Quality Assurance (QA) strategies, frameworks and policies are usually translated into the form of rules and procedures, which provide the basis for QA practices. With the globalisation of higher education efforts are made to improve QA practices through sharing best practices across institutions and internationally. This can be characterised as an example of knowledge transfer through sharing of practices. However, such practices based on rules and procedures are typically influenced by and often derived from cultural norms of organisations, which are not always explicit. Drawing on a practice-oriented knowledge transfer model and organisational semiotics as its analytical basis, we discuss the issues in sharing QA practices.

We first begin by considering a practice-oriented knowledge transfer model, to characterise the form of knowledge transfer in which practices are transferred across organisations. This model is then examined from a semiotic viewpoint and analysed based on the notion of semiosis. Through this analysis potential problems and issues to be considered in this form of knowledge transfer are discussed.

QA in higher education is typically implemented as frameworks and procedures. These are often developed over the years through experiences and strategies of national and regional QA bodies, as well as in each constituent institution. At the same time, they can be enhanced through learning from other QA bodies as best practices. Moreover, with the internationalisation of higher education that calls for a more common or standard assurances of quality across countries [1], there would be attempts to transfer QA structures and policies from countries and institutions that have made further progress in QA. Hence we characterise and analyse this as a knowledge transfer issue.

There is a variety of ways in which knowledge transfer can be achieved. These include informal mechanisms such as conversations and informal discussions, formal mechanisms such as training sessions, and personal channels based on personnel transfer [2]. These mechanisms assume direct interactions between people who provide knowledge and those receive it. However, in cases where knowledge is codified into rules and procedures which form the practice that executes the knowledge, the practice itself may be transferred and executed by the recipient. An example is an expert knowledge in cooking; the knowledge about preparing a dish through an appropriate selection of ingredients and their combinations can be codified as recipes, which can be followed and executed. We characterise such form of knowledge transfer as ‘practice-oriented’, since knowledge is not directly transferred but is transferred through practices [3]. Here, practice is a routine use of knowledge and follows the notion of best practice transfer [4]. In many ways, knowledge transfer in QA is practice-oriented as best practices captured as procedures and rules are adopted by its recipients.

Figure 1 illustrates a practice-oriented knowledge transfer model (based on [3]). In this model, the knowledge of source organisation is not directly transferred to the recipient (dashed arrow); instead...
it is first codified or encoded as a form of practice. Then this practice is transferred to the recipient. This practice may not be exactly the same as the source but is mostly replicated (hence described as Practice’ in Figure 1). Through performing the practice, the knowledge is decoded or reconstructed in the recipient. It is through this reconstruction of knowledge that completes the transfer of knowledge.

Although this appears to be a practical approach to knowledge transfer, differences in organisational cultures and prior knowledge can influence its effectiveness. Applying the same QA system across different countries and cultures would require caution [1]. What the model suggests is that each of the three steps (codification, transfer, and reconstruction) involves translation of information, i.e., the knowledge transfer process can be captured as a set of translations. One of the approaches to analyse translation problems is through the use of semiotics. In the following, we use semiotics as a method of analysing the issues involved.

Semiotics is study of signs. Signs are something that stands for something in some capacity. As such, a sign represents some object or entity through its manifestation. According to Peirce, a sign (representamen) is bound to an object (referent) through an interpretant, which is an agent or process of making sense of the sign (Figure 2). This process is referred to as semiosis.

In applying semiosis to the practice-oriented knowledge transfer model, let us consider the practice as the sign that represents the knowledge [3]. In this case, the interpretant would be the process by which the practice is mapped to the knowledge. In the case of creating the sign, i.e., the creation of practice from knowledge, it can be considered as the source organisation’s process of codification. In the recipient organisation is the process of (re)construction of knowledge from the practice. When mapped to the process of knowledge transfer, this translates to the process starting from the knowledge of the source organisation (object) that is codified based on its interpretation (interpretant) to generate the practice (sign) that represents it. This is then transferred to the recipient (as a sign) which is interpreted and decoded (interpretant) to construct the knowledge in the recipient (object). This is illustrated in Figure 3 as a mapping of the process on to the continuous semiosis of two parties involved.

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Fig. 2. Peirce’s triadic model of semiosis

Fig. 3. Knowledge transfer through semiosis
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In Figure 3, the triangle on the right represents the semiosis of the source, and the left that of the recipient. Note that the diagram shows three ‘gaps’: the gap between the signs (Practice and Practice’), between the interpretants, and between the objects (Knowledge and Knowledge’). This illustrates that the practices are not necessarily transferred ‘as they are’ but involves some adaptation or localisation. It also shows that the transferred knowledge may be different, affected by the differences between the two organisations. These differences may be due to cultural differences, organisational contexts, prior knowledge, etc.

What this analysis reveals is that the process of practice-oriented knowledge transfer must consider semiotic gaps that exist in the process. It corroborates the findings in knowledge transfer research that identify the transformation of knowledge content as well as the recipient context
(e.g., [5]). By treating it as a semiotic problem, methods of problem analysis and modelling in organisational semiotics [6,7] can be applied to identify key issues and potential problems. This includes the analysis of relationships between formal and informal aspects of organisations, and the role and effects of norms.

Transfer of knowledge from other organisations or countries, which is one of the most effective ways of introducing best practices, is expected in QA of higher educations both in terms of improving quality as well as to meet the international standard expected. In this process, it is important to understand the process and analyse it to identify any potential issues. We introduced a semiotic method to approach this based on a practice-oriented knowledge transfer model.

REFERENCES:


