

## **Supporting the Culture of Quality Assurance Prior to Accreditation and Beyond**

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The Philippine Education Conference for this year “highlights the need for policies and practices that are responsive to the needs of learners [including students] and schools for the development of the education sector. Specifically it encourages discussions on operationalizing the complementarity between public and private schools in the areas of educational financing.” Our topic in this concurrent session is **accreditation in the context of the AQRF and the PQF**. My task is twofold. First: suggest what policies and practices are needed to provide learners and students the *quality* education the Constitution states they have a right to on all levels ultimately in the context of the AQRF. I have five suggestions. Second: suggest how public and private schools can help one another in quality assurance. My general recommendation is, as the title of my talk suggests, to *support the culture of quality assurance in the Philippines prior to accreditation and beyond*.

Unfortunately, the PhilEd framing of this concurrent session starts us off on a very high level: that of accreditation and of the AQRF. The AQRF is a scheme whereby the quality-assured qualifications in one of the member countries of the ASEAN can be compared with qualifications in another ASEAN country. The AQRF is a method of insuring comparability of the qualifications we output in our schools with the qualifications of all other countries. The qualifications we produce such as mechanic, computer technician, engineer, architect, chemist, or nurse become comparable with similarly trained qualifications in other countries. This allows movement of students and professionals from one ASEAN country to another and the appropriate recognition of qualifications as students continue their studies or are engaged professionally in other countries.

Meanwhile, accreditation is considered a very stringent, and to many, the highest form of quality assurance. Considering the more than 2000 private schools under the umbrella of the COCOPEA, FAAP states that only 727 have accreditation. The Association of Christian Schools and Colleges –Accrediting Association, Inc. (ACSC-AAI) has accredited 92 (13%), the Philippine Accrediting Association of Schools Colleges and Universities (PAASCU) 415 (57%), and the Philippine Association of Colleges and Universities’ Commission on Accreditation (PACUCOA) 220 (30%). However, the real number of *schools* with accreditation is only 665, since 62 of these have some programs accredited by PAASCU and others accredited by PACUCOA and so are counted twice. 665 of 2000 schools is roughly one third of COCOPEA schools, which does not encompass all private schools. For an ecology of QA in the Philippines seeking general comparability of its qualifications with all other ASEAN nations, this one-third is too small.

This considered, my first suggestion is **to focus on the cultivation of a culture of quality assurance**. A current policy dispensation which focuses on the *rewards* of quality assurance in vertical typology (such as the benefits of autonomous or deregulated status for the school and the lessened administrative worries for the regulative body) or forces a decision in horizontal typology (whether a school shall be a university, a college or a professional institute) even before the school has begun to nurture a culture of quality assurance may discourage rather than encourage the practice of quality assurance. Focusing on nurturing the culture of quality assurance is necessary.

My second suggestion: **We must agree on what quality is**. There are some who think the mark of a quality school is the high level of tuition it charges. There are others who think that only big, urban, well-know schools are quality schools. There are others who think that a small school dedicated to the training and education of indigenous peoples cannot be a quality school. In PAASCU, our understanding of quality is fourfold and explicit in our mission statement: “to promote our member institutions’ implementation of their vision, mission and goals, achievement of minimum standards [based on learning outcomes] and evidenced excellence based on learning outcomes, and responsiveness to stakeholders.” In CHED’s definition of quality in CMO 46 s. 2012, achievement of minimum standards is not part of its definition. This is merely implied in its standards of excellence. CHED also omits responsiveness to stakeholders, certainly necessary for compliance with the PQF. Coming to a working agreement on the meaning of quality that is then reflected in our quality standard on quality assurance would help develop the culture of quality assurance needed in the education sector.

