DISSOLVING BOUNDARIES FOR A QUALITY REGION: CROSS-BORDER COOPERATION THROUGH QUALITY ASSURANCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION IN THE ASIA-PACIFIC REGION

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Abstract

Boundaries separate, but also connect parts. "The world is flat". Globalization is a fact. We can't stop it; it has already happened; it is here to stay; and we are moving into this new quality and global stage. The pivot of education quality without boundary is on the integration of the cultures of all the countries/territories.

Since the founding of the Asia-Pacific Quality Network (APQN) in 2003, the value of "Dissolving Boundaries for a Quality Region" has been shared by all APQN members, no matter what kind of difficulties it met, and the shared-value will be carried on for a long period of time, even forever. APQN with 197 members from 40 countries/territories did practical exploration on the 4 aspects: 1) 13 QA themes at APQN annual conference (AAC); 2) the implementation of over 30 QA projects; 3) a wide range of methods and actions; and 4) a wide QA beneficiary and a huge target group. With its thirteen-year practical experience, APQN has introduces 4 key innovations: 1) to involve the largest number of beneficiaries; 2) to focus on the quality assurance without boundaries; 3) to cooperate with national and international networks/organizations; and 4) to dissolve boundaries for a quality region.

However facing such challenges as finance, in order to ensure sustainable development, APQN should establish the shared values of quality in higher education beyond borders: to dissolve boundaries for a quality region; to promote good practice for internal/external quality assurance; to develop appropriate procedures & systems to cover foreign providers & programmes; to encourage mutual trust, confidence & understanding of HE systems in the world, especially in APR; to establish clarity & transparency in QA processes & outcomes and to encourage the culture of quality.

Key words

Quality Region; Quality Assurance; Higher Education; Dissolving Boundaries; Cross-National/Territorial Cooperation; shared values; the Asia-Pacific Quality Network (APQN)

1. Preface

Borders are geographic boundaries of political entities or legal jurisdictions. Boundaries separate but also connect entities. "The world is flat" said Thomas Friedman in his international best-selling book. In this fast-changing era, with an increasing appetite for education, and with increasing mobility of students and providers to meet that need, every country has to face up the global competition, climate change, higher education (HE) internationalization, and all the impact brought by globalization with its own national capacity. Globalization is a fact. You can't stop it; it has already happened; it is here to stay; and we are moving into this new quality and global stage to dissolve boundaries for a quality region.

Since the founding of the Asia-Pacific Quality Network (APQN) in 2003, the value of "*Dissolving Boundaries for a Quality Region*" has been shared by all APQN members, no matter what kind of difficulties it met, and the shared-value will be carried on for a long period of time, even forever. APQN uses Quality Assurance (QA) to link the external quality assurance agencies (EQAAs), internal quality assurance agencies (IQAAs) of higher education institutions (HEIs), and all the relevant stakeholders whose goals are to seek good quality in education in the Asia-Pacific Region (APR) which contains 51 countries/territories with over half the world's population. The pivot of the education quality without boundaries is on the integration of the cultures of all the countries/territories.

2. Rationale

In March 31- April 1, 2005, the first APQN Annual Conference (AAC) was held in Hong Kong, China. It laid the foundation for APQN with the title *"Establishment of the Asia-Pacific Quality Network (APQN): Dissolving Boundaries of a Quality Region"*. Today APQN has become the largest and the most influential non-profit, non-governmental international organization in the field of quality assurance in education in the APR and it still sticks to its shared-value of *"Dissolving Boundaries for a Quality Region"* according to its Constitution.

"Dissolving Boundaries for a Quality Region" focuses towards a borderless world advanced as part of globalization theory, the APR, stepping, as it was and it is, with thousand-mile boots from south to north, from west to east, from the countries/territories in Asia to those in the Pacific Ocean. It tries to show how QA in education models and remodels borders and bordering processes in rich and meaningful local contexts in our increasingly interdependent world.

APQN's main concerns are to use QA to promote quality learning, quality teaching, quality administration, quality research and others in HEIs, and to foster cultural awareness and mutual understanding of quality education amongst all the stakeholders in EQAAs, IQAAs of the HEIs across the national boundaries in APR. The motivation of *"Dissolving Boundaries for a Quality Region"* is as following:

• to contribute the establishment of regional alignment in quality assurance;
• to provide an agreed reference point for consistency and benchmarking in quality assurance;
• to facilitate regional student and academic mobility and exchange;
• to improve transparency and accountability of higher education institutions (HEIs);
• to align the region with international developments in quality assurance;
• to encourage mutual trust, confidence and understanding of higher education systems within and beyond the APR.

