

External Mid Term Review of the EQAP Business Plan 2019-2022

Final Report

April 2021

1. Introduction

The Educational Quality Assessment Program (EQAP) commissioned a Mid-Term Review in order to assess the effectiveness of the Business Plan (2019-22) in enabling the organisation to achieve its goals and targets, and to draw lessons and recommendations that can inform future decision making.

EQAP works with SPC member countries to support their efforts to build a robust education system through providing support in curriculum and assessment, education statistics and analysis, policy development, and technical qualifications. EQAP works in close collaboration with the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER), the New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA) and UNESCO Institute for Statistics. EQAP receives funding from both Australia and New Zealand through a programmatic¹ funding partnership grant arrangement, established jointly in 2018, over different time periods. EQAP delivers a significant high profile regional product, the PILNA, the country level standardised literacy and numeracy assessment conducted regional every 3 years, as well as a broad range of specific support services for each member country. ACER provides ongoing technical support to EQAP through a partnership supported by the Australian and NZ donors in their funding agreement. EQAP negotiates an annual workplan with ACER to support the needs of the Business Plan and member country priorities.

The findings, lessons and recommendations of the Review are aimed at multiple audiences including management and staff, PIC Member countries, SPC and Development Partners (Australia and New Zealand).

An independent consultant, Mr Paul Nichols, took a participatory and qualitative approach to the Review, which involved interviews with key stakeholders, discussions with management and staff, and consultation with PIC Member representatives (Heads of education systems) on the Pacific Board for Education Quality (PBEQ), the governance body for EQAP. Feedback was sought on the findings and recommendations to optimise the opportunities for all stakeholders to share their views and propose practical recommendations and next steps to make the Review as useful as possible.

The **overall conclusion** from the review is that:

The Business Plan provides a sound basis for EQAP to plan, manage and report on its work in a manner that meets the needs of Member Countries and satisfies donor requirements and expectations.

The **key recommendations** arising from the review are that:

1. EQAP should continue to utilise and further develop its Business Plan process and structure as a sound basis for overall management and accountability.

¹ The term “programmatic funding arrangement” is used here, as “core funding” has a specific meaning within SPC as contributions from development partners at the organisational level. In effect NZ and Australia provide flexible funding to the EQAP program, which contributes to the overall combined budget of EQAP rather than being pre-allocated to specific activities.

2. Development Partners (Australia, New Zealand and other potential partners) should continue to utilise a programmatic funding approach in provision of support, as this strengthens integrity of internal organisational planning and reporting processes, is highly efficient, and proven to be an effective means of delivering outcomes for Member Countries.

The findings of the review explain and justify this overall conclusion. They are presented in two ways: firstly around key themes that emerged from the review process; and secondly against the key review questions of the Terms of Reference.

2. Scope, objectives and methodology

The Terms of Reference identified three objectives for the review:

- a) to document and evaluate the effectiveness of the business plan in guiding EQAP work planning, programme execution and reporting of results;
- b) to review the extent to which the business plan continues to reflect and respond to member priorities; and
- c) to provide findings and recommendations to inform ongoing implementation and future programme design.

A series of key review questions were outlined against the evaluative areas of relevance, coherence, effectiveness, efficiency, impact, sustainability, inclusiveness and monitoring and evaluation (included in analysis and discussion).

A mixed method open-ended enquiry participatory approach was developed for the review. This involved several stages of:

- documentation review by the Consultant
- open-ended interviews with stakeholders including: Member countries (Fiji, Tonga, Tuvalu, Solomon Islands, FSM), Development Partners (DFAT, MFAT), specialist Partner organisation (ACER), regional organisations (SPC, UNICEF, UNESCO), and staff (policy and research, curriculum, statistics). University of South Pacific was not able to be consulted in this period.
- workshop with management on findings and recommendations
- presentation and verification with EQAP governance body representatives, the PBEQ.

At the conclusion of document review and open-ended interviews, a set of themes were identified as emerging which provided a basis for analysis and testing with stakeholders. These themes are presented and discussed. A further analysis of the documentation and feedback from stakeholders is provided against the key review questions.

The period covered by this review is calendar years 2019 and 2020, noting that 2020 was a particularly disrupted and challenging year due to COVID-19 resulting in significant changes to ways of working, including restricted travel and remote engagement and support.

There are a number of **challenges and limitations** to this review. From a conceptual perspective, the scope and objectives of the Terms of Reference of the review are concerned with the EQAP Business Plan, which at its heart is a *planning and reporting tool*, whereas many of the key review questions of the Terms of Reference are more concerned with the performance of the *organisation itself*, and the performance of staff, systems and activities of the organisation. This theoretical challenge flows through to the methodology and findings of this review. The methodology was structured in an open-ended manner to seek real feedback on the strengths, achievements and challenges facing EQAP as an *organisation* or a *program*, not structured around a forensic examination of the nature

of the Business Plan tool per se. This was an intentional decision so that the review could be as useful as possible for future planning and direction of EQAP activities, not be limited to an examination of the planning tool. However, it does mean that there is a slight misalignment from a technical evaluation perspective between the objectives (narrow) and the methodology (broad) of the review, as there is between the scope and purpose of the review (narrowly focused on the business plan itself), and the findings, which focus on performance and strategic direction and improvement (organisational learning). The overall veracity (validity and reliability) of this review should be judged by readers according to the evidence and argument presented under each finding and the following discussion against the key review questions.

