Views on the ENQA Competences Framework for Quality Assurance Professionals

I am greatly honoured to be invited to share views on the newly developed ENQA Competencies Framework for QA professionals (ENQACFQA) by the ENQA Staff Development Group. This groundbreaking work is remarkable and deserves high appreciation not only because it opens a new frontier in the QA discipline, but it also serves as a useful tool for the QA agencies to ascertain their manpower quality as well as a valuable reference for improving the QA practitioners' professionalism. It is believed that other regions on earth will definitely follow suit in view of the growing importance of QA for higher education worldwide.

The views are provided based on my research study titled *"professionalism, profession and quality assurance practitioners in external quality assurance agencies in higher education"* whereby a competency framework for external quality assurance practitioners (CFEQAP) is proposed with a view to ensuring the practitioners' professional performance and holding them accountable to society's expectation, and facilitating professionalisation of the QA profession in the long run.

Before proceeding with the view sharing, four basic differences between the two frameworks are worthy notice. Firstly, for their purposes, apart from laying down the expected core competencies, the ENQACFQA has a more far-reaching goal for staff recruitment, staff development and performance review. This is laudable as the framework will be more functional and instrumental in utility. Secondly, their constructs are different. The ENQACFQA is devised as a matrix capturing two major areas of QA work in one axis and three major categories of competencies in the other whereas the CFEQAP adopts a list approach subsuming a number of sub-competencies under each of the six major areas of essential competencies. In terms of the presentation, the ENQACFQA features a closer mapping between the competencies and the major areas of QA work. Thirdly, their contents are somehow varied. As a matter of fact, many sub-competencies are common to the two frameworks, such as those set out under the two core competencies of "Project Management" and "Interpersonal Competencies". But some differences can still be identified, and this is detailed later in this article. Last but not least, the term, competency, which underpins the two frameworks are defined differently. The ENQACTQA defines competencies as "a combination of attributes with respects to knowledge and its application, attitudes, skills and responsibilities that

describe the level or degree is capable of performing" (cf. ENQA SDG – report of outcome April 2014, p.10). A simpler definition is employed in the CFEQAP whereby competencies are understood as a set of knowledge, skills and attitudes, performance and levels of sufficiency required to ensure a person's high quality performance. Despite such a variation, their meanings remain to be not far too apart. In short, with these four fundamental differences, an absolute comparison of the ENQACFQA and the CFEQAP can be really difficult.

Broadly speaking, several strengths of the ENQACFQA are noted. First and foremost, the framework is succinctly exhibited with the six core competencies reasonably grouped under each of the three major areas of competencies: "Knowledge", "Systemic Skills" and "Social Skills". This is easily comprehended even for layman. Secondly, the simple core competencies table is further supplemented by the table on the set of detailed competencies (cf. ENQA Competencies Framework, p.3-8) which does not solely offer a greater detail on the expected competencies, it also comes up with a clear distinction of what different competencies are required from an entry level staff and an experienced/senior staff. The latter part, in particular, can provide a strong motivator for career advancement by making clear of what is expected from the senior staff. Thirdly, the "Technical Competencies" dimension is used in the table of detailed competencies, and the term sounds to be much more comprehensible that the corresponding term, "Systemic Skills", in the original core competencies table. Fourthly, the detailed set of competencies contains some useful competencies extra to the CFEQAP which entail, e.g. 'diplomacy and political sensitivity' and 'personal resilience' under the "Interpersonal Competencies" dimension. These two competencies are for sure of utmost significance for the conduct of QA activities. Fifthly and lastly, the framework is built upon the results and analysis of an empirical questionnaire survey of the ENQA members. This leaves the framework with a high level of validity.

Nevertheless, some suggestions for improvement are made for consideration if deemed appropriate. With respect to the set of detailed competencies, it may be worth supplementing sub-competencies related to 'knowledge of private providers and cross-border providers' in the "HE Sector Knowledge" domain under the "Knowledge Competencies" dimension taking into account the rapid growth of the number of these

providers over time. Consider the unavoidable influence of QA agencies on their QA staff, 'agency value' and 'issues of agency changes' may be additional sub-competencies for the same domain. On the "National QA" domain, it may be worthwhile to supplement 'knowledge of different QA approaches and methods' so as to widen the staff's horizon and enable them to handle a greater variety of cases competently. As regards the "International Dimension of QA & E" domain, adding sub-competencies pertinent to the 'QA practices outside Europe' may be useful given the trends for standardizing global QA practices and practicing QA across borders. Lastly shifting to the "Technical Competencies" dimension, 'contract formulation', and 'cost analysis' are two additional sub-competencies suggested for the "Project Management" domain.

To conclude, ENQACEFQA is by and large well-established. However, it is imperative to note, no matter how the framework will eventually turn out to be, the most essential thing to be borne in mind is to understand and apply the framework in context. That is, to make the framework actually work well in the ENQA member agencies, it is of paramount importance for the agencies to appropriately address all their context-specific factors in application. In this regard, slight adjustments and modifications of the framework with reasonable grounds in adaptation should be allowed.

Finally, it is sincerely hoped that the above views will be found to be useful for improving the ENQACFQA at last.

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