3. APQN's Practical Exploration

The implementation process follows "the Project Guidelines" developed by the Board as a mechanism through which the common interests of APQN members are addressed. All the members share responsibilities from various QAAs across the Region. The process is diversified, dynamic and sustainable in nature, depending on the developments that take place in the QA domain. APQN reaches its objectives through the following methods and contents:

3.1 Thirteen QA themes at APQN Annual Conference

Over the past 14 years, APQN has held 13 AACs which brought together all APQN's members, both local and international representatives share their research, experiences and good practices in QA through a significant number of submitted papers, keynote presentations, panel discussions, parallel sessions and workshops. The latest one was conducted with great success in Moscow on May 25-28 with 182 participants from over 30 countries and territories.

Table 1 List of QA themes of AACs to dissolve boundaries for a quality region

S/N	Date	Theme and Sub-themes
start-up stage	January 18, 2003	Formation of the Asia Pacific Sub-Network: Constitution and Finance Manuel
	October 9, 2004	World Bank Development Fund Grant (DGF) and the Asia Pacific Quality Network (APQN)
1	March 31- April 1, 2005	The Establishment of the Asia-Pacific Quality Network (APQN): Dissolving Boundaries of a Quality Region
2	March 1-4, 2006	Regional Mobility: Cooperation in Quality Assurance
3	February4-7, 2007	Emerging Challenges, Emerging Practices: Sharing a Global Vision of Quality Assurance in Higher Education
4	February 19-22, 2008	Future of Quality Assurance in Asia-Pacific: Cooperation amidst Diversity
5	March 4-5, 2009	Quality Assurance in Higher Education: Balancing the National Contexts and International Aspirations
6	March 3-5, 2010	Enhancing Quality of Higher Education in the Developing World
7	March 2-4, 2011	Quality Assurance in Higher Education: Expectations and Achievements
8	February 29-March 2, 2012	External Quality Assurance in the Asia☐Pacific: What has Changed over a Decade?

9	April 7-8, 2013	Has External Quality Assurance Made an Impact? Looking back at the Decade of Quality Assurance
10	March 7-8, 2014	Higher Education Quality Assurance in a Changing World: Envisioning the Future of the Asia-Pacific Region
11	April 17-19, 2015	Globalization and Diversification of Quality Assurance of Higher Education
12	May 26-27, 2016	Sustainable Development of Quality Assurance in Higher Education
13	May 25-27, 2017	New Horizons: Dissolving Boundaries for a Quality Region

3.2 APQN implementation of over 30 QA projects

Over the past 14 years, APQN has carried on many projects on QA to dissolve boundaries for a quality region (see Table 2):

Table 2 List of projects on quality assurance done by APQN

Year	Project
2004 -2008	1. APQN Website: Expansion/Maintenance and Database Development 2. Chinese Translation Project 3. Identify Constituency 4. Indicators of Quality 5. Internship and Cross-regional Staff Exchange Programme 6. Mutual Recognition of Quality Assurance Agencies 7. Qualifications Frameworks 8. Quality Assurance of Distance Education/E-Learning 9. Quality Literacy 10. Student Participation in Quality Assurance 11. Survey: Monitoring of Transnational Activities 12. Training Materials and Resource Package 13. Transnational Education
2008 -2015	1. APQN Quality Awards 2. APQN Quality Information Portal 3. APQN Quality Label 4. APQN Quality Label as Regional/International Accreditation of Internationalization 5. APQN Website Expansion, Consolidation and Maintenance 6. Asia-Pacific Quality Register(APQR) 7. Database of Consultants and Reviewers 8. External Evaluation Review of the APQN by Bateman & Giles Pty Ltd 9. Internship Program, 10. Liaison and Communication among APQN Members and Regional Networks 11. Moderated Online Forum 12. Mutual Recognition(MR) Project 13. On-line Discussion Forum 14. Peer Review of QA Agencies 15. Publication of Electronic Package for Reviewer's Training 16. Quality Assurance and Higher Education Internationalization 17. Quality Information Systems Toolkit 18. Survey of the Revision of Higher Education Quality Assurance Principles for the Asia Pacific Region (Chiba Principles) 19. Workshop for Pacific Nations 20. Workshop on Good Practices in China 21. Workshop-Round Table Discussion for the 2008 Batch of Interns 22. Dissolving Boundaries for a Quality Region：APQN Sustainable Development (self-fundraising project)
2016-2017	1. APQN Strategic Plan(2016-2019) 2. Asia-Pacific Quality Register(APQR) 3. Dissolving Boundaries for a Quality Region: APQN Sustainable Development (self-fundraising project) 4. APQN Website Expansion, Consolidation and Maintenance 5. Database of Consultants and Reviewers 6. Staff Capacity-Building 7. APQN Quality Information Portal 8. APQN Quality Label as Regional/International Accreditation of Internationalization

