment (ONESQA)
	7. Law of Malaysia A 679 / MQA ACT 2007
	8. BAN PT Executive Board Mid-Annual Report 2019
	9. Report on the External Review of the National Accreditation Agency for Higher Education of Indonesia (BAN-PT)
	10. HEEACT Accreditation Handbook for Reviewers
	11. ONESQA's regulation over reviewer qualification
	12. The Outline of China's National Plan for Medium & Long-Term Education Reform and Development (2010–2020)
	13. "Five-in-one" Evaluation System Policy in China
	14. MQA Self-study report
	15. TEQSA engagement framework
	16. Standard Framework for Teaching Quality Evaluation of Undergraduate Programs in Chinese Universities and Colleges in China
	17. ENQA Review report over NCPA

Source: authors

Triangulation, involving using multiple data sources in an investigation to produce understanding, was adopted as a method for verification of major findings (Patton, 2001). Initial findings of document analysis and transcripts were examined closely by cross-verification. Subsequent consistent data and information directly contributed to major findings and conclusion. Those deemed inconsistent were marked as discussion points.

Major findings

Document analysis

Overview and analysis of governmental policies in Asia Pacific

Although national QA mechanisms have been in place in major Asian countries under national regulations and laws, the role of employers and industry collaboration are not specifically identified or stipulated by the legislations in most nations, except Malaysia and Australia.

Table 2 Codes of participants by nationality and affiliations

Country	Affiliation unit (QA agency)	Coding
Russia	National Centre for Public Accreditation (NCPA)	Q1
Bhutan	Quality Assurance & Accreditation Division (RAA)	Q2
Japan	National Institution for Academic Degrees and Quality Enhancement of Higher Education (NIAD-QE)	Q3
Japan	Japan Institution for Higher Education Evaluation (JEHHEC)	Q4
Australia	TEQSA	Q5
Russia	The Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education and Career Development (AKKOR)	Q6
New Zealand	Academic Quality Agency for New Zealand and Universities	Q7
Indonesia	National Accreditation Agency for Higher Education (BAN-PT)	Q8
Hong Kong	Hong Kong Council for Accreditation of Academic and Vocational Qualifications (HKCAAVQ)	Q9
Malaysia	Finance Accreditation Agency (FAA)	Q10
Taiwan	Higher Education Evaluation & Accreditation Council (HEEACT)	Q11

Source: authors

Based on documents collected, it was found that stipulation and implementation of employer engagement at national regulations and law, has three typologies, including "no specific indication", "indication but not implementation yet", and "clear indication as well as implementation". The first category showed that there was no specified indication of the role of employers and industry in related Higher Education Laws though internal or external quality assurance mechanism were embedded. Take Thailand for example, the Private Institution of Higher Education Act only required to "establish a quality assurance system within the private institution of higher education by a participation of the student in evaluating the quality of the institution of higher education in accordance with the regulation of the private institution of higher education" (Office of Higher Education Commission, 2020, p. 12). In Taiwan, the national framework with both internal and external quality assurance mechanism has been set in the University Act. The University Act revised 2005 clearly formulated that "all universities shall regularly carry out self-evaluation of their teaching, research, services, academic advice and guidance, academic affairs, administration, and student participation; regulations governing the evaluation shall be formulated by each university". In addition, the Ministry of Education is obligated to authorize the national accreditor or professional accreditors to "carry out regular assessments of the universities, and it shall make the results public" (MOE Taiwan, 2019, p.1). However, this law did not clearly state that QA governance, procedures and process should engage employers and industry by institutions and accrediting bodies. Similarly, Japan's Basic Action for Education and Report of The Future of Higher Education by the Central Council did not state specifically either quality assurance in higher education nor role of employer engagement in higher education and QA mechanism (MEXT, 2006; MEXT, 2016).

Vietnam belongs to the second typology. The 2012 Higher Education Law indicated that universities should require employers to sit on institutional governing boards. Although the Law has been effective for more than five years not all universities established boards as required (Pham, 2019, p.154). Indonesia is a similar case. One of the interviewees responded that "The new ministerial decree enacted recently mandated one board member shall represents professional or employer. But it is not implemented yet" (Q8).

