

## **Pacific Quality Forum: Current and Future Impacts of Covid-19 and Responses**

### Context and Introduction

The global Covid-19 pandemic (the pandemic) is having major impacts on education worldwide, including how education is quality assured. Impacts to date have included the deferral of some activities and changes to the ways in which others are delivered. While a number of these changes have been necessary responses to a difficult situation, they have also prompted thinking about ways in which quality assurance might operate in the future.

A number of summary reports about the impacts of the pandemic on education and quality assurance are now available in different parts of the world. Quality assurance conferences and other events are also examining impacts, including both immediate response impacts and those with longer timeframes.

This Pacific Quality Forum was an initial effort to explore the impacts of the pandemic in the Pacific. Pacific nations have particular characteristics which indicate that the impact of the pandemic requires a Pacific-centric examination, while also continuing to learn from other examinations globally.

### Organisation of the Forum

A Pacific Quality Forum for academic quality agencies across the Pacific to discuss current and future impacts of Covid-19 and identify any priorities for further work was convened by the Educational Quality and Assessment Programme (EQAP) on 28 October 2020. The Forum was facilitated by Emeritus Professor Sheelagh Matear, Executive Director of the Academic Quality Agency for New Zealand Universities and Dr Jeanette Baird, Adjunct Professor, Divine Word University, Papua New Guinea. Participating organisations are listed in Appendix 1. The Forum was held on Zoom and recorded. The recording was then transcribed using rev.com. This report summarises themes from the Forum and makes suggestions for further activity.

The focus of the Forum was on the impacts of the pandemic on Quality Assurance Agencies in the Pacific. In preparation for the Forum, agencies were asked to consider three questions:

1. What changes has your Agency made to quality assurance practices and requirements?
2. What were the driving factors for these changes (aspects of COVID):
3. Have work practices changed in your agency?

A series of prompts accompanied each question. These are attached in Appendix 2.

The first part of the Forum examined country impacts and the second part examined some common themes that emerged from the country reports in more detail and explored responses and opportunities for further work.

The scale of the impacts of Covid-19 was recognised at the start of the meeting and the high levels of uncertainty that it is generating – as well as immediate health and economic impacts. Therefore, connecting with colleagues and support for well-being was also a motivating factor for the Forum.

The agencies participating have differing scopes of activities and therefore impacts are different.

### Themes emerging from the Forum

All participants had been affected to some extent by the pandemic. All had experienced national lockdowns and restrictions to some extent, including border closures. Colleagues from Vanuatu however, provided a reminder that other major events and disasters continued to impact on the Pacific. Severe Tropical Cycle Harold caused widespread damage and destruction, including 27 deaths, across Fiji, the Solomon Islands, Vanuatu and Tonga in April 2020.

The areas of impact of the pandemic can be grouped into:

- Impacts on quality assurance, review and assessment work
- Impacts on quality enhancement and training and development work
- Other impacts on education and assessment
- New work and emerging and heightened issues
- Positive impacts or opportunities
- Impacts on agencies ways of working

#### *Quality assurance*

Approval, accreditation and review work undertaken by Quality Assurance Agencies in the Pacific have been affected by the pandemic. The effects have included deferral and postponement of reviews. The main contributor to these deferrals has been the inability of the agencies to undertake some (not all) site visits and particularly the inability of international reviewers to contribute to site visits.

While all agencies had been able to adapt and continue operating, some indicated that they had needed to seek approval for changes to external quality review procedures.

In addition to the deferral of activities, responses to the unavailability of internal reviewers have included the development of mixed modes reviews where international panel members contribute virtually. There is scope for guidelines to be developed to direct these mixed mode (and online) reviews.

Agencies also discussed the potential for a 'Pacific platform' that might be shared across agencies and support virtual institutional audit and reviews. While the Covid-19 pandemic is the current challenge, it was recognised that resilience was required in quality assurance systems to enable continuity of activity through future challenges. The Australian Peer Review Portal<sup>1</sup> could provide an example of the sort of platform that is envisaged. The need to develop trust in institutions was recognised as a key contributing factor in any future success of a virtual review platform. A common virtual platform for institutional review might be aligned with increasing mutual recognition of external quality assurance reviews and assessments.