Most of the projects have produced good result. Take "Asia-Pacific Quality Register (APQR)" for example. The first formal review for APQR has been conducted on the Fiji Higher Education Commission (FHEC) in Suva, Fiji on 24-26th June, 2015. "This exercise would be counted as a milestone in history of APQN and APQR." Following the founding of the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR), APQR became the second in the international QA networks to implement QA register, in 2015 with initiative of Asia Pacific Quality Network (APQN).

Another good example is the "Survey of the Revision of Higher Education Quality Assurance Principles for the Asia Pacific Region (Chiba Principles)" which consists of three parts:1) Internal Quality Assurance: key principles guiding institutions in assuring their own quality; 2) Quality Assurance Agencies: key principles guiding the structure of quality assurance agencies and their management if they are to effectively conduct assessments for the accreditation and auditing of institutions and programs; 3)Quality Assurance: a set of principles which outline the process and content of quality assurance common to the activities of both the institution's internal practices and assessment by external quality assurance agencies. APQN played a significant role in the dissemination of the Chiba Principles.

3.3 A wide range of methods and actions

In order to achieve the goal of "Dissolving Boundaries for a Quality Region", APQN has taken a wide range of methods and actions, including:

1)Dissemination of information through newsletters, documents, journals and books, such as "the Academic Proceeding of 2015 APQN Conference Globalization and Diversification of Quality Assurance of Higher Education" in 2016, "Annual Report", Newsletters, "Toolkit on Regulating the Quality of Cross Border Education" with UNESCO in 2009 and others.

2) Capability training and development through seminars, workshops and staff exchange, such as the Global Initiative on Quality Assurance Capacity (GIQAC), Qualifications Frameworks, Indicators of Quality, "Workshop for Evaluators of NAEAC" in Pakistan in 2015,"Welcome Your Idea for APQN Collaborative Research Link" and others.

3) Quality Awards initiated in 2013 were awarded in over 30 EQAAs and IQAAs under such award categories as APQN Quality Champions Award, APQN International Cooperation in QA Award within the Region, APQN Strengthening QA Profession Award and others.

4) Set QA system for the APR, such as "Assessing Quality in Higher Education-Digital Book" and a "Toolkit: Regulating the Quality of Cross-Border Education"

5) Reference to the databases and other resources of other QA organizations, such as Consultant Data, the establishment of the APQN quality information portal in Sri Lanka, CIQG International Quality Principle.