Nation in the last category, such as Malaysia and Australia, stressed that "the importance of graduates' qualifications and competencies and universities and colleges need to gain the public confidence, particularly employers and industries in the national regulations. Both nations have developed national qualification frameworks which are carried out by QA agencies. The Malaysian Qualification Agency (MQA) as the legal and competent QA agency under Law of Malaysia, is responsible for accrediting programs and higher education. MQA ACT stipulates that development and formulation of national qualification framework should engage varying higher education stakeholders, including employers, professional bodies, and examination bodies (MQA, 2007). In Australia, the role of the Australian Skills Quality Authority (ASQA, 2015), the national vocational education and training (VET) regulator is to ensure that the quality and reputation of Australia's VET system is maintained through effective national regulation, which would increase public confidence in the integrity and credibility of national qualifications issued by registered training organisations (RTOs), particularly employers and students (ASQA, 2015).

Roles of quality assurance agencies in employer engagement

In terms of the QA documents published by national accreditors, it was found that several agencies recognized roles of employers in the external review mechanism via official documents, which is strongly associated with graduate employability.

In most agencies, an employer survey is adopted to enhance talent training policies as well to shorten the gap between HEI teaching and social practice. According to the Higher Education Evaluation Center in China (HEEC) director, "it is required that we should further enhance the training of creative talents, improve students' practice and entrepreneurship and pay attention to employers' evaluation results to adjust program setting and talent training policies" (Wu, 2021, p. 29).

Some agencies stipulated that employer representatives should be in the governing board. Take HEEACT for example, the Articles of Association Article stipulated that "The Board of Trustees is composed of between 15 and 19 board members, including one to three industry representatives who have an interest in higher education" (HEEACT, 2005, p. 1). Hong Kong Council for Accreditation of Academic and Vocational Qualifications (HKCAAVQ) Ordinance stated the appointed Council members should either have "expertise or experience in quality assurance or the conduct of accreditation tests; or good standing in the field of education or training or in any industry" (HKCAAVQ, 2007, p. 1). TESQA proposed a five-step model of engagement framework, which aims to outline level and types of engagement for the different higher education stakeholders, including employers. Moreover, the Principles in the Framework indicate that all tools and strategies for employer engagement in QA must be fit-for-purpose, and appropriate (TESQA, 2019).

Interview results

The approaches that the national accreditors engaged employer vary from agency to agency

National accreditors engage employers through varying approaches but limited number of accreditors engage employers in review panels. In general, engaging employers in the QA agency's Board and recruiting employer in the QA team are the two main approaches. For example, two respondents explained the relationship between QA agencies and employers respectively:

> "Both our 'employers' (owners) are sitting on our Board, with a Board member chairing the Accreditation Council and makes ultimate decisions over program accreditation. We also have a number of employees of financial institutions serving on our accreditation panel. Many of these employees are holding very senior positions in their companies and hence they could be deemed employers, too" (Interviewee Q10)
> "Our agency is working with industry, professional bodies for accreditation. We mainly use employer surveys in assessment" (Interviewee Q5).

In addition, one respondent in Bhutan stated that they would invite the employer representatives as the Council consultants to help the development of QA Framework, standards for the program accreditation, or national quality assurance guidelines, etc. (Interviewee Q2). Up to present, there are more than 200 employers who engaged in this accrediting body. The other respondent indicated that they would engage the employers to develop specific standards for business, medicine, art, language and communication (Interviewee Q6).

When it comes to methods of QA procedure participation and process substantially, some respondents indicated their agencies would invite employers to serve as onsite visit review panel and request them to write the accreditation report as well (interviewee Q1, Q2 and Q6).

The benefits of employer engagement brought to higher education and quality assurance

As discussed above, literature and QA documents have highlighted that employer engagement is quite significant to ensuring quality of higher education and to strengthening the relevance to the industries, which would bring the benefits to quality assurance mechanism from the QA respondents' perspectives. Several interviewees highly agreed that employer engagement would strengthen the cooperation and interaction among accrediting bodies, HEIs and employers, create better quality of education as well as enhance quality of quality assurance. For example, two of the interviewees responded that.

> "It is significant to engage employers in the QA system, which would support accrediting bodies to create capacity building and think of the appropriate approaches to develop the fruitful cooperation with employers, even professional bodies" (Interviewee Q1)
> "The industry and employers would understand more in QA practice of QA agency and their support would facilitate the quality of quality assurance mechanism. Moreover, the QA practice would be much closer to the industries" (Interviewee Q8)
> "I think their confidence on quality of higher education will be significantly improved" (Interviewee Q10)

Another respondent admitted that employer engagement would reduce the duplication in accreditation. As he stated,

> "The office of engagement focuses all about engagement, engagement with the students, with the providers and with the employers, as well as the professional accreditation bodies. So, we are trying to avoid duplication with professional bodies and we are trying to make sure that they don't replicate what we do and vice versa. We do a mapping of our framework against their framework and if they already done it, we don't duplicate" (interviewee Q5).

