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Please note that all fields are obligatory. For a detailed description of the submission requirements and Frequently Asked Questions please consult the Call for Contributions.

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Short bio (150 words max):

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(133 words)

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Proposal

Title: An Exploration of the Competency Framework for External Quality Assurance Practitioners

Abstract (150 words max):

The extensive establishment and development of external quality assurance agencies all over the world has created a new profession so-called the external quality assurance profession. This paper attempts to explore the quality assurance professional competency frameworks developed by quality assurance networks, agencies and scholars to standardise and support those working within the external quality assurance profession, the external quality assurance practitioners or professionals. The study first investigates the external quality assurance profession. Second, it provides a discussion of external quality assurance practitioners. Next, it identifies essential competencies for external quality assurance practitioners, followed with a review of current competence frameworks for external quality assurance professionals. Finally, it provides a discussion and recommendations through the synthesis of associated literature. The results of this research are expected to clarify core professional competencies needed for external quality assurance officials and/or practitioners working for external quality assurance agencies. *(144 words)*

Key words: higher education, quality assurance, external quality assurance, profession, competency, competency framework

1. Introduction

Quality assurance has emerged as an area of great interest in higher education sector worldwide since the last decade of the 20th century (Cheung, 2015; Damme, 2002; Hou, 2015). According to the International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE), the number of its members – quality assurance agencies and institutions implementing quality assurance practice - has increased from 8 in 1991 to 266 in 2016 (INQAAHE, 2016a). Among them, there are 177 full members which are defined as "organisations and bodies responsible for the external quality assurance" or external quality assurance agencies (INQAAHE, 2016b). There has been a number of studies concerned the accountability, quality assurance or international recognition of such agencies (Eaton, 2011; Hou, 2015). However, there has been a lack of attention to those working within the external quality assurance agencies, particularly their professional competencies (Cheung, 2015).

To address part of this knowledge gap, this study searches for the professional competencies necessary for practitioners working at external higher education quality assurance agencies and releases a discussion and recommendations through a desktop research analysis of current quality assurance professional competency framework and relevant literature. The results of the research are also expected to provide a tool for stakeholders in higher education quality assurance area for understanding and identifying the competencies needed for external quality assurance practitioners in order to use them effectively for their specific purposes.

2. External Quality Assurance Profession

In order to identify the external quality assurance profession, it is important to understand the concepts and characteristics of a profession. Professions Australia (2016) defines:

> A profession is a disciplined group of individuals who adhere to ethical standards and who hold themselves out as, and are accepted by the public as possessing special knowledge and skills in a widely recognised body of learning derived from research, education and training at a high level, and who are prepared to apply this knowledge and exercise these skills in the interest of others.

In the field of medicine, Cruess, Cruess and Johnston (2000) discuss four characteristics of a modern profession. First of all, it must possess specialised knowledge not easily understood by the average citizen. Second, it needs to use the specialised knowledge in the service of the society in an altruistic fashion. The third characteristic relates to the commitment and autonomy of the profession to establish and maintain standards of practice and self-regulation to assure quality. Last, it must be responsible for the integrity of the knowledge base and expansion through research to ensure the highest standards of its use.

Regarding higher education sector, the massive increase in external and internal quality assurance activities over recent decades has created a new profession related to quality assurance known as quality assurance profession in general or external quality assurance profession in particular (INQAAHE, 2016c). In addition, INQAAHE (2016c) also emphasises this profession requires a structured academic discipline and programmes to educate quality assurance professionals, stimulate research, and produce new initiatives.

3. External Quality Assurance Practitioners

As mentioned above, at present there are more than 170 external quality assurance agencies established in over 100 countries across the globe. Quality assurance practitioners working within these agencies are known as external quality assurance practitioners (Cheung, 2015). The associated literature has discussed several of their core duties and responsibilities. For example, Martin and Stella (2007) mention their duties as report writing, training for reviewers and conducting orientation for higher education institutions. They should also be competent and experienced and regarded by the academic community as peers. Additionally, through her observation of thirty countries in the Asia-Pacific region, Stella (2008) discovers that officials in the external quality assurance agencies are responsible for developing the quality assurance framework, monitoring the major phases of quality assurance, training the reviewers and supporting the institutions to implement the quality assurance activities. The senior staff in some agencies also work as external assessors or accreditors. They participate in site visits and write external assessment reports as members of external assessment teams.