3.4 Wide QA beneficiary and a huge target group

All the AACs, projects, methods and actions have provided a broader platform for information exchange and networking opportunities for all the members to reach the goal of "Dissolving Boundaries for a Quality Region".
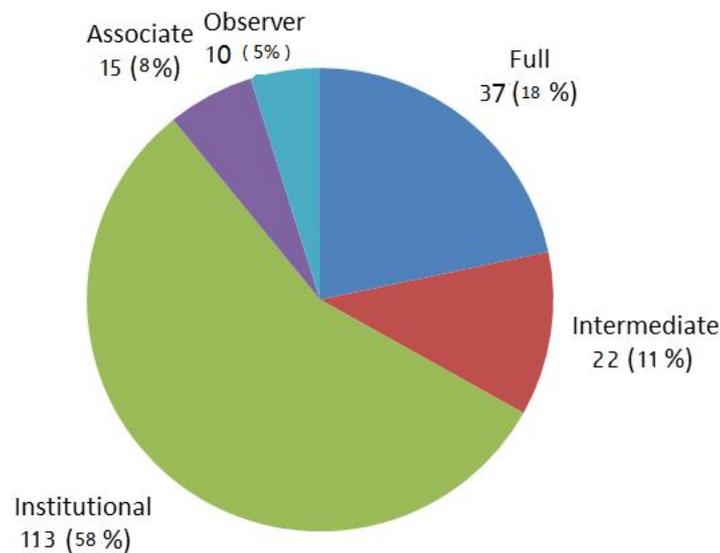
The region covered by APQN includes: all the Pacific island nations and territories, New Zealand, Australia, Papua New Guinea; all island and mainland nations and territories of Asia, including Russia, Afghanistan and Iran, but excluding other central Asian countries (included into another network), and excluding the Gulf countries (included in another network) (APQN, 2006).There are 51 countries/territories identified across the APR (see Table 3).

As of December 31, 2016, APQN had a total of 197 members, respectively from the Philippines, India, China, Thailand, Malaysia, Australia, New Zealand, Japan and other 40 countries/territories. Among the members, there are 37 Full members, 22 Intermediate members, 113 Institutional members, 15 Associate members and 10 Observer members (see Fig.1). 31 new members were successfully approved as the new members of the Network during the reporting period from 1 January to 31 December 2016.

Table 3 List of 51 Countries/Territories of the Asia-Pacific Region

S/N	Country/Territory
1	Afghanistan
2	Australia
3	Bangladesh
4	Bhutan
5	Brunei Darussalam
6	Cambodia
7	China
8	China, Hong Kong
9	Cook Islands
10	Fiji
11	French Polynesia
12	India
13	Indonesia
14	Iran
15	Japan
16	Kiribati
17	Korea, North
18	Korea, South
19	Kyrgyzstan
20	Laos
21	Macao, China
22	Malaysia
23	Maldives
24	Marshall Islands
25	Micronesia
26	Mongolia
27	Myanmar
28	Nauru
29	Nepal
30	New Caledonia
31	New Zealand
32	Niue
33	Pakistan
34	Palau
35	Papua New Guinea
36	Philippines
37	Russia
38	Samoa
39	Singapore
40	Solomon Islands
41	Sri Lanka
42	Taiwan, China
43	Thailand
44	Timor-Leste
45	Tokelau
46	Tonga
47	Turkmenistan
48	Tuvalu
49	Uzbekistan
50	Vanuatu
51	Vietnam

Fig. 1 APQN membership structure of 197 members from 40 countries/territories as of December 31, 2016

Almost all APQN members have been encouraged to adopt more robust mechanisms for continuous quality enhancement, more rigorous self-evaluation, increased transparency, and a better understanding of the notion of quality and best practices.