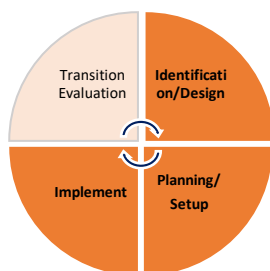
3. Discussion of the EQAP Business Plan and reporting process

The EQAP Business Plan is structured around four outcomes:

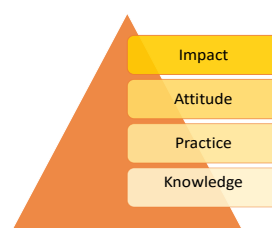
1. More national Ministries of Education and other key institutions increase the use of information for policy development and implementation, planning and management
2. More PICT schools increase and improve the assessment students' performance against curricula
3. More PICT national agencies, employers and learners increase use of recognised quality assured qualification.
4. EQAP is increasingly recognised internationally as a leader and source of knowledge and experience in education in the Pacific.

These outcomes are broken down into Key Result Areas (14 in all in calendar year 2020); and further broken down into Actions for each year (24 in all for 2020). Outcomes and Key Results are fixed for the period of the Business Plan, whereas Actions are flexible and vary from year to year. Results are reported in an Annual Report against the Actions, and analysed by its Status of Progress (across four stages from identification and analysis, planning, implementation and evaluation); and the level of change achieved from the achievement reported (knowledge, practice, attitude, impact) This analysis of the nature of the results reported is in alignment with the standard SPC-wide definitions and approach to monitoring and evaluation, referred to as the SPC Results Hierarchy (included with the definitions attached).

Status of Progress



Level of Change



This structure and approach to the business plan is sound, well considered and appropriate as a basis for planning and implementation of EQAPs work. It has proven to be a useful tool for planning, as the breakdown is logical and practical enough for staff to implement activities against actions, and to provide meaningful reporting. The SPC-wide approach to analysis of results represents good practice for organisational level monitoring and evaluation. EQAP convenes a reflection process three times a year with staff (and other stakeholders) to review the Business Plan actions, discuss challenges and opportunities and to make changes to the plans. This also represents good practice

in adaptive management and planning, and has the benefits of engaging staff and stakeholders in focusing on the mission and purpose of the organisation.

A further analysis of the nature of the outcome, KRA, action and achievement statements, is included in the section on Findings against key review questions.

4. Findings, lessons and recommendations against emerging themes

A number of themes emerged throughout the review as commonly identified and discussed by different stakeholders. As the review process continued, the consultant drew out more analysis and information about the themes, and identified recommendations for the 'next steps' in EQAPs organisational development to respond to identified challenges and opportunities.

Finding 1: The planning culture in EQAP is becoming institutionalised, and not dependent on individual leaders or managers.

The process behind developing and reporting on the EQAP Business Plan includes a consultation process with Member Countries at the start of every year, and two Reflection meetings by staff with stakeholder participation to review progress and performance. This has evolved to the extent that stakeholders report that EQAP staff now have a medium and long term outlook in their own planning, and are able to break down major activities into time related tasks and meet deadlines in a more realistic and practical manner. The planning culture is now much less reliant on individual leaders and managers, and the sense of team work and joint accountability is developing strongly. There is sufficient shared understanding of key activities and tasks that vacancies and illnesses can be backfilled with staff stepping into roles and tasks as needed. These achievements have been strongly led by the Director, and supported by the Principal Adviser which has become an important role in building organisational capacity and contributing to regional efforts. Their leadership is highly valued by staff, SPC senior management, and regional partners.

The recommended next steps in further developing the planning culture of EQAP include:

- a) The planning process be extended to include other actors in Region, such as Development Partners and regional organisations in the education sector, so that planning can be more integrated, holistic and work across the system of education support.
- b) Refinement of the indicators in the Business Plan to more directly reflect the Outcome areas and KRAs, and consider identifying clear 'targets' for the higher level outcomes to make assessment of performance even more meaningful.
- c) The role of Principal Adviser should be continued and supported by SPC and donors, even as the function evolves and its scope varies in future Business Plans to meet new priorities and challenges.

Finding 2: EQAP maintains a strong focus on its core mandate and clients, resisting the pressures to extend the scope of its work or respond to external demands.

EQAP has a strong sense of its comparative advantage and core competencies (in assessment, curriculum development, qualifications and data management and analysis). The role it plays in the Pacific Regional Education Framework (*PacREF*²) draws on these competencies appropriately without overextending its mandate or functions beyond its capability, but this remains a possible risk. EQAP's strong relationships and open communication with Member Countries and regional

² PacREF is a collaborative regional agenda for education quality and reform across the Pacific, led by PIFS and supported by Education Ministers and heads of education systems. The governance structure and purpose is found here: [PacREF Governance Structure – PacREF](#)

organisations means that it listens to feedback and ensures that it takes on appropriate activities and tasks to meet their needs, rather than doing their own thing outside the agreed education architecture for the region. EQAP is recognised by external agencies (donors) and in the region for being the 'go to' organisation in many areas as its performance and reputation has increased in recent years. These boundaries are constantly tested when Member Countries request support in areas which are relevant and important to them and to EQAP but stretch the capacity of the organisation, or which could be provided by other parties or in a different manner at a bilateral level (between a donor, for example, and the country directly rather than through EQAP).

The recommended next steps in maintaining the boundaries for EQAPs role include:

- a) Continue to use the Business Planning process and approval by PBEQ to ensure that EQAP has a confirmed mandate for activities and tasks it agrees to take on, to find a balance between "initiating" activities and "responding" to requests.

Finding 3: EQAPs has stepped up its leadership and support role in the PacREF and regional architecture, is well respected and increasingly recognised by external parties.

EQAP has played a constructive and important role in the PacREF, particularly playing a leadership role in negotiating the GPE (Global Partnership for Education) implementation plan and funding arrangements, and the M&E arrangements for the PacREF. This has been a fairly long and drawn out process and taken time for all parties to settle into agreed roles, responsibilities and develop a clear action plan, but it appears that these arrangements are now strong enough for implementation to begin on agreed policy priorities. The PacREF has not been a forum for donor coordination on broader education investments and stakeholder identify this as an area for improvement by all parties. The linkages of EQAP's work to other regional and bilateral education investment of Development Partners (particularly Australia and New Zealand) is not as strong as desirable, despite efforts in sharing information by EQAP.

