What would you describe as the basic elements that should be present in a “Qualitative Higher Education?”

That is partly what the problematic of this meeting is about. Quality, is something that everybody in higher education wants, what it is, is not self evident. There has been a movement in higher education for the last two decades for two things to happen simultaneously. For countries which have long traditions of quality assurance to refine that and actuate it and that's perhaps the case with the English speaking countries. For much of the Pacific the decade of the 90's was the decade in which they developed quality assurance mechanisms for higher education. If you go through the countries that are coming to this meeting, they will only have had their systems in place for, in some cases, 10 years. So you have, on the one hand, people trying to get to quality and on the other hand you have the environment for quality changing very rapidly. This meeting will pull together people from APEC economies that are further along these paths together with people who are new to the task and try to affect some kind of synergy.

Do you foresee a period in the future where we might achieve a standardised quality assurance level among APEC economies?

That's the other problematic for this meeting and we've expressed this in terms of the sustainability agenda. What we mean by that is to take this particular conference and the confluence of people who come and ascertain whether there are sufficient interest, desire and resources to make something happen subsequent to it, that is, to make the effort sustainable. If that is the case, then what would that look like? Australia, Malaysia and others are seeking to develop a framework which could become a joint framework. Now, in South East Asia – there has grown a series of networks for quality assurance including the Asia Pacific Quality Network (APQN) and through that particular entity there is a considerable amount of effort to develop a common system. Antony Stella, who works with the Australian Quality assurance agency, is currently the chair of APQN, and will be delivering a lead paper at the conference.

The upcoming conference on Quality Higher Education - how is it structured?

So the purpose of this meeting is to raise issues about the nature and quality of higher education accepting the fact that the environment for higher education is changing very rapidly. We've organised the conference into four clusters.

1. What is the nature of quality?
2. Exemplars of quality
3. Ranking Universities
4. The Global University – what is it?

Each of them shows a different phase to the quality issue.

In terms of Participants at the conference, how many are you expecting?

We have invited 19 papers and we have four keynote speakers. In addition there will be representatives from a variety of ministries although not all countries will send representatives. Then there
is a substantial group of UH people and higher education people from Hawai‘i who will attend so we’re expecting something between maybe 60-80.

This is an invited conference. It is built on the papers to be presented. The people who will give the papers were chosen because they were known to us to know the higher education systems and the quality assurance systems in these economies well. We have several expats. For instance, the Korean chap is an economist from Korea who happens to teach at the University of Wisconsin – Milwaukee but spends half of his time in Korea. So it seemed, his was a nice transitional point of view. The Russian representative also, teaches at George Washington.

What are your expectations of the results of this conference?

We have three anticipated outcomes.

1. We decided to pre-publish the papers so the papers will be available to all participants. We did that so that in the short space that these people will be together they will have, more than they usually have in a conference setting, to know about what others are thinking and doing.

2. We will then publish the papers on the APEC website shortly after the meeting and that will be done prior to the APEC meeting here in Honolulu.

3. Explore this sustainability agenda. To see whether or not, for example, there will be some effort coming out of the engagement and the interaction of these 50-some people in an APEC framework as well as the Asia Pacific framework. This can take us in the direction of the previous question of something that could be standardised here.

One of the ideas that has already come forward is – could the University of Hawai‘i and the East West Center operate a clearing house for information, and best practices having to do with quality assurance. Something that it might do in partnership the APQN.

In relation to the outcomes of this conference, will it be given an agenda line at the next APEC Education Ministers Meeting in South Korea?

We certainly hope so. That is our intention. When we started this, there were two proposals for higher education meetings, one in Shanghai and ours. Over the intervening months we have been told in several settings, that people have come to realise, increasingly, the importance of higher education quality and that’s one of the things we hope will have some staying power when we try to put together a sustainability agenda.

Are other international qualitative agencies represented at this conference?

Many of the papers to be presented reference other international entities, particularly the Latin American representatives, who have been much influenced by the Bologna process and other things that are happening in Europe. So there is a link there. We were, however, made aware of the fact that it is prudent to focus primarily on the APEC Member Economies and also to be aware that APEC as an entity consists essentially of developing economies and developed economies and so there is quite an exchange between those two.

You mentioned the Bologna Process. How would you compare the European network of Higher Education Institutions to that of APEC?

I think the major difference is as a set of economies. Europe is a more consistently developed set of economies. It is also a region where the university traditions go back coherently for a long period of time. So you get two things out of that:

1. You get well developed University systems.
2. They operate as very steep, well protected silos.

This was the whole problematic of the Bologna Process – how to build horizontal linkage across those silos.

In the APEC region you have three very distinct kinds of economies. You have important and rapidly developing countries such as China, you have well developed countries such as Korea and the US, with 48 of the worlds top ranked Universities, and then you have authen-tic developing countries such as Malaysia, the Philippines, Thailand. What it is about is doing two things simultaneously, which are daunting things:

1. Build Horizontal linkages
2. Preserve national integrity

Europe is consistently further ahead than Asia although ASEAN is trying to put together a joint common curriculum but I think its early days. It is framed on the Bologna Process though.

The three distinct groups within APEC that you mention, if you were to rank each group on a scale of 1-10 in relation to qualitative education levels (1 being the lowest and 10 the highest), how varied would your rankings be?

I think they go from 1 to 10. There are some places where quality is very problematic and very underdeveloped and certainly the effort to assure quality is very underdeveloped. However, having said that, I believe, that through the efforts of APQN and so on, all of the members now have this in front of them, whereas that was not the case 10 years ago. Is there a reality that equals the system in front of them? I think in many cases, no, there is not.

To take another slice, there is national and cultural uniqueness amongst these countries. It is highly idiosyncratic.

Do you have any final comments on the Conference next week?

I think the real value of these meetings is not so much the papers but the networking. I have really high hopes that we can bring people together, introduce people who should be working together and get some follow up from that. I’m a strong believer in networking.