Even though the external quality assurance practitioners are involved in a number of tasks, many of them, particularly those in developing countries are argued not to have adequate knowledge, skills and experiences to perform their duties well (Nguyen, 2016). In this regard, Nguyen (2016) points out three main reasons: (i) quality assurance in higher education is a new field, (ii) external quality assurance practitioners were not trained professionally and academically in areas related to quality assurance, and (iii) their agency does not have any formal recruitment programmes for them. Another reason shared by INQAAHE (2016c) is that there there is very little education and training for the quality assurance profession and its professionals.

The quantity and quality of quality assurance practitioners (human resources) in an external quality assurance agency are concerned by regional and international quality assurance networks. For example, the European Association of Quality Assurance Agencies (ENQA) (2009) in the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher*

Education Area requires external quality assurance agencies should have adequate and proportional resources to enable them to organise and run their external quality assurance processes in an effective and efficient manner. Similarly, the resource requirement of INQAAHE's Guidelines of Good Practices in Quality Assurance says that an external quality assurance agency needs to maintain adequate and accessible human resources to conduct external evaluation effectively and efficiently in accordance with its mission statement and its methodological approach (INQAAHE, 2007). However, the lack of human resources or external quality assurance practitioners is one of the common challenges of external quality assurance agencies (Hou, 2014; Westerheijden, Cremonini & Empel, 2010). Consequently, maintaining adequate human resources together with developing skills and attitudes of external quality assurance practitioners is central to the sustainable development of the external quality assurance agencies (Cheung, 2015).

4. Professional Competencies Necessary for External Quality Assurance Practitioners

Professional competency is regarded as as a required behavioural characteristic for staff members of an agency to efficiently perform their job tasks, as well as the capability to maintain a competitive advantage (Cheng, Lu &Chen, 2012). The concept of competency or professional competency has been applied extensively in many sectors such as medicine, business, and tourism. For example, in medicine, competency is defined as knowledge, skills, attitudes, and personal qualities essential to the practice of a specific profession (Albanese, et al., 2008). In career development sector, *The Canadian Standards & Guidelines for Career Development Practitioners* of the Canadian Council for Career Development (CCCD) defines the core competencies career development practitioners need in order to practise effectively and ethically. They consist of the skills, knowledge and attitudes common to all career development practitioners, regardless of their employment setting (CCCD, 2016). In tourism, Albanese, et al. (2008) review associated literature and confirm that professional competency includes KSA (knowledge, skill and ability or attitudes).

Higher education sector also shares similar professional competencies. In his research on professionalism and profession in quality assurance, Cheung (2015) discusses that external quality assurance practitioners should possess "a set of required professional competencies in knowledge, skills and attitude relevant to external quality assurance in higher education" (p. 9). Specifically, he argues that the competencies required for external quality assurance practitioners should have at least two major genres: core professional knowledge and skills, generic skills, and attitudes or dispositions (Cheung, 2015).

In addition, INQAAHE with a grant from the World Bank and with support from UNESCO developed materials for a comprehensive programme for the training and professional development of quality assurance professionals (INQAAHE, 2016c). This programme consists of four different modules: (i): higher education in a global world: the context of quality assurance; (ii) external quality assurance: what is quality and how has it been implemented in different countries; (iii) operating an external quality agency: practical training in the structure and management of quality assurance agencies around the world; and (iv) maintaining quality within the institution: assessing learning, conducting a self-study, and using data. These modules with their detailed information in each unit were provided to underscore the importance of developing new quality assurance systems through international cooperation among new and established quality assurance agencies.