4. Key Innovative Features

APQN has made a huge step forward in the process of "Dissolving Boundaries for a Quality Region". It has more and more contacts within the APR and the influence worldwide is increasing. It made a lot of achievements such as dissemination of information, consultant database, APQR, Quality Label, AACs, regular seminars, workshops, internships, and others. This effectively strengthens the exchange of experience and practical cooperation among QAAs in the APR, making positive contribution. In 2008, the external evaluation review undertaken by Bateman & Giles Pty Ltd was to address the following criteria: 1) Efficacy; 2) Initial outcomes; 3) Governance and management; 4) Efficient financing; 5) Sustainability. The result is satisfactory (Bateman & Giles Pty Ltd, 2008).The evaluation report confirmed that the comprehensive range of programs and activities undertaken by APQN have been affirmed by members as significant contributing factors in building capacity in quality assurance (Concepcion V. Pijano, 2008).On March 6, 2010,at the implementation review mis-
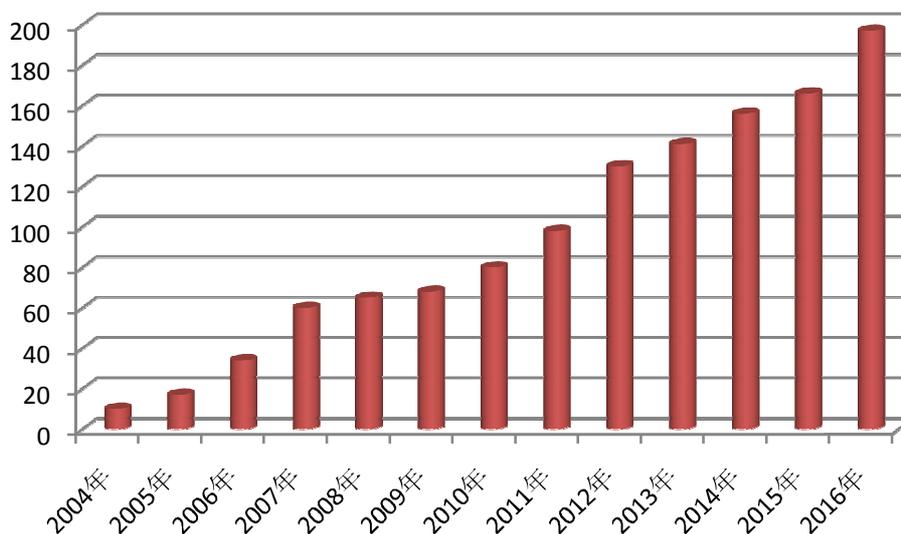
sion conducted by Programme Specialist Zeynep Varoglu of the UNESCO Division of Higher Education, APQN's progress toward achieving the overall objectives of the GIQAC grant was rated Highly Satisfactory. Her report indicated that "APQN has a clear sense of both the purpose and the development objectives of the grant. The clear focus also emerges through the project documentation and reporting."(Concepcion V. Pijano,2010).

Looking back what APQN has done over the past 14 years, a comprehensive analysis to the QA development trend has enlightened higher education QA for the countries in the APR, especially to some developing countries. The paper of *"Characteristics and Influences of APQN in Process of Education Quality Assurance in the Asia-Pacific Region"* gave a description on it. Briefly speaking, till now, APQN project of "dissolving boundaries for a quality region" has at least 5features:

4.1 To involve the largest number of beneficiaries

On September 30, 2005, APQN had only 17 members, but by December 31, 2016, the total number of membership reached 197, increasing dramatically fast, with the growth rate of doubling almost each year. All the members are the beneficiaries of APQN. Based on the principle of information sharing, all the resources are shared by all in the world.

Fig. 2 The Increase of APQN members from 2004 to 2016

4.2 To focus on quality assurance without boundaries

APQN focuses on the core of "quality assurance" in the APR, which is the foremost priority. Among the 13 themes of AACs in the past 14 years, the most frequently used key word is "quality assurance", which takes into account the comprehensive global trend, educational reforming, practical experience, and many other aspects.

The participants and scholars present themselves according to the theme chosen, exchange their competent expert opinions, share successful cases in order to promote mutual learning among members and promote the development of QA in the APR.

Through the Global Initiative for Quality Assurance Capacity (GIQAC) funded by UNESCO, the booklet "Assessing Quality in Higher Education", "Toolkit: Regulating the Quality of Cross-Border Education" and others set the QA standards for QAAs in this region.

4.3 To cooperate with national and international networks/organization

At the same time, APQN has established close relationship with international networks/organizations and sector groups in quality higher education. The fourth president (Jagannath Patil) was a president of APQN and INQAAHE for one year. The fifth President (Jianxin Zhang) has been advisor of the CHEA (Council for Higher Education Accreditation) since 2012. APQN has many partners including Asia Development Bank (ADB), ANQAHE (Arab Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education), APEC (Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation), AQAN (ASEAN Quality

Assurance Network), ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations), AUN (ASEAN University Network), European Commission(EC), ECA (Economic Commission for Africa), ENQA (European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education), INQAAHE (International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education), Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), Japan Bank for International Cooperation (JBIC), South East Asian Ministers of Education Organization (SEAMEO),UNESCO Paris (global), UNESCO Bangkok (regional), World Bank and others.

In "APQN Strategic Plan (2016-2019)" issued on July 4, one of the 7 Goals and Actions is "*to strengthen relations with other international, regional and national networks/organizations within and outside the Region*" (APQN, 2016).Many hands have contributed to the development of APQN. We are sure that through the continuing international collaboration we have seen the APQN expand and flourish.