The recommended next steps for enhancing EQAP's role in the region include:

- a) Continue to work collaboratively as part of the PacREF and regional education architecture to support others at regional and country level to implement related activities in a complementary and collaborative manner, rather than EQAP succumbing to the temptation to 'build its own empire'.
- b) Development Partners, PBEQ and others should continue to recognise and support EQAP as a 'facilitating' regional entity within the broader architecture with a specific regional function.
- c) Development Partners should make more efforts to coordinate internally so that EQAP's information and program is shared with bilateral investments and better coordination can be undertaken at country level by Member Country Ministries of Education.
- d) EQAP should continue to involve Australia, New Zealand and other DPs in the PBEQ, reflection meetings, and other opportunities to share information and coordinate work at regional level.

Finding 4: EQAP is now well integrated into the SPC family and management structures, and making a valuable contribution to the organisation.

Although the SPBEA formally joined SPC in 2010 it operated as a fairly separate and distinct entity until 2017 with separate bank accounts, IT infrastructure, physical office location, and governance. Under the 2019 Business Plan, and with physical relocation to the SPC campus, EQAP is now fully integrated. At the end of 2019, EQAP relinquished separate Facebook and Twitter accounts, and uses corporate comms and branding. SPC regularly draws upon the personnel and capabilities of

EQAP for acting positions and broader corporate planning, reporting and internal management team activities. EQAP has participated in joint planning exercises with SPC for integrated planning although other areas of SPC find it hard to engage with EQAP or see how they contribute to SPC's broader programming priorities (eg fisheries, food security, climate change). EQAP has worked collaboratively with other parts of SPC to support their activities, such as integration of social citizenship education into the school curriculum³. Employee surveys conducted by SPC in 2018 and 2020 shows that EQAP has outperformed the rest of the organisation in employee satisfaction, indicating that the EQAP staff now also feel part of the SPC family.

The recommended next steps for building on EQAP's role in SPC include:

- a) EQAP to continue to engage with joint planning and strategy with other parts of SPC to demonstrate how education contributes to broader regional priorities and organisational goals
- b) SPC senior management to develop a clear narrative about EQAP's contribution to the regional priorities and SPC mandate and continue to share that with other Divisions

Finding 5: EQAP's broad technical competence and quality of products is increasingly recognised across the region, although the depth of expertise and capacity needs strengthening.

EQAP's reputation is dependent on the confidence that education policy and decision makers have on the quality of the products delivered, in particular PILNA (the centrepiece of EQAPs assessment work in the region), the national examinations for some countries, and the collection and analysis of education data. Stakeholders report increasing confidence in the data, analysis and reporting of PILNA and other EQAP deliverables. Management and staff report that they have increasing confidence in their own technical competence, and there is strong evidence that EQAP staff are more able to develop workplans, manage activities, identify skills and expertise gaps and draw on external expertise as required (see Finding 6). It remains a risk that very specific skill sets are maintained in single individuals, as is the nature of smaller technical organisations, particularly in the Pacific. EQAP has inculcated a mindset of professional development for staff, and a plan for working in teams and backfilling skills so that there is less reliance on individuals, although this is still a work in progress.

The recommended next steps for building EQAP's technical competence include:

- a) EQAP to identify specific skill sets where professional development and training is required for deepening and strengthening individual and team capacity (for example sampling methods and techniques, data analysis and reporting, amongst others), and develop a multi-year professional development plan for individuals and teams. The number of specialist skill sets should be limited and realistic for the remaining period of this BP for the next BP period (ie not too ambitious).
- b) EQAP should continue its process for team building and team working culture as a strategy for business continuity and risk management.
- c) EQAP should continue to draw on the technical capacity of external partners (such as ACER) but aim to continue to transition that support from the 'doing' and 'supporting' to responding to requests for very specific, high level technical expertise as required (See Finding 6).

Finding 6: The partnership with ACER has enabled a flexible, responsive, efficient and effective means of building technical capacity and maintenance of quality standards in implementation.

³ <https://www.spc.int/updates/news/media-release/2018/08/pacific-children-key-to-championing-human-rights-in-the-region>

The trilateral program design (DFAT, MFAT, SPC) identified ACER as a partner to EQAP as part of the programmatic funding arrangement. This has supported a dynamic, flexible and responsive relationship between EQAP and ACER that has enabled EQAP to access and utilise a broad range of skills and capacities from ACER than would have been possible otherwise. EQAP is able to identify its technical support and professional development needs each year as part of its planning process, and ACER is able to undertake its own organisational planning with a level of funding predictability, so that the support is timely, attuned to specific needs and priorities, draws on the best and most appropriate people and experiences across ACER. The partnership has developed a 'rhythm' for engagement which is based on trust and relationships, a common strategic intent and understanding, and a deep commitment to agreed outcomes (identified in the Business Plan). This has been possible through the financing and grant agreement mechanisms built into the design whereby ACER has a guaranteed level of personnel inputs (10 days per month) for a strategic adviser, and EQAP has the "control" and mandate to lead the scope of work undertaken by ACER according to EQAP organisational priorities and member country needs. This scoping and planning is conducted as a joint exercise, with ACER having strategic input based on their deep understanding and knowledge of EQAPs priorities, needs and current technical capacities. This collaborative process, with EQAP in the lead role but an open and trustful strategic engagement, and predictable funding stream, has created a "partnership" with benefits greater than the sum of its parts. EQAP, for example, has been able to broker a role for ACER in the broader GPE program (managed by the ADB) for the Pacific, and on other occasions, directed Member Countries to engage with ACER directly. ACER is respectful of EQAP's leadership role for education quality in the Pacific, and takes its lead from EQAP on opportunities that arise to undertake activities outside the partnership. The development of this partnership was not without tensions and risks, and initially relied on the goodwill of individuals to work through and resolve. Stakeholders now report that the partnership is bigger and broader than individuals, but has become more institution to institution, with many team members and staff able to work within the parameters, expectations and culture now established.