My third suggestion: **Schools should begin the practice of quality assurance long before they are accredited. Government can begin to recognize and reward schools practicing quality assurance long before they achieve accreditation**. Early on, schools should have articulated their vision and mission well and should be able to evidence how these are being implemented in the culture of the school, including in its academic, research and outreach activities. Schools should be able to evidence their compliance with minimum academic standards set by the DepED or CHED’s PSGs for programs – PSGs that are calibrated with the PQF. Schools should show evidenced excellence in at least one academic area achieved through the exercise of academic freedom in pursuit of their vision and mission. Schools should evidence their responsiveness to stakeholders, not only industry (as important as industry is and stressed by government) but stakeholders determined by the schools’ vision and mission: possibly, the poor, the jobless, indigenous peoples, the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region, the Church, the NGOs. Government in partnership with the external quality assurance agencies can recognize and reward schools cultivating quality assurance long before they quality for accreditation.

My fourth suggestion: **The ASEAN Quality Assurance Framework (AQAF) should guide and motivate the schools and the the different private accreditation**

**agencies in the country towards a harmonized promotion of the culture of quality assurance in the country (and therefore not only of accreditation); this needs to include conversations that in academic freedom would strengthen the EQAAs and harmonize the EQA-Standards and Procedures (EQA-SP).** Within the AQAF, it is the school, and not the quality assurance agency, that is the principal driver of quality assurance first within the school and thereafter within the Philippine educational community. From within, the school decides to offer quality education and to assure itself and others that it is delivering that quality education. From this decision it designs and implements its Internal Quality Assurance (IQA) culture.

At a certain level of quality development, the schools reach out to an EQAA to help assure it and others of its quality using respectable world-class standards and procedures (EQA-SP). Based on these standards and procedures, that EQAA should be able to help the school develop a culture of QA even prior to accreditation.

Part of my fourth suggestion is that EQAAs such as PAASCU, PACUCOA, ACSCU-ACI for different educational levels such as basic and higher education, and different associations of accrediting agencies, like the Federation of Accrediting Associations of the Philippines (FAAP) for private schools, the Accrediting Agency for Chartered Colleges and Universities in the Philippines (AACCU) for SUCS, and the Association of Local Colleges and Universities Commission on Accreditation (ALCUA) for LCUs, get together to address their differing standards and procedures of accreditation, especially when determining levels of accreditation. The situation of siloed accreditation processes for different HEI groups (for profit private schools, non-stock, non profit private schools, public SUCs, public LCUs) and the lack of harmonization between them may favor the interest of the operation of a school or set of schools over the integrity of the quality assurance, and so throw in doubt the validity of the accreditation process itself and the veracity of the quality assured. It makes it impossible to compare the assured quality of private, state and local colleges and universities in the Philippines, even though we claim comparability with the qualifications of other ASEAN nations through the ASEAN Qualifications Referencing Framework (AQR). This is a sorry situation that must be faced not only by government, but by the educational community of the Philippines. It is an exigency less of government which can only enforce minimum standards in its regulation of schools, and more of the higher-educational community itself that in academic freedom pursues excellence in chosen academic areas that need quality assurance. As long as it is not faced, there is no reliable quality assurance mechanism available to ascertain that the public funds spent on SUCs or LCUs would not have been better spent in private schools based on quality.

My fifth suggestion: with the consent of the HEIs who enjoy academic freedom, government should confirm its **adoption of the AQAF as normative for quality assurance for schools in the Philippines** and actively participate in its further development and implementation. The distribution of scholarships, public funding, the benefits of the GASTPE and of the Universal Access to Quality Tertiary Education

should be based on the assured quality of the AQAF, giving quality education higher priority to government funding rather than merely whether it is a public or private school.

Finally, public and private schools, e.g. through associations like the PASUC and the COCOPEA, can in true practical complementarity help one another in quality assurance by **sharing best practices in internal quality assurance and by insisting that their EQAAs are genuinely external and that their EQA-SPs are truly harmonized with the SPs of other EQAAs in the Philippines and in other ASEAN countries so that the qualifications they output in their schools are truly quality assured.** Genuine quality assurance must eliminate all conflicts in interest. All may consequently consider and help develop a proposed new policy-standard on quality assurance that focuses primarily on the cultivation of quality assurance and uses an *instrument of quality assurance* that checks the institutional culture of quality even prior to accreditation. [This instrument is discussed in the concurrent session led by Dr. Gina Montalan.] Public and private schools may include among their EQA-SPs the exchange of accreditors and the external monitoring of accreditation processes to further guarantee the objectivity of quality assurance.