The challenges encountered by national accreditors

Although it is worthwhile to engage employers in QA governance, standard development, external review process, several challenges remain. It was found that it was quite hard to overcome difficulties when it came to QA professionalism. As the INQAAHE GGP guidelines stated that "The EQAA operates with transparency, integrity and professionalism and adheres to ethical and professional standards" (INQAAHE, 2016, p.6). In order to advocate quality of review process and procedure, reviewers training is being recognized as the core of EQA system. Most quality assurance agencies should provide sufficient and appropriate training for each reviewer involved, which is supposed to be complete specifically prior to an upcoming review. Yet, due to unavailability and limited QA knowledge, it is very challenging to be carried out. As several respondents explained,

> Engaging employer in the panel will definitely face great challenges, for they don't have time for reviewing documents and making onsite assessment. Not to mention also the number reviewers representing variety of job sectors need to be recruited will become another challenge (Interviewee Q8).

Amongst the challenges are their availability, addressing the differences (different needs and requirements) and their support (Interviewee Q10).

Most employers do not clearly realize what external quality assurance mean. Therefore, no matter where they sit on the board or serve as review panel, they can't actually focus on the issues addressed. Sometime it is quite hard to engage them in our QA teamwork. We have provided training for employer reviewers but we can't force our Council directors to take part in the training session for they are all appointed by the government (Interviewee Q11).

In addition, the selection criteria for employers to take part in EQA is another concern not only for QA agencies but also HEIs. As the interviewees complained,

The agency did try the best to find the right people from business sectors and industries according to a number of selective criteria. Yet, only limited number of employers express their interests in EQA (Interviewee Q3).

As you know, nomination and selection process are complicated in our context, which would hinder their participation (Interviewee Q1)

Subsequently, some interviewees proposed views toward future implementation, particularly the linkage with learning outcomes assessment on the study of program. One interviewee pointed out,

"Employers are helpful at both generic procedures and subject-specific procedures. Probably, employers should concentrate on assessment of learning outcomes" (Interviewee Q6)

On the contrary, one of the interviewees held a completely different perception toward employer engagement in external QA mechanisms because they believed that employer engagement is the responsibility of the universities:

"Our agency checks, this is effective as part of its academic audit processes, that is, the programme accreditation requests employer input, including the review processes (capture) programme development and approval processes. Possibly, by focusing on the agency the national picture is missed" (Interviewee Q7).

Discussions

A transition from intermediate model to advanced approach emerges in some Asian states while this tendency is likely contributing to a disruption of EQA governance

It has been two decades since national QA systems have been in place in most Asian nations (Hou, 2015). Examining the national higher education policy and EQA governance, some governments launched QA policies with a new focus of employer engagement in both internal and external quality reviews in recent years, for example, Malaysia and Hong Kong. Yet, the study found that the emerging practice in QA agencies was not very effective, particularly existence of a gap between policymaking and implementation, such as Indonesia and Vietnam. Document analysis showed only a limited number of Asian QA agencies engage employers comprehensively, leading to a tendency to develop a close relationship with employers, where complementary roles are understood. Yet, it is observed that a transition of "intermediate model" into "advanced model" has occurred in a few Asian nations, such

as Indonesia, Australia, New Zealand, Taiwan. It is also evident that employer engagement would help agencies to reshape policy context via their engagement in external review process (Table 3).

Moreover, the study demonstrated representation of employers in QA governance varies between different types of EQA systems in Asia. Although most respondents from the QA agencies were quite positive about employer representation in EQA systems, their contribution to quality assurance governance exhibited limitations due to unfamiliarity with QA systems and lack of HE knowledge. As Leisyte and Westerheijden (2014) argued, the formal representation of employers on governance bodies "was perceived as neither contributing to the development of programme curricula and requirements, nor to the development of quality assurance" (p. 93). Nonetheless, in some contexts, they were also identified as "weak latent stakeholders" (Leisyte & Westerheijden, 2014). Given that challenges remain, such as employer's unavailability and agency's worries toward QA professionalism, in most Asian contexts, it will take time to review the effectiveness of employer engagement in EQA governance. Even though a paradigm shift apparently emerges in few states, employer engagement is inevitably leading to a disruption to current EQA governance mode in some Asian contexts.