#### *Quality enhancement and training*

Quality enhancement and development work have also been affected. The unavailability of international reviewers is again a major component of this impact. Other constraints include limits on group sizes that can attend a single meeting or event. Responses have included transitioning training onto an online platform and extending the timeframe for training. In some cases, this extended work was already initiated in the past year with international trainers and advisors

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.peerreviewportal.com/>

contributing virtually. Other agencies have decentralised their delivery models so that instead of attendees from many organisations joining a single, central meeting, multiple meetings have been held with the central provider travelling to a number of institutions. This has also had benefits in terms of increasing the number of trainees in institutions that the central agency (and trainers) have been able to engage with. Agencies have also experienced an increase in demand for online training.

The increase in quality enhancement and training work may also reflect an increase in attention to and support for internal, as opposed to external, quality assurance.

#### *Other impacts on education and assessment*

Increasing demand for education and training has come from institutions seeking support for online teaching and assessment. Smaller education institutions particularly have experienced challenges in moving their learning, teaching and assessment to online modes. These challenges derive from the inadequacy of digital infrastructure, or limited online teaching capability, or both.

Reference was also made to changing learner demands. This point is something that should be explored further, as some types of learners may prefer more online activities while others have a strong preference for face-to-face learning.

#### *New work and emerging and heightened issues*

Increased requests for support with online teaching is one example of new work that quality agencies across the Pacific have been asked to contribute as a consequence of the pandemic. Associated with this, agencies have also been asked for guidelines for quality assurance of online learning and also for business continuity and risk assessment.

Some agencies are also experiencing an increase in requests for approval of micro-credentials as institutions seek to adapt provisions in uncertain and changing environments.

In some cases, quality assurance agencies have been asked to contribute to monitoring national requirements and restrictions for institutions.

Other new work includes analysis of short- and long-term impacts of the pandemic being requested of some agencies.

#### *Trades and Vocational Education and Training (TVET)*

The impact of the pandemic on TVET delivery requires specific mention. Most of the impacts above also apply to TVET. However, there are additional challenges of online delivery and assessment for TVET where it is more difficult to develop and assess psychomotoric competencies that comply with social distancing requirements or are online; for example, the correct use of tools in automotive training or inserting a needle in nursing and health care. Some agencies are paying particular attention to developing guidelines for TVET.

#### *Positive impacts or opportunities*

Some agencies reported opportunities of positive impacts as a consequence of the pandemic. The major positive impact was reported from PNG, where the pandemic had provided impetus for advancing a significant policy agenda for 'digitalisation' of higher education.

Moves to online and virtual meetings with reductions in costs of time and money were also seen as positive aspects of changed ways of working.

Responses to the pandemic have prompted agencies and staff to be innovative and develop new skills and new ways of delivering services and engaging with stakeholders. Some agencies considered that their internal reflections on ways of operating necessitated by the pandemic had provided positive effects, for example, in exploring a wider range of options than would otherwise have been the case.

#### *Impacts on agencies' ways of working and preparedness*

Most of the impacts on ways agencies work have been covered above. This section reinforces the experience of agencies who have also moved their ways of working to an online or mixed mode format.

Agencies have reflected on their own preparedness for an event of this scale, which has been varied. Some agencies felt their policy settings and operational arrangements (for example, all staff having laptops and internet connections) had served them well, while others considered there was a need to review their policy frameworks. Agencies recognised that while the numbers of Covid-19 cases might have been low or non-existent in their countries, the prevalence of the pandemic worldwide reinforced the need for preparedness.

#### Issues

Not surprisingly, agencies also reported a number of issues they experienced, or are continuing to experience, as a consequence of the pandemic. The main issues were:

- Connectivity
- Budget cuts
- Capability

Connectivity (internet and mobile phone) is an issue for agencies, institutions and students. Some agencies and governments have been able to provide support for institutions and students but bandwidth and unreliability present a challenge on the use of online learning, as does the cost of data for students. This is not a new issue for the Pacific but it may be having a greater impact as it limits the ability to adopt responses that are being used in other parts of the world.

A number of agencies have already experienced budget cuts and others are concerned about future years as the pandemic continues to impact on economies. In some cases, agency staff had been redeployed to contribute to other aspects of the pandemic response. The economic shock to Pacific nations due to the pandemic is known to be substantial<sup>2</sup> but the effects on post-secondary education systems may take some time to fully emerge.

Discussion in the Forum emphasised several times that as delivery and quality assurance make greater use of online opportunities, there is a need to support the development of capability for online delivery. It was noted that there are institutions in the Pacific, particularly the University of the South Pacific, with long experience in distance and online delivery who may be well placed to provide advice.