The recommended next steps for the EQAP-ACER partnership include:

- a) Development Partners to recognise the value of a medium-long term partnership to improving the effectiveness and efficiency of capacity building and quality assurance, by continuing to support the model in future funding arrangements to EQAP.
- b) The partners (EQAP and ACER) to continue learning and documenting the mechanisms, processes and culture of the approach which leads to best outcomes, so that the approach continues to be institutionalised.
- c) The partners advocate for continued support for this approach as other funding opportunities arise (such as the GPE funding through ADB).
- d) DFAT (and MFAT) document and share the approach and processes for effective partnership as a model that may be appropriate for other investments.

Finding 7: EQAP is increasingly being recognised across the Region and in Member Countries, but understanding about its role and comparative advantage is uneven.

EQAP has been regarded as a highly specialist and technical organisation. It is well known within Ministries of Education amongst senior managers and leaders. Information produced by EQAP appears to be fairly tightly held by education administrators, and disseminated in fairly technical language and materials. Other actors, such as bilateral education programs from Australia and NZ, are not strongly aware of, do not appear to make strong use of the materials or the organisations capabilities. As it aims to improve the use of data for decision making and policy making, its presence and products need to be more widely understood and utilised by a broader range of actors, which will require a broader communication strategy.

The recommended next steps for communications by EQAP include:

- a) EQAP consider ways of improving public and targeted communications to stakeholders, using a wider variety of channels and materials.
- b) EQAP negotiate with DFAT and MFAT a clear information sharing and communications channel to improve internal coordination between education investments and promote collaboration.

Finding 8: EQAP is improving the amount and quality of education data available in the Pacific, but it could be used better for decision and policy making.

EQAP has made strong progress in consolidating education data available across the Pacific (through the EMIS and Pacific Data Hub of SPC), and the quality of the data collection, integrity and analysis of PILNA and other research products is increasingly recognised. EQAP has historically provided technical and analytic support to Member Countries, and they are then expected to identify their policy reform and education quality priorities that arise. EQAP has become more pro-active in supporting Member Countries to analyse and use the data from their own systems and education performance, and has initiated analysis (with ACER) from PILNA by theme and country to highlight key issues, challenges and opportunities for each country. They have also begun to conduct more indepth data analysis workshops with bigger countries, enabling them to drill down into data and identify their own key policy questions. As this process continues, EQAP is faced with the challenge of how far to go in making the link between data analysis to making policy recommendations and supporting decision makers and policy makers to plan reforms or make structural and program decisions for education delivery.

The recommended next steps for supporting steps to take evidence to policy and practice for EQAP include:

- a) Strengthening the research and policy development areas of the Business Plan in future years, particularly to support motivated Member Countries, and structuring EQAP support to enable them to draw on evidence as they focus on key policy reform issues; and by identifying specific research activities to meet their needs
- b) Consider developing greater capacity in supporting Member Countries to engage in policy development processes (ie adding an area of technical expertise in policy engagement beyond the technical but to support education administrators to engage in the political economy of policy making)
- c) Foster a policy development stream in the PacREF that focuses on using evidence for decision making, and building a regional commitment to this area
- d) Developing products and materials for a broader audience than education administrators (such as politicians, the public, media) so that the information is more easily accessible in the public domain and can support public policy debate.

Finding 9: The PBEQ continues to play an important role of EQAP governance and engagement with Member Countries, and the process for meeting has evolved over the period of the Business Plan to become more strategic and supportive of the regional education architecture.

PBEQ meetings were historically focused on governance and formal decision making for budgeting, planning and accreditation requirements for qualifications. Over this period of the Business Plan, EQAP has used the PBEQ meetings as opportunities to engage Member Countries and senior education administrators in strategic priorities related to the regional education architecture (the PacREF) and working groups, and to create an environment for policy dialogue on critical reform, planning and service delivery issues for the education sector. The PBEQ is a formal sub-committee

of the SPC Board, but operates in a more collegiate and consultative manner, with Australia, New Zealand and regional organisations also participating. As the financial and opportunity cost of bringing Pacific Island representatives together is high, there is potential to utilise this gathering for even greater benefit by structuring the policy dialogue and planning processes more strategically, with regional partners and programs also invited to improve overall donor and partner coordination.

The recommended next steps for the scope of the PBEQ meetings could include:

- a) Consider developing a joint collaborative planning process amongst Development Partners and regional institutions (UNESCO, UNICEF etc) and Member Countries, related to the PacREF, around key thematic priorities and/or activity planning, to be held concurrent to the PBEQ formal meeting.

5. Analysis and discussion against key review questions

The following discussion provides information and analysis of the Business Plan, reporting information, and feedback from stakeholders structured against the key review questions. This includes repetition of some of the same information and analysis of the key Findings (above), as well as a more comprehensive covering of perhaps less significant and important issues that were not identified by stakeholders through open-ended enquiry, but are more identifiable through a technical analysis of documentation and benchmarking against experience of other organisations and programs.

Relevance

1. To what extent is the EQAP business plan responsive to PICS' evolving regional and national education priorities?

The EQAP Business Plan appears highly responsive to PIC priorities as demonstrated by:

- The annual consultation process between EQAP and PIC members to develop workplans and a schedule of activities and timeframe
- Six-monthly reporting back from EQAP to member countries on activities (4.1.5)
- The increased frequency of meetings with countries to 3 times in 2020 (4.1.2)
- High level of engagement of all 15 PICs across the EQAP business plan reporting
- The high level of confidence reported by heads of education systems in PBEQ meetings (and in consultations for this review).