Can employer engagement diversify peer review system in EQA or lead to bias judgement?

Peer review systems in external review has long been dominated by academics. Yet, Bloxham et.al (2015) contended that the assumption of "independent reviewers drawn from academics within the discipline who can apply shared knowledge of academic standards and assure quality" is not appropriate and too idealistic (p.1072). Hénard (2016) advocated, "without the involvement of all levels of society, the evaluation process could lead to bias and undue influence from certain interest groups defending particular views (p. 27). On a basis of these arguments, QA agencies were driven to engage employers in the review panel and collected diverse feedback from industry, to avoid academic hegemony and ensuring accountability to society (Cheung, 2015). However, Leisyte and Westerheijden (2014) argued whether employers would increase the validity of the peer review system due to their QA professionalism.

On the other hand, the interviews revealed that employers were not interested in EQA system participation owing to unavailability and different needs, either at the institutional or program accreditations (Hou et al., 2020). Although most QA agencies emphasized employer reviewers would bring benefits, it was quite critical to engage them appropriately in such a long review process working with academic reviewers, where the underpinning logics are complicated and time-consuming. Most importantly, their cognitive feedback in the final report would not exactly fulfill the needs of the universities and programs. Accordingly, it is still highly expected that the innovative partnerships between QA, HE and employers or industries would adequately "link higher education courses with continuous professional development and career planning and promotion" for the sake of university graduates' employability (Wedgwood, 2008, p.13).

Conclusion

Global attention to employer engagement gradually drives an EQA governance paradigm shift in the Asia context. It is a predestined perception that engaging employers would assist in achieving a mutual understanding across different sectors and HE stakeholders.

Table 3 The national regulation and model of employer engagement in EQA governance and process in Asian context

	National QA regulation	Employer engagement in QA policy	IQA Employer engagement	EQA employer engagement (review panel and board member)	EQA government model
China	✓	x	✓	x	Intermediate
HK	✓	✓	✓	✓	Excellence
Japan	✓	x	✓	x	Intermediate
Taiwan	✓	x	✓	✓	Advanced
Malaysia	✓	✓	✓	✓	Excellence
Thailand	✓	x	x	x	Intermediate
Vietnam	✓	✓(x)	✓(x)	✓(x)	Intermediate
Indonesia	✓	✓(x)	✓	x	Advanced
Australia	✓	✓	✓	✓ (x)	Advanced
New Zealand	✓	x	✓	✓(x)	Advanced
Russia	✓	✓	--	✓	--
Bhutan	--	--	--	✓	--

Source: authors

The study found that most Asian governments have related legislation in place, but they do not closely link with national QA systems such as Indonesia and Vietnam. The approach and level of employer engagement in EQA governance vary from country to country, but most of the agencies tend to invite employers to sit on the QA agency's Board and the QA team, including Malaysia, Australia, New Zealand, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Russia. All in all, it was agreed that employer engagement would bring positive impacts over QA policy context, but unavailability and lacking QA knowledge are two key challenges. Employers engagement in EQA governance has been recognized, yet, the effectiveness of their participation remains unclear, particularly low representation in peer review systems. Even so, attempts by QA agencies and higher education institutions to link the industry into QA system is on the rise in Asia.

Under a global convergence context, the employer engagement issue has impacted EQA governance and peer review systems in Asia. By borrowing experiences from abroad, employer engagement has been institutionalized in IQA mechanism at universities and embedded into a part of campus culture in Asia context (Stensaker, 2007; Hou et al., 2020). Similarly, their representation in EQA governance and review system becomes significant even though it is relatively low and ineffective. Notably, it acknowledges that employer engagement in EQA governance, to a certain extent, not only vibrates the obsolete peer review system which has existed for a century but also continues to invigorate local policy discourse stipulated by Asian governments. However, the study has limitations as its research methodology is merely limited to documentary review and interviews. A larger scale survey study over employer engagement over quality assurance practitioners, higher education management team, employers, and other stakeholders is strongly recommended to conduct in the future in order to assess the actual impact over IQA and EQA mechanisms.

Declarations

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