---

<sup>2</sup> <https://blogs.worldbank.org/health/economic-impact-covid-19-and-health-financing-pacific-time-action-now>; accessed 2201207

## Opportunities

On the basis that there are common challenges to delivering quality assurance and quality enhancement activities, there may be value in exploring common responses. These include, for example:

Development of guidelines for:

- mixed mode and virtual panel visits, particularly with respect to the contribution of international panel members
- online teaching and quality assurance of online learning
- online delivery and assessment of TVET programmes
- business continuity and risk assessment – for both institutions and agencies.

A starting point might be to share the guidelines that have been developed so far.

Other opportunities for peer learning and support include:

- Sharing of impact analyses
- Sharing of agency policies and preparedness for operating under emergency conditions
- Training and development platforms, and the hosting of learning resources for providers. Not every agency will want to maintain its own learning management system. Those that do might be prepared to host training courses and presentations from other agencies, or to arrange webinars across several countries.
- Sharing of experts on the quality assurance of education and training

Finally, the suggestion of a common, virtual platform for managing institutional audits should be explored further. As an initial step following the Forum, some agencies shared reviewer registers.

## Acknowledgements

Acknowledgements and appreciation are extended to EQAP for co-ordinating the Forum and to agencies for participating.

**Appendix 1: Participants and participating organisations.**

|    | <b>Name</b>                        | <b>Organisation</b>  |
|----|------------------------------------|--|
| 1  | Atelini Koroi                      | Fiji Higher Education Commission                           |
| 2  | Epi Rawalai                        |  |
| 3  | Leali'ifano Easter Manila-Silipa   | Samoa Qualifications Authority                             |
| 4  | Professor FR Jan Czuba             | Department of Higher Education, Papua New Guinea           |
| 5  | Wilma Paka                         |  |
| 6  | David Lambukly                     | Vanuatu Qualifications Authority                           |
| 7  | Sam Samuel                         |  |
| 8  | Emeritus Professor Sheelagh Matear | Academic Quality Agency for New Zealand Universities (AQA) |
| 9  | Dr Jeannette Baird                 | Adjunct Professor Divine Word University, Papua New Guinea |
| 10 | Agustin de la Varga                | EQAP, SPC  |
| 11 | Dipshika Singh                     |  |
| 12 | Rajendra Prasad                    |  |
| 13 | Selai Waqainabete- Nainoca         |  |

## **Appendix 2: Preparation questions and prompts**

Note: not all questions will be relevant for every agency and they do not need to be answered; they are intended to be prompts for agencies to consider in advance of Session 1.

What changes has your Agency made to quality assurance practices and requirements?

- Cancellation of activities. What?
- Deferral of activities. What, for how long?
- Change in delivery mode (more use of online, more desk-based assessment)?
- Easing of some requirements (eg placements or in person examinations)
- Are there differences between changes made for quality assurance of programmes/qualifications and those made for institutional quality assurance?
- Has interaction with professional accrediting bodies had any impact?
- Have any aspects increased (eg approval of micro-credentials; development of advice on digital delivery or online assessment for universities/institutions) or new aspects or requirements been added?
- Has your Agency provided any guidance or advice to institutions, e.g. on COVID safety or online learning?

What were the driving factors for these changes (aspects of COVID):

- Government requirements/directions
- Requests from universities/institutions
- Particular challenges faced by universities/institutions
- Agency governance and management?

Have work practices changed in your agency?

- Have staff workloads increased?
- Are staff working remotely, are systems and infrastructure adequate?
- Has additional attention been paid to staff wellbeing?
- How has governance been maintained?
- How well prepared was your agency for the disruption from Covid?
- Has funding been maintained?

### **Other sessions**

Future impacts?

- Is new/additional advice or guidance needed?
- Are further changes to quality assurance requirements needed? What are these?

Changes prompted by COVID that would be worth continuing?

- Virtual review activities?

## COVID Impact: Academic Quality Agency for New Zealand Universities

- Deferred start of audit phase of cycle for 12 months in response to request from universities
- Staff working mainly from home since mid-March (small office)
  - No particular increase in workload, but some change in priorities
  - Minor problems with connectivity
  - Weekly meetings to maintain connections, some additional support for staff
- New work – development of an outline for universities to assess good practice in their teaching and learning during COVID
- Other work (our external review) moved online
- Governance also moved online
- Budget reduction



EQAP Pacific Quality Forum – 28 October 2020