APQN has made a positive contribution in promoting substantive QA cooperation among its members of what has been done for the past 14 years. In the aspect of building a QA system and leading QA standards, together with UNESCO in Bangkok, APQN co-research the QA supervision of cross-border education, and launched QA toolkit and other standards. Acting as an aid in regulating quality assurance for the countries that are involved in providing and receiving cross-border education (UNESCO-APQN), APQN has smoothed the road for the global cross-border higher education.

4.4 To dissolve boundaries for a quality region

In the "flat world," everything changes…The growing international activity within the educational system enhances student mobility, thus, intensifying faculty exchanges, increasing the number of cross-border educational programs and growing reliance on online or Web-based education, which altogether create a sense of urgency for a shared understanding of educational quality in the whole world, especially in the APR. While any single national regimen of educational quality would be difficult and perhaps undesirable, a shared understanding about the dimensions of quality would be useful. APQN has tried its effort to move towards such understanding and action while acknowledging and respecting the numerous differences of history, culture, beliefs and values that shape our systems of higher education and our perspectives on quality.

5. Challenges and Actions Taken

5.1 Challenges and Constraints

No doubt, APQN faces a lot of difficulties, among which the most crucial is the financial problem. Since 2012, APQN has had no financial support from either UNESCO or World Bank; its functions are carried on with the membership fees, volunteer contribution and personal donations.

APQN has clearly recognized the situation, faced and overcame difficulties, dealt with concrete matters, assumed responsibility and maintained a stable and healthy development. APQN took and takes such initiatives as "*to explore additional funding sources externally which can include donation, commissioned work, and sponsorship of events or publications by governments, agencies/organizations, philanthropists and other relative stakeholders, such as establishing "Guidelines for APQN Project by Self-fundraising*" (APQN, 2016).

"Money is not everything, but only something." It is certain that with the everlasting ideal of seeking for excellent quality in mind, APQN can continuously inherit and carry on the spiritual legacy - Dedication, Sharing, Serving, Innovation and Sustainable development. With its diligence, all the members will fight for "dissolving boundaries for a quality region", to realize the vision of "being a self-sustaining network".

5.2 Sustainability of the innovation and future plans

"*Dissolving Boundaries for a Quality Region: APQN Strategic Plan (2016-2019)*" was issued on July 4th, 2016. The fifth Board will keep striving for the sustainable project with new missions, new attitude and new perspectives. 2016-2017 will be the year of procedure building, 2017-2018 will be the year of personnel capability building, and 2018-2019 will be the year of action and achievements. APQN will complete the seven goals and actions along with ten targets, such as "to strengthen relations with other international, regional and national networks/organizations within and outside the Region", "to maintatain APQR and APQN Quality Label", "to establish on-going financial viability and stability", etc. in order to reach the goal of "Dissolving Boundaries for a Quality Region".

APQN, through both internal and external validation, has amply demonstrated that the objectives have been achieved through the work of the whole APQN members. Sustainability of the work of *"Dissolving Boundaries for a Quality Region"* is guaranteed by the commitment of the new Board who took office in May of 2016 and has recently embarked upon this cross-national work in 2016-2019.

6. Conclusion

As important as Huntington's monograph *"The Clash of Civilizations"*, as fascinating as Friedman's *"The Lexus and the Olive Tree" and "The World is Flat"*, APQN's huge and never-ending project of ***"Dissolving Boundaries for a Quality Region**: Cross-National/Territorial Cooperation through Quality Assurance in Higher Education in the Asia-Pacific Region"* didn't explain what's already happened: it tries to offer a roadmap for action of quality assurance in the borderless world that has emerged. Its rationale embraced the broad QA initiatives of all the members to meet the needs of this "quality society", and its core objectives were met.

The essential feature of the whole innovative process is its non-competitive, cooperative nature-between EQAAs and IQAAs, between nations and international organizations/networks across the national borders in the APR. The collaboration does not "just happen", and within the present context, the participants have worked hard within such an ethos to enhance education quality to all, to arouse the consciousness of "seeking common ground and establish a foundation for understanding quality", to plant the seeds of QA for the great cause of quality education in the globe.

*"**Collaboration is not an option. It is, as our cave-dwelling ancestors discovered, a survival response.**"* (Hughes, 2000). "Dissolving boundaries for a quality region" represents not merely a beguiling ideal, but a provable reality and compelling evidence for the potential of quality assurance in education for the whole globe, especially for the APR.

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