In Asian context, Prado (2016) conducted a study to determine the constructs used to describe the ideal accreditor of the Accrediting Agency of Chartered Colleges and Universities in the

Philippines (AACCUP). According to Prado (2016), an ideal AACCUP should possess the following eight skills: interpersonal skills, management skills, organisational skills, leadership skills, teamwork skills, credibility skills, communication skills, and accountability skills.

It can be seen that while the training materials for quality assurance professionals of INQAAHE focuses a lot on knowledge necessary for external quality assurance practitioners, Prado's research is about skills for accreditors. There seems to be a lack of emphasis on attitude or disposition which is a core component of the professional competency.

5. Current Quality Assurance Professional Competency Frameworks

Some regional quality assurance networks, agencies and scholars have developed the competency frameworks for quality assurance professionals. The potential strengths and weaknesses of each framework are reviewed below.

In Asian setting, ASEAN University Network Quality Assurance (AUN-QA) (2013) developed the AUN-QA professional development competency model with elements of outcome, skills, knowledge and attitude for four levels: practitioner, assessor, lead assessor and expert. The competency framework for AUN-QA assessors is highlighted in Table 1.

Outcome	Ability to assess AUN-QA assessment
Skills	***Conceptual:*** strategic management and quality planning
	People: team management; stakeholders' interview; cultural awareness
	Technical: AUN-QA guidelines; desktop assessment, document review, site assessment, assessment report
Knowledge	***Quality assurance:*** AUN-QA model (programme level, internal quality assurance system level, institutional level)
	Education: quality management concepts and principles
Attitude	Professionalism (including English language) and ethics

Table 1. The competency framework for AUN-QA assessors (adapted from AUN-QA Professional Development Competency Model, AUN-QA, 2013)

AUN-QA competency framework is very clear and contains all three core professional competencies (knowledge, skills and attitude). However, it is only applied in AUN-QA's context. Furthermore, it seems to lack a couple of essential competencies related to skills (for example, interpersonal skills) and knowledge (for example, higher education administration).

In European context, ENQA (2016) introduced the ENQA quality assurance professional competencies framework identifying the common core competencies of quality assurance and quality enhancement professionals in ENQA member agencies. External quality assurance agencies of ENQA are expected to use this competency framework in job design, recruitment and staff development activities. The core competencies of the ENQA quality assurance professional competencies framework are summarised in Table 2.

Knowledge Competencies
- Higher education sector knowledge
- National quality assurance
- International dimension of quality assurance and quality enhancement

Systematic/Technical Competencies
- Project management (organisational and planning skills)

- IT and data skills
- Problem solving/Analytical skills and continuous learning skills

Interpersonal Competencies
- Diplomacy and political sensitivity
- Communication (oral and written)
- Professional attitude
- Teamwork and flexibility
- Personal resilience (stress and pressure resistance)
- Autonomy and proactivity

Table 2. Core competencies of ENQA quality assurance professional competencies framework (2016)

It can be seen that the first two sets of competencies refer to competencies in knowledge and skills respectively while the third set consists of both competences in skills and competencies in attitude. It would be better if this framework clarifies skill competencies and attitude competencies. The ENQA quality assurance professional competencies framework also identifies detailed competencies for both entry level staff and for experienced/senior staff, and a broad range of activities that quality assurance agency members can use to develop their staff. This is an advantage of this competency framework.

Apart from competency frameworks introduced by quality assurance networks and agencies, several scholars have attempted to develop the competency framework for external quality assurance practitioners or professionals. One of the best-known framework is the competency framework for external quality assurance practitioners in higher education (CFEQAP) proposed by Cheung (2015), based on the project of Wilcox (2012) with the 'Essential Competencies for Programme Evaluators', INQAAHE's Quality Assurance Graduate Programme and relevant literature review. This competency framework has 58 essential competencies which are grouped into six categories. A summary of Cheung's CFEQAP is presented in Table 3.