2. How has the business plan guided the mandate of EQAP in supporting the PacREF initiative?

The 2020 Annual Report against EQAP Business Plan has just two formal references to the PacREF (4.1.5; 4.3.3), and does not include any cross-referencing to PacREF initiatives or priorities throughout, although it is expected that there would be many linked actions (and results). However, the PacREF is clearly an important regional initiative encompassed within the scope of Outcome 4 (EQAP increasingly recognised internationally as a leader and source of knowledge and expertise in Education in the Pacific) and so it would be expected that EQAPs actions in outcome 4 are guided by the PacREF even if not explicitly stated. As the Heads of Education Systems are the representatives on the PBEQ, and also on the PacREF, there is tight alignment between PacREF priorities and EQAP priorities, and governance functions are operating well.

Some clear cross-referencing of the EQAP Priority Actions to PacREF priorities/activities, would demonstrate this alignment.

Coherence

3. How does the EQAP business plan enable EQAP to add value while aligning with efforts at national and regional levels?

The EQAP business plan demonstrates a good balance between being purely responsive to individual country requests and needs, supporting the regional efforts, and having a mandate or purpose of its own. It does this by:

- Having a clear plan that is transparent and accountable to the PBEQ and member countries
- Including elements of ‘push and pull’ (or supply and demand) in use of information for quality improvement: a previous focus on data collection and analysis (eg PILNA) is now supported by workshops to analyse and use data and information, benchmarking with other countries and previous results, dissemination through media and policy influencers, making information available through SPC’s data hub;
- Engaging strongly in the regional policy discourse, so that individual country data and issues are elevated to regional priorities and actions.
- Positioning EQAP as a regional thought leader, by being able to speak authoritatively from a strong evidence base about key education quality issues outside the internal constraints of domestic politics.

Effectiveness

4. How has the EQAP business plan allowed EQAP to show progress towards its key results areas and outcomes?

- a) What positive or negative unintended outcomes have been realised during the first two years of implementation?*
- b) What approaches are effective in EQAPs business plan implementation?*
- c) What assumptions made during development of the business plan have been verified or refuted?*

The EQAP Business Plan provides a sound structure for reporting of progress (by reporting against activities), achievements (narrative descriptive reporting against the Key Priority Action) and outcomes (analysis of that narrative reporting against the Key Result Area). The detailed tables of EQAP Results 2020 do just that, using the ‘Current Phase’ column and the ‘Level of Change’ column to analyse the narrative description of reporting progress and achievement. The technical challenge comes in providing the narrative report on progress and achievements against the Key Priority Actions in ways which provide the most meaningful information; and in having a basis for making a meaningful judgment about progress that is reported.

The current report (2020) was summarised in the discussion by ***completion of activities***:

EQAP 2020 Annual Report Table 3: EQAP progress in 2020 by Outcomes

EQAP Outcomes	Planned Activities Achieved		Planned Activities Redesigned		New Activities Achieved		% Increase in Activities for 2020	Overall EQAP Progress
	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%		
Outcome 1	138	99%	2	1%	5	100%	4%	99%
Outcome 2	28	74%	10	26%	7	100%	18%	87%
Outcome 3	39	80%	10	20%	5	100%	10%	90%
Outcome 4	50	100%	0	0%	66	100%	132%	100%
Total	255	88%	22	12%	83	100%	30%	94%

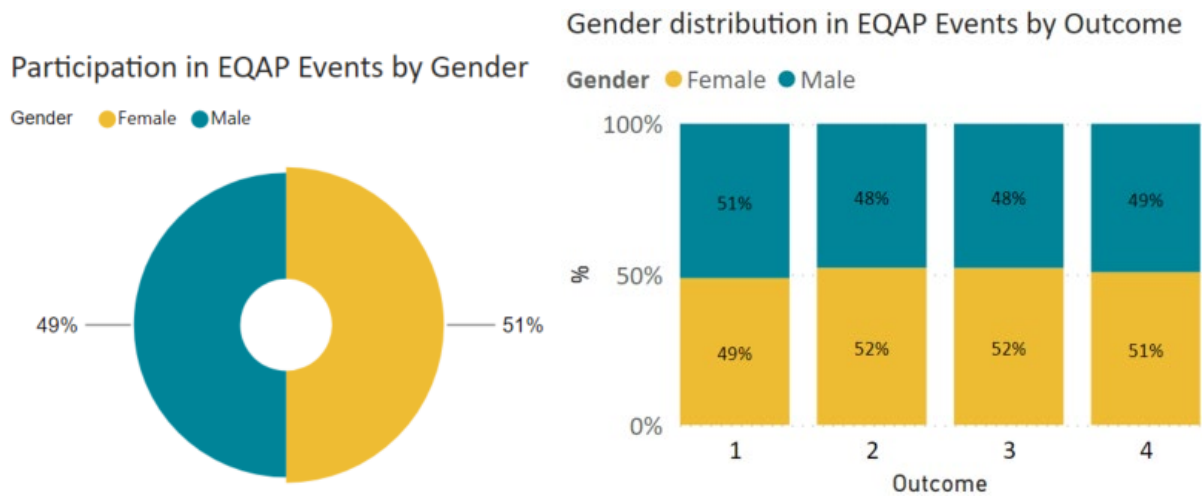
EQAP Outcomes	Planned Activities Achieved		Planned Activities Redesigned		New Activities Achieved		% Increase in Activities for 2020	Overall EQAP Progress
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Outcome 2	28	74%	10	26%	7	100%	18%	87%
Outcome 3	39	80%	10	20%	5	100%	10%	90%
Outcome 4	50	100%	0	0%	66	100%	132%	100%
Total	255	88%	22	12%	83	100%	30%	94%

A summary of **participation by PIC member** countries by Outcome area; and of EQAP activities by **gender** was also provided.