1. Professional practice (consisting of 7 competencies)
2. Systematic inquiry (consisting of 16 competencies)
3. Situational analysis (consisting of 12 competencies)
4. Project management (consisting of 12 competencies)
5. Reflective practice (consisting of 5 competencies)
6. Interpersonal competence (consisting of 7 competencies)

Table 3. A summary of Cheung's (2015) CFEQAP

Cheung argues his CFEQAP has "a specialised set of knowledge, skills and attitude that is indispensable for facilitating and ensuring external quality assurance practitioners' high quality performance" (2015, p. 13). However, Cheung's CFEQAP does not specify which competencies belong to knowledge, skills or attitude. Moreover, this framework seems to have too many competencies, which may cause confusion and/or difficulty for stakeholders when implementing it.

6. Discussion and Recommendations

There is no doubt that the competency framework for external quality assurance practitioners should identify three sets of professional competencies including knowledge, skills and attitude.

The core knowledge competencies should focus on: (i) higher education (policy, management and administration), (ii) quality assurance and quality enhancement (terms, concepts, theories, assumptions), (iii) quality assurance models (assessment, accreditation, audit), (iv) external quality assurance (roles and responsibilities, structure, management and operation of an external quality assurance agency, networks of external quality assurance agencies), and (v) internal quality assurance (the quality cycle, maintaining quality within a higher education institution).

Professional competencies in terms of skills include: organisational and planning skills (project management), IT and data skills, problem solving skills, continuous learning skills (lifelong learning skills), (written, verbal, listening) communication skills, report writing skills, conflict resolution skills, document review skills, leadership skills, management skills, negotiation skills, and teamwork skills.

Attitude competencies refer to the professionalism of external quality assurance practitioners. In other words, they need to highlight ethics and professional attitude. Specifically, they should emphasise responsibility, honesty, autonomy, accountability, transparency, and commitment.

Obviously, an ideal competency framework for external quality assurance practitioners should consist of all professional competencies as discussed above. However, when developing the framework for its own purpose and usage, each agency or network should select and focus on the most essential competencies for its staff. Furthermore, external quality assurance officials should be involved in every step of the competency framework development.

To maximise the usage, the competency framework for external quality assurance officials should identify different levels of staff such as the new entrants and experienced professionals (of ENQA quality assurance professional competencies framework) or practitioner, assessor, lead assessor and expert (of AUN-QA professional development competency model).

In addition, a competency framework for external quality assurance practitioners only becomes truly meaningful when it is utilised and evaluated by different stakeholders. In other words, how a competency framework is agreeable and acceptable to external quality assurance professionals and other related parties should be thoroughly paid attention to after it has been developed.

Different stakeholders could use the competency framework in different ways. It is recommended that external quality assurance practitioners should use it to reflect on their strengths, gaps and attitudes. When setting up an external assessment team, the framework could be used to inform the choice of team members. For external quality assurance agencies, they could use the framework when recruiting and developing external quality assurance practitioners.

7. Conclusion

The development of higher education quality assurance in general and the mushroom of external quality assurance agencies worldwide require the professionalism of practitioners or professionals in this field. In order to help the external quality assurance officials perform their

tasks professionally, several quality assurance networks, agencies and scholars have developed the quality assurance professional competency frameworks which share some similar core competencies including knowledge, skills and attitude.

Through the synthesis of the associated literature, particularly AUN-QA professional development competency model, ENQA quality assurance professional competencies framework, and Cheung's (2015) CFEQAP, this study identifies essential competencies within each core competency: knowledge, skills and attitude. It is expected that different stakeholders such as external quality assurance practitioners, site visit teams and external quality assurance agencies will find it a useful reference that they can employ or adapt for their own purposes.

(2664 words)

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Discussion questions:

1. Who are external assurance practitioners and what impacts have they made in the higher education quality assurance system?

2. How do external quality assurance practitioners use the quality assurance professional framework?

3. How is the competency framework for external quality assurance practitioners beneficial for other stakeholders such as external quality assurance agencies or higher education institutions?

Please submit your proposal by sending this form, in Word format, by 25 July 2016 to QAForum@eua.be. The file should be named using the last names of the authors, e.g. Smith_Jones.doc. Please do not send a hard copy or a PDF file.