Annual Report 2020 Table 6: Percentage of Country participation in EQAP events by Outcomes

EQAP Outcomes	%
Outcome 1: More national Ministries of Education and other key institutions increase the use of information for policy development and implementation, planning, and management.	22%
Outcome 2: More PICT schools increase and improve the assessment of students' performance against curricula	45%
Outcome 3: More PICT national agencies, employers and learners increase the use of recognised quality assured qualifications	21%
Outcome 4: EQAP is increasingly recognised internationally as a leader and source of knowledge and expertise in education in the Pacific	12%

Annual report 2020 Figure 2: Participation in EQAP Events by Gender



This form of analysis, in the 2020 Annual Report, is **activity based aggregate reporting**. While the 2020 Annual Report also provides a strong discussion and narrative of reporting of emerging priorities, changes to plans, and performance stories which do tell a lot about outcomes and impact of EQAP’s work in the year, this reporting is not structured from the Business Plan itself.

The Business Plan structure, however, **can** provide a good basis for some aggregate outcome and impact reporting. A secondary analysis of the 2020 Annual Report in the following table shows the status of progress and level of achievement for each of the Key Priority Actions.

Status of Progress	#	Level of Change	#
Identification/Design	0	Knowledge	4
Planning/Setup	3	Practice	17
Implementation	21	Attitude	3
Transition/Evaluation	0	Impact	0

While this remains a fairly crude aggregation of progress, it shows that 21/24 results reported as achieved are related to implementation (not yet completion of the Action); and that the highest level of change achieved is ‘attitude’ in only 3/24 results reported, with 17 being changes in practices, and 4 just changes in knowledge. No changes in “impact”, as defined by the SPC M&E definitions are reported as being achieved (“the long term outcomes, at the individual, institutional or population level that EQAP aims to inspire”).

The challenge with this structure of reporting of achievements and results, is that they are matched to the Action level, not to the Key Result Area level or the Outcome level. A different form of data gathering and analysis would be required to report on achievements against result areas or the four Outcomes, and evaluation mechanisms established. This could include the use of indicators, setting targets and or reporting progress against baselines for each outcome area. This has been identified as an area for further development under Finding 1. An alternative, and perhaps more practical, would be to establish a more formal evaluation process against outcomes at the end of the Business Plan period, rather than attempt to do ongoing higher level performance reporting of outcomes and impact. Having made these points, the practices that EQAP has established in its Annual Report do represent best practice at organisational level for performance reporting. There is accountability for

progress against plans, there is discussion and reporting of achievements and change, not just activity completion, there are performance stories which represent significant impact of identified activities, and there is a feedback loop and accountability to stakeholders through individual reporting to member countries and through the PBEQ.

5. *How has the EQAP business plan allowed EQAP to show progress towards SPC's organisational objectives?*

- a) *engagement with members and partners*
- b) *strengthen technical and scientific knowledge*
- c) *member priorities and multidisciplinary responses*
- d) *improve planning, prioritization, evaluation*
- e) *enhance capabilities of our people, systems*

The Annual Report 2020 clearly demonstrates that the Business Plan, and EQAP activities are aligned with and contributing to these five areas of the SPC organisational objectives. Although they are not cross referenced in the EQAP report, the detail and information that is relevant to these objectives can easily be identified and reported against them.

Efficiency

6. *How does the EQAP business plan enable EQAP to maximise its use of resources and programme modality?*

- a) *How has the business plan enabled EQAP to respond to COVID in the use of its resources?*
- b) *How can the business plan contribute to efficient use of EQAPs resources post COVID?*

It is not the Plan itself, but the process of developing and managing the business plan that enables EQAP to optimise efficiency as far as it is able. There are several features of this process:

- The Business Plan is an organisation wide planning process, whereby different staff teams jointly plan and review progress, and can identify synergy and collaboration when developing detailed workplans on country and individual basis. More joint missions and joint activities appear to be taking place in country as a result.
- EQAP has elevated its engagement to work collaboratively with regional institutions, under the PacREF framework, and so there is common effort on common problems for member countries against agreed priorities.

In the period of COVID, the 2020 Annual Report provides detailed discussion of how the organisation has responded and adapted to new ways of working. In particular this included the development of new digital tools for working remotely, and enhanced consultation on priorities and activities appropriate to each country. The list of new digital tools developed in house includes:

Table 4: *List of digital tools developed in-house by EQAP*

No	Tool	Function	Countries
1	Contract Tracking System (<i>new</i>)	Tracking contracts for PILNA and SPFSC scorers, examiners, data entry specialists	SPFSC countries
2	EQAP Information Reporting Information System (EQIRIS) (<i>new</i>)	Monitoring and Evaluation system for tracking EQAP progress -individual workplan, team workplan, annual workplans, generate regional and national reports	15 countries, EQAP
3	LSA PacSIMS module	PILNA enrolment and registration module	PILNA countries

No	Tool	Function	Countries
4	Moodle Platform for SPFSC (<i>new</i>)	Moodle platform to support schools implement the SPFSC programme. Platform is accessible to all teachers and students.	SPFSC countries
5	Pacific Regional Accreditation System (<i>new</i>)	A web-based online application that national agencies, and providers can use to request EQAP to accredit a qualification	15 countries, EQAP
6	PacSIMS - Markers scoring online (<i>new</i>)	SPFSC online platform to enable markers to verify, upload and confirm scores for SPFSC subjects. Allow scorers to work remotely.	SPFSC countries
7	PILNA - online data entry application (<i>new</i>)	Web-based application for entering PILNA data on tablets	PILNA countries
8	PILNA - online item bank	Stores all PILNA past and current items	PILNA countries
9	PILNA - online translation module (<i>new</i>)	Online application to allow translators of vernacular to submit, recheck, verify and confirm accuracy of translation of items in PILNA	PILNA countries
10	SharePoint Contract Tracking - EQAP Finance (<i>new</i>)	Timely tracking system for tracking contracts	EQAP
11	Strategy for Monitoring School Leadership Effectiveness (SMILE)	Tool for tracking performance of school leaders against national leadership standards	7 countries

The significant learnings and experience of working remotely can be expected to have a lasting impact on EQAP's efficiency. This has largely been brought about through forced circumstances, and the culture change from member countries and willingness to engage remotely may be a lasting benefit to the organisation and the Pacific more broadly. Further investment in information technology capability, including IT platforms and accessibility for Member countries, would be warranted to optimise this efficiency. Further investment in supporting staff to facilitate remote workshops and training, and conduct collaborative meetings remotely, would also be warranted.

Impact

7. How has the EQAP business plan allowed EQAP to show progress towards SPC's Development Objective 9 (Quality Education)?

There are two ways in which the Business Plan supports EQAP to show progress towards the SPC Objective of Quality Education:

- i. All of the activities of the Business Plan are aimed at improving a quality education, and so all the reporting of results and progress is evidence that supports the SPC objective of quality education. However, this evidence is largely activity based, disparate, not easy to aggregate, and has not benchmark or target indicator to provide a more simple measure of 'progress' against.
- ii. Some of the specific Activities of EQAP are the actual measurement tools of a quality education, particularly the PILNA assessment, but also the tools used for national examinations, and for assessments of the capacity of national education systems. These

activities are the basis for analysis of whether quality education is improving or not across the Pacific.

While these two elements of supporting SPC progress and reporting on Objective 9 are important and valid, it would be worth investigating further how the Business Plan could more directly and intentionally establish evaluation mechanisms for reporting on progress towards the SPC objective. This could be through the articulation of indicators and targets at the Outcome level (as outlined in Finding 1 and elsewhere in this report); or by establishing point-in-time baseline and evaluation points, possibly linked to the PacREF. Regardless of which approach is taken, more investment of time and resources into the analysis of available data and benchmarking of 'Quality Education' across the Pacific is warranted, and would be highly valued by multiple stakeholders including regional organisations and development partners.

8. How flexible is the EQAP business plan to respond to emerging priorities such as COVID, tropical cyclones, and other such events and situations?

The EQAP Business Plan process has proven to be highly adaptable and agile as shown by the redesign of activities in 2020 and development of new activities shown in the table under Key Review Question 4 above.

Sustainability

9. What evidence is there that the business plan continues to provide ongoing benefits to the delivery of EQAP Programme?

The Business Plan and the process for annual planning, reflection and reporting, is having a significant benefit for EQAP's operations in a number of ways:

- Finding 1 above discussed the institutionalisation of good corporate planning culture and processes, which will have lasting impact on individuals, teams and the organisation, regardless of the ongoing structure of the business plan format and template
- The structure of the Business Plan itself, with four clear and simple outcome areas; and a set of Key Result Areas which are easily broken down into actions then detailed annual workplan, is a sound and rationale approach to planning which is serving the organisation well.
- Feedback from stakeholders indicates that the business plan provides a sense of common purpose and ease of accountability and transparency, which are key elements for generating commitment and ownership for improvements in quality education systems.

At the same time, it should be pointed out that the business plan itself is not sustainable without ongoing leadership, staff and stakeholder commitment, and ongoing resources and financing to the purpose and mandate of EQAP. The Business Plan is proving to be a key tool in building and maintaining that commitment.

Inclusiveness

10. To what extent does the EQAP BP reflect a people-centred approach in guiding program delivery?

This review question is not easily answered by review of the Business Plan and reporting itself, and falls somewhat within the methodological challenges of the review.

An analysis of the business plan documentation, text and reporting data reveals that the outcomes, key result and action areas, and expressed in terms that focus on the 'use' and 'benefit' of EQAPs activities to the client (or beneficiary) – which makes the business plan 'people centred' to a large extent. The business plan refers to the Ministries of Education, Member countries, heads and representatives of education systems, policy and decision makers, teachers and students. The reporting narrative also is expressed in terms of the participation of these clients and groups and the benefits that accrue to them, rather than simply to the activities or efforts of EQAP itself or staff members, which also demonstrates a client-centre or people-centred approach in program delivery. Feedback from stakeholders appeared to indicate that EQAP is well respected for its responsiveness and context specific approach to member country priorities and requests, seeming to support that EQAP adopts a people centred approach. It would appear that this approach is led more from the leadership and management, and development of an organisational culture, than from the business plan itself.

At the same time, there is little direct evidence that EQAP has adopted or committed to a people-centred approach that would be inclusive. In the 2020 Annual Report against the business plan there is one sole reference to disability, noting that of 556 participants in EQAP programs, just 4 self-identified as having a disability. There are very significant issues for quality education being accessible to all in the Pacific, and significant issues for assessing the education outcomes for people living with disability, who are currently excluded from national assessments in literacy and numeracy. A significant challenge for EQAP will be how to incorporate an inclusive development for all agenda into its workplans at both an organisational and operational level. This perhaps should be considered in light of the priorities and agenda of the PacREF, and raised by EQAP directly with member countries in annual planning consultations.

Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E)

11. How does the EQAP business plan support the M&E system in effectively tracking implementation progress, and progress towards meeting expected results and outcomes?

This key evaluation question has been addressed in Finding 1, and discussed in detail under key review question 4 under "effectiveness".

In summary the business plan provides a strong and sound basis for tracking progress and EQAP is using the plan extremely well to prepare Annual Reports and provide reporting to member countries, its governing body, and development partners. It is less able to report on 'expected' results as indicators and targets for the Outcomes themselves are not established, and as yet no progress reporting has identified 'impact' levels of results. The solutions proposed include developing baseline, indicators and targets for the outcomes; or establishing an end of period evaluation process and method that could more comprehensively address the question of outcomes and impact.

6. Conclusion and recommendations

The overall conclusion from the review is that **the Business Plan provides a sound basis for EQAP to plan, manage and report on its work in a manner that meets the needs of Member Countries and satisfies donor requirements and expectations.**

The structure and content of EQAP's Business Plan articulates a clear rationale and internal logic from the analysis and justification in each core area, to outcomes and related indicators. It outlines the workplan for each Outcomes and Key Result Area with activities and a timeframe, which appears

well developed and clear. Annual Reports for 2019 and 2020 are able to use this structure as a basis for data collection, analysis and reporting which is rational and clear. The BP provides a structure for budgeting and financial reporting. PIC Members report that the consultation process for planning each year, the flexible nature of EQAP in responding to urgent requests, and provision of high quality technical support is meeting their main needs and interests.

This conclusion is supported by both the discussion on key themes emerging from the review, and a more technical analysis of the Business Plan and reporting against the key review questions.

The key recommendations from the review include:

- 1. EQAP should continue to utilise and further develop its Business Plan process and structure as a sound basis for overall management and accountability.**

Strong elements of the business plan that should be continued include the focus on four clear outcome areas, the well expressed key result areas and actions, and the progress reporting narrative for results each year which are expressed in benefits and use of the activities for participants. This structure enables annual team and individual work planning, and provides clarity for accountability and reporting. The three time per year reflection process to refine and update the business plan should continue, with ongoing stakeholder engagement involved at points as appropriate (development partners, regional organisations and development partners). Closer alignment between EQAP business planning and PacREF and Heads of Education Systems meetings and planning processes should also be encouraged. Enhancements to the business plan could include establishing indicators and targets at outcome level and/or establishing end of period evaluation processes and methods to improve and extend evidence for outcomes and impact.

- 2. Development Partners (Australia, New Zealand and other potential partners) should continue to utilise a programmatic funding approach in provision of support, as this strengthens integrity of internal organisational planning and reporting processes, is highly efficient, and proven to be an effective means of delivering outcomes for Member Countries.**

The programmatic funding approach has clearly achieved efficiency in transaction costs for SPC (and EQAP) in planning and reporting processes, and has improved alignment of EQAP's work with regional priorities, and enabling an agile and responsive approach to changing circumstances. The identification of ACER as a partner in the programmatic funding arrangement has improved efficiency and effectiveness of the technical support available to EQAP and enhanced capacity at individual and organisational levels.

Paul Nichols, Praxis Consultants
4 May 2021

Definitions for key areas of Change

Source : SPL Document, SPC

- i. **Change in Knowledge:** The individual skills, capacities acquired or reinforced as a result of our actions. The awareness or understanding raised an issue following our work. Changes in knowledge are often short-term outcomes as they typically occur immediately or soon after an activity is delivered.
 - a. Measuring the effectiveness of our outputs will very often require assessing whether levels of awareness or knowledge of our programme participants have evolved. It is best to measure learning outcomes both before and after capacity development or technical assistance, based on your learning or assistance objectives, to assess changes.
 - b. Suggested standard indicators to include in results frameworks to measure changes in knowledge are:
 1. Number of people involved in capacity development (M/F) (specify subject)
 2. Number of people receiving technical assistance (M/F) (specify nature of assistance)
 3. Number and % of supported people with increased knowledge and awareness (M/F)
- ii. **Change in Attitude:** Evolutions in people's beliefs, opinions, motivations, intentions, which have emerged as a result of SPC's work. Changes in attitude are changes in intention, not action. They are often short-term outcomes as they typically occur immediately or soon after an activity is delivered.
 - a. Measuring the effectiveness of our outputs will very often require assessing whether the attitudes, beliefs, opinions, motivations or intentions of our programme participants have evolved as a result of our work.
 - b. Suggested standard indicators to include in results frameworks to measure changes in knowledge are:
 1. Number and % of supported people showing change in attitude (M/F) (specify the change based on change in attitude terminology below)
 2. Number and % of supported national or sub-national infrastructures, institutions, other entities showing change in attitude (specify the change based on change in attitude terminology below)
- iii. **Change in Practice:** The application of acquired information, skills, capacities or new behaviour leads to 1) changes in action and 2) new or improved practice for individual or institutional performance. Changes in practice are usually mid-term to longer-term outcomes as the changes from action to practice take more time to emerge.
 - a. Measuring the effectiveness of our outputs will very often require assessing whether the knowledge or skills gained have been applied, or whether changed intention

translated into action for our programme participants. These represent changes in action, which, if they are sustained, will contribute to changes in practice, i.e. improvements in individual or institutional ways of working, new or improved transferrable skills or competencies, new or improved structures, processes, systems, and equipment.

b. Suggested standard indicators to include in results frameworks to measure changes in knowledge are:

1. Number and % of supported people using skills/knowledge received in training or technical support, six months later
2. Number of supported institutions which implemented (new/upgraded) systems/tools/procedures/processes/equipment/working methods
3. Number of PICTs adopting policies, laws, plans etc. based on evidence or assistance provided by SPC
4. Number of PICTs implementing policies, laws; plans based on assistance provided by SPC (Implementation includes budget development, plans or priorities enacted, programmes developed, resources allocated)

iv. **Impact at SPC:** The long-term outcomes, at the individual, institutional or population level, SPC aims to inspire

a. Evidencing impact of our work is the last step in our results hierarchy towards contributing to our members' development priorities. As impact is best assessed through rigorous impact evaluations, it is important that we aim to conduct thorough assessments of institutional or population situations and capacities before programme inception (baselines), to enable comparisons at later stages.

b. Suggested standard indicators to include in results frameworks to measure changes in knowledge are:

4. Institutional impact on the effect of applied skills/knowledge on country system
5. Population level impact on targeted population
6. Number Individual level impact effects of a programme or project